

## **EL SOBRANTE'S FOSTER'S FREEZE – A FAMILY AFFAIR**

By Maurice P. Abraham: April 15, 2012

### **Introduction**

Have you ever been curious about the owners of a small business you frequent? Ever wondered where they came from, what brought them to the local community and what may have motivated them to start their own business? For every small business, there is certain to be an underlying story, some perhaps similar, but all unique in their own way.

For some business owners, entrepreneurship is in their roots, perhaps spanning multiple generations. For others starting the business may have been a necessity after loss of a job or other catastrophic event. For still others, starting the business may have been an outgrowth of a hobby or long-time passion.

For a mid-century Richmond family, a compelling personal situation inspired their decision to acquire a Foster's Freeze franchise in Richmond and soon thereafter to open a Foster's Freeze in El Sobrante. Their deeply personal decision can be traced directly to the Korean War (1950 – 1953), a conflict that had evolved from an earlier WW II agreement which had politically divided a once united Korea into Northern and Southern Republics.

### **The Coryell Family**

Ernest and Hazel Coryell opened the El Sobrante Foster's Freeze in 1951. They had purchased the Richmond Foster's Freeze franchise in 1950, then sold it to open the El Sobrante store. At the time, the Coryell family lived on Ninth Street in downtown Richmond. They loved El Sobrante and a decade later would make it their home.

Ernest worked as a chemist for Standard Oil Company. Until they became involved in the Foster's Freeze business, Hazel, had primarily been a homemaker raising their two children, Florence and Eugene. However, during WWII she had worked at Richmond's Kaiser Shipyard in the War Bond Office.

Ernest Roy Coryell was born March 14, 1897 in Lett's Corner near Greenburg, Indiana. He joined the Army in World War I serving in France. After the war, Ernest returned home and settled in Corning, California. There he partnered with his brother in running a general store, Coryell Produce.

Hazel Coryell was born Hazel Viola Moore on October 20, 1904 in Linkville, Oregon, now the City of Klamath Falls, where her family lived on a ranch. When she was 14, her family decided to move to California. They packed their belongings into a covered wagon and made their way to California, also settling in Corning. For Hazel, circumstances intervened, letting her escape the long and grueling covered wagon trip. One of her sisters had a newborn baby at the time and would make the trip by train. The sister asked that Hazel accompany her to help with the baby.

Sometime prior to the move to California, Hazel had shared a fantasy with her sisters. She told them she was going to marry a soldier boy who had a store, although at the time she had no inkling of Ernest Coryell or his Corning store. It was just a young girl imagining herself one day marrying and about the kind of man she dreamed of marrying.

But destiny would once again intervene, turning fantasy into reality. After joining her family in California, Hazel's sister's told her they had "found her man" at a local store. Her mother would often send her off to Coryell Produce, and in time romance blossomed between Hazel and her fantasy soldier boy, Ernest. Apparently Ernest, too, had found the girl of his dreams. The couple married in the family home in Corning on July 7, 1921. Hazel was just 16 years old when she married 24-year-old Ernest.

After a year of marriage, Ernest and Hazel moved to Oakland, California. There he managed a shoe store and she sold women's hose door to door. It wasn't long thereafter that Ernest, desiring a better career opportunity, applied at Richmond's growing Standard Oil Refinery and was soon hired as a chemist. They soon moved to their Ninth Street home in Richmond where they settled in, looking forward to starting and raising a family.

On July 7, 1926, the young couple's fifth wedding anniversary, a daughter Florence was born. Three years later, on September 14, 1929, a son Eugene (Gene) was born. Both Florence and Gene attended Richmond public schools, and graduated from Richmond High School, Florence with the Class of 1944, Gene with the Class of 1947.

