

FOCUS ON THE 450TH

Company: 'We are St. Augustine'

» St. Johns Food Service caters to the community for 65 years

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With local people and tourists alike on their hands, St. Augustine restaurants have to keep their shelves stocked to keep bellies full.

So when the food supply runs low, the company that many call on is St. Johns Food Service Inc.

"You need it, we'll go find it whether it's one case or a truckload of an item," said Rick Long, president of St. Johns Food Service.

The company, with a small fleet of 11 straight trucks, navigates up and down the brick roads of downtown and farther up to 11 times a day to ensure that St. Augustine eateries remained stocked.

St. Johns Frozen Foods

St. Johns Food Service was originally St. Johns Frozen Foods.

It was so named because of the nature of the original business. Before the company was delivering, the restaurants of the community would come to them.

Dr. Ronald F. Jackson, well-respected local veterinarian, started the business in 1949. At that time, not many had running freezers readily available in their homes and restaurants.

So Jackson, with colleagues Willard Howarth and Harold Pfannenbecker, capitalized on the opportunity and created St. Johns Frozen Foods.

Jackson was president of the company, Pfannenbecker was vice president while his wife, Catherine, was secretary. Howarth was secretary according to the St. Augustine Research Library.

"We were in a rural area here in St. Augustine and so they built a big freezer and put (in) lockers," said Melvin McQuaig, current owner of St. Johns Food Service. "Old frozen food lockers and the people, when they would butcher their animals, whether it be a hog or a cow or what, they would rent a locker and store that while they consumed it during the year."

The business grew until



PHOTOS BY ALEX.SANCHEZ@STAUGUSTINE.COM
Rick Long, president of St. Johns Food Service Inc., left, and owner Melvin McQuaig stand beside one of the company's trucks on Wednesday in St. Augustine. St. Johns Food Service, Inc. is at 4 Louise St.

technology, as with many of today's jobs, stepped in and eliminated the middle man.

"Next thing you know by the end of the late '50s ... that business, just really really lost a lot of appeal," McQuaig said.

Pursuing a new frozen market

Instead of cutting losses, Jackson, Howarth and Pfannenbecker decided that the frozen food business was the way to go and began selling frozen foods to restaurants.

"The frozen food business back then represented mom and pop little grocery stores or mom and pop little restaurants and schools," McQuaig said.

St. Johns Frozen Food had entered into a market that was limited to some degree because there was no other frozen food distributor around, he added.

Unfortunately, the business did not go as well as planned and Jackson needed a new game plan.

In the early '60s, Sid Fischer was brought on board to take place Pfannenbecker.

"He was a salesperson who came along to work for Harold and Jackson," McQuaig said.

Jackson had decided that the business either needed to make money or simply fold and if Fischer could not turn it around and make it a success, it would be a fold.

That being said, Fischer hired a new crew and set out to turn the business around.

Frozen Food sees changes

In 1963, McQuaig was



Long stands in the distribution warehouse. The company has served St. Augustine for more than 65 years.

interviewed by Jackson and hired to work in the warehouse and make deliveries; later, he became a salesperson for the company.

McQuaig said Fischer and he had known each other and went to the same church.

He added that Fischer knew he was a hard worker based on his background in the food business in a retail grocery store.

In 1964 and '65, McQuaig said the company made some money and Jackson was thrilled.

After a while, Fischer went to another business and the position was left to be filled by McQuaig while the business continued to prosper.

"My first year as an interim manager, we were very successful as well. We made money again in '65 and made money again in '66," McQuaig said. "So in '67, Dr. Jackson offered me the opportunity to

buy into the company and own some stock."

In 1985, the business made another change and incorporated dry goods into its warehouse, becoming what is called a broad line distributor. Its name changed to St. Johns Food Service Inc.

"In the mid 1980s, we went to what we call a broad line, which was dry goods, frozen foods, paper goods, produce and that's what a broad line distributor is," McQuaig said.

According to the company's website, Jackson sold the business to McQuaig, general manager at the time, but financing would have been a financial burden to McQuaig.

Instead, Jackson and McQuaig structured an employee stock ownership plan for Jackson's 51 percent of the business as a way to finance the sale of the business.

That structure stayed in place until 2005.

Today's St. Johns Food Service

St. Johns Food Service continued to do well due to its customer service.

The company may have started with humble beginnings, but grew to a peak of 30 employees servicing close to 500 accounts within a 75-mile radius of St. Augustine, according to the company's website.

There are approximately 3,000 restaurant, food and paper products that are stocked in the company's warehouse. From a plethora of spices and canned goods to frozen foods, the business is stocked and ready to ship.

For specific needs, St. Johns Food Service will deliver those products with advanced notice.

The Reef restaurant chef, Bob Henle, said he often works with St. Johns Food Service.

"They're a real good

service for us," Henle said.

Because Henle's cooking requires specific items like piquillo peppers, pickled ginger and Roland Brand items, he turns to the company time and time again.

"They come out early in the morning," Henle said. "The delivery guys are great and the sales people are nice."

Henle said that even if he forgets to order something that he normally orders, St. Johns Food Service will stop by and drop it off.

If customers would rather pick up their order, the company allows that as well.

In 2010, Jackson passed away while McQuaig continued on with the business, and has a special interest in customer service and employee management.

"My focus as an owner and a manager has always been the employees," McQuaig said.

In 2004, Rick Long joined the business after spending time as southeast regional president at the Tree of Life, a Canadian natural- and special-foods distributor.

McQuaig said Long was intelligent and possessed a strong financial and food background, and he became the company's president.

With the economic downturn in 2006 and '07, McQuaig said Long helped the business remain profitable.

"I believe that at that point, I'd gained confidence that he needed to become the president of our company, and he just fulfilled all the responsibilities that I could ask of him," he said.

Now, 65 years after its establishment, St. Johns Food Service slogan says "We Are St. Augustine."

But why?

St. Johns Food Service carries the slogan because it has been locally owned and operated for more than 65 years. Money stays in the community to support the local economy; they consider themselves to be competitive on value with big food distributors like Sysco and U.S. Foods.

They carry special products and are able to navigate easily through St. Augustine downtown.

McQuaig said that he likes to tell his employees that this business is a great little company.

"I truly believe that in my heart," he said. "I mean when you look at the longevity of the company and you go there and kind of measure the personnel and look at them, I'm proud to be an owner of St. Johns Food Service. It's a great little company."

"What more could you ask for?"