Florence went on to a teaching career, spending 26 years with the Richmond Unified School District, 17 of which were at Rancho Elementary School. Rancho School was located on El Portal Drive (then Road No. 20) just north of San Pablo Dam Road. The school ultimately closed due to declining enrollment, and the property sold to a builder. The buyer demolished the old school and erected the Creek View apartment community in its place.



Gene Coryell...in uniform and ready to serve his Country

In 1947, following high school, Gene joined the National Guard in 1947. About a year later, after working for a few months at Richmond's Standard Oil Refinery, he ventured out of his home town at the suggestion of a friend. The friend, a local boy, had moved to Los Angeles to work in his brother's plumbing business. So, in 1948 Gene joined his friend in Los Angeles and began his apprenticeship in the plumbing business. However, the apprenticeship was interrupted in 1950. Uncle Sam called and Gene soon found himself on his way to serve in the Korean War.

#### **A Family's Dilemma**

Gene's deployment to Korea was a turning point for the family, particularly for Hazel. Still a homemaker, and with her only son

in an active war zone, Hazel found her mind constantly filled with fear for Gene's safety. This became the impetus behind Ernest and Hazel deciding to start a business. Ernest, understandably concerned about Hazel's obsessive worry, suggested to her that they consider starting a business. He knew that running a business would give her new purpose, shifting her thoughts more to the business and a little less on Gene.

Hazel understood Ernest's concern and concurred. She realized that she needed something to occupy her time and to change her thinking to something more productive. Owning and operating a business seemed to be just the right thing, not only for Hazel, but for the future opportunities it might provide for their children. Ernest had been thinking about this for some time and had investigated several opportunities, including a Foster's Freeze franchise available in Richmond. As he and Hazel scrutinized the Foster's Freeze opportunity in detail, they agreed it was a business that had potential for success and one that Hazel would enjoy working at.

### **Going with Foster's Freeze**

The decision was made to join the Foster's Freeze network and to buy the Richmond store as a start. Because Ernest would continue his work at Standard Oil, they had determined a nearby location was essential. They purchased the store around 1950 and owned it for only a short time before deciding to sell it to open a store in El Sobrante.

El Sobrante was a business-friendly community that, in the early 1950's, was experiencing moderate post-war growth and was projecting significant additional growth. The community had a number of new businesses, including the just completed Park Theater. It also had some sizeable residential projects on the boards, including Utah Construction Company's planned 1500-home De Anza Vista development in May Valley.

Aside from the fact El Sobrante represented business growth opportunities, it was also a community the Coryell's had come to love and could see as their ultimate home. When Florence and Gene were young, their mom and dad often took them out to the open spaces of El Sobrante to fly their kites. Not only were the children safe from the overhead power lines that lined their streets in Richmond, the El Sobrante hillsides provided updraft conditions ideal for providing lift to the kites.

The Coryell's entered into serious discussions with Foster's Freeze corporate people about opening a store in El Sobrante. The Foster's Freeze people concurred with the El Sobrante location and the final terms and conditions of a franchise agreement were set. The agreement was signed and the Coryell's were ready to move forward.

From the beginning, it was Ernest's long term goal to build and own a store. He had always been an entrepreneur and businessperson at his core, and the idea of paying rent to someone else went against his good business sense. However, to buy a site and build a new store at this early stage would have required a sizeable initial investment and entailed far greater risk.

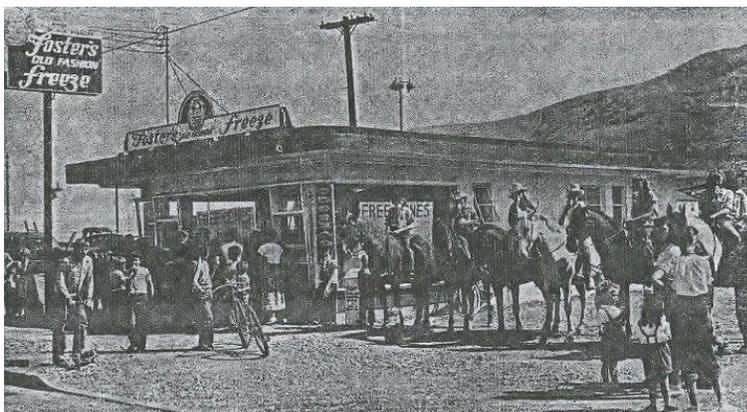
Their next task was to find an appropriate site and an owner willing to build a store to Foster's Freeze requirements. They located a vacant land parcel a short distance west of the new Park Theater. In the fifties, movie theatres were a far more popular entertainment venue than today, and locating near the theater would allow a fledgling Foster's Freeze to benefit from people stopping by before or after attending a movie. The site was situated in the heart of the communities growing business district, and on its busiest traffic thoroughfare. The location seemed perfect.

The vacant land, located where the Park Rexall Drug Store is today, was owned by Ed Galli, publisher of the El Sobrante Herald newspaper at the time. Mr. Galli was a vocal advocate of the El Sobrante business community, using his role as publisher to promote all aspects of community development. So, he most certainly would have welcomed a Foster's Freeze into the community, even above his self-interest as a landlord.

The Coryell's approached Mr. Galli about the land availability. Negotiations got underway and were successfully completed with Mr. Galli agreeing to construct a new building and lease it to the Coryell's. Construction of the building soon got underway as well as related site improvements. The building was constructed to the Foster's Freeze corporate specifications and to accommodate the modern and specialized equipment needed. This store would be the first of two the Coryell's would operate in El Sobrante.

### **Open for Business**

A grand opening of the first El Sobrante store took place in 1951-52 and attracted hundreds of local residents, some out of sheer curiosity and others for the free ice cream giveaway. Many of the locals came on horseback, not unusual in early '50's El Sobrante. The menu included soft-style ice creams (vanilla and chocolate), dipped cones, a variety of milkshakes, sundaes, banana splits, floats and sodas. No food items were offered at the original store.



**GRAND OPENING!** Free frosty cones brought out hundreds, some even on horseback. Not unusual in early '50's El Sobrante.

The response by the community was overwhelmingly positive, setting the stage for steady growth of the business. In the early years of the business, Florence worked the day shift and her mom, Hazel, worked the night shift. After his day job at Standard Oil, Ernest would work evenings pouring the "frosty" mix into the large ice cream machines. As business grew, other girls were hired to handle the increasing work load.



**Ernest and Hazel set off to work from their Richmond home in the early 1950's.**

After several years of success, it became clear to the Coryell's that the Galli building could not accommodate the changing demands of the local customers. Customer comments and observation of competitor trends led to the conclusion that customer seating was of great importance to maintaining a competitive business position. In addition, demand was also growing for an expanded menu to include food items such as a line of hamburgers, hot dogs and French fries.

essential to respond to this growing behavioral trend. With the Galli lease nearing time for renewal, the Coryell's decided that buying land and constructing a new, larger store would be a prudent business move. It would not only be an investment, it would also help their business keep up with a growing list of fast food competitors.

In the late 50's, people were increasingly eating out rather than cooking and it was

A suitable site for a new store was available adjacent to the Mechanics Bank building (now The Peddler bicycle shop). The land was purchased and the Coryell's notified an understanding Mr. Galli they would not be renewing their lease. At the new site a larger and more modern store was constructed. The new store provided a partially enclosed customer eating area and was set back farther from the busy roadway than the original store. This permitted more convenient parking in front and assured that customers would be a safer distance from passing traffic.



**The new and larger Foster's Freeze opened around 1958 next to the Mechanics Bank building. Today it is vacant.**

The new store opened around 1958. Aside from being a popular family ice cream and fast-food dining spot, Foster's Freeze also became a favorite hangout, especially for the local teens. It was particularly popular among young drivers that loved showing off their customized and "hopped-up" cars in the parking lot surrounding the Foster's Freeze building.

lot of time hanging out there just waiting for something to happen...anything; a party, a dance, let's go 'drag the main' on MacDonald Avenue, or take a cruise through the valley."

Foster's Freeze became a hub of activity in the 60's and beyond. El Sobrante resident Steve James recalls, "Foster's Freeze was the social gathering spot for De Anza high school kids that drove. In the years 1965-68, I spent a

Steve's recollection mirrors my own memories from the late 50's through the early 60's. Today, drive-ins such as Foster's Freeze are popular gathering spots across the country where classic car owners gather in a nostalgic atmosphere recalling memories of those earlier times.

### **Transition to the Next Generation**

Over the years, ownership and operation of the business changed from the elder Coryell's to Gene and his then wife, Joanne. Gene had completed his Korean tour of duty in 1952, was honorably discharged and returned to Los Angeles to continue his plumbing apprenticeship. There he met his future bride, Joanne L'heureux. Gene and Joanne married in 1954 and continued to live in the Los Angeles area until 1961.

In the late 1950's Ernest and Hazel had sold their Richmond home and relocated to El Sobrante to be closer to the business. They had purchased a vacant hillside parcel on San Pablo Dam Road between May and Valley View Roads, had subdivided the newly acquired parcel into two lots and constructed their new home on one.



**Ernest and Hazel on the steps of their El Sobrante home**

Around 1960, Ernest and Hazel began to seriously consider retirement. Their retirement would prove an opportunity for Gene and Joanne. In 1961 they decided to purchase the new El Sobrante Foster's Freeze store. They moved their family to El Sobrante where, with ongoing help of his parents, Gene took over operations of the store. They also began construction of a new home on the remaining vacant lot uphill from his parent's home. The location was perfect, having a beautiful view across the valley to the Sobrante Ridge hillsides.

After the home was completed, Gene worked in the store, waiting on customers while Joanne handled all the business accounting at home. The success of the El Sobrante store allowed Gene and Joanne to build and open a Foster's Freeze in nearby Pinole. While Ernest and Hazel considered themselves retired, they continued to work in the El Sobrante store, Ernest working behind the scenes and Hazel working as a regular employee.



Ernest working behind the scene....while Hazel works up front.

The El Sobrante Foster's Freeze was truly a family operation. The three older children of Gene and Joanne also worked in the El Sobrante store. Susan, the oldest and 16 when she started, worked for a couple years as an employee. The two boys, Randy and Ronnie, helped out on weekends, usually getting up around 5 am. They would pick up yard litter, sweep, mop and perform other needed jobs. But what they remember most is collecting baseball cards and getting the occasional free ice cream or candy. The oldest, Randy, especially liked the trips to Oakland with his Dad to purchase supplies. The boys were paid a little, but reminded their parents often that they were "worth more than they were being paid".

External forces, however, eventually intervened. As time went on Gene and Joanne observed growing competition from larger national chains like McDonald's, Burger King and Jack-in-the-Box. It became clear in the early 1970's that growth of their businesses was slowing and their market value approaching a plateau. So, in 1974 they made a difficult but timely decision; they sold the businesses that had been so much a part of their family and moved to Oregon where they reside today. Gene and Joanne reminisce fondly on their years in El Sobrante. Joanne says "I can honestly say those years were the best of my life".

Life was a long and rewarding adventure for Ernest and Hazel Coryell. In 1987, at age 90, Ernest passed away at Doctor's Hospital in Pinole. He must have felt great pride, not only in the accomplishments of himself and Hazel, but also those of his children. A few years following Ernest's death, Hazel and her daughter Florence moved to Salem, Oregon where they lived next door to one another for another 10 years. On Hazel's 99<sup>th</sup> birthday, she and Florence bought and moved to a new home they had built in nearby Keizer, Oregon. They lived together until Hazel's passing in 2007 at age 103. Florence continues to live in the home they shared.

END

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