

## Koenig's – A Store Ahead of its Time

Koenig's retail store and lunch counter in Fairmont was a haven for area shoppers during the 1940s, 1950s and into the 1960s. It was so popular at that time that KSUM commentator Ev Ohrt hosted what was called "Coffee Time at Koenig's" every afternoon. Considered a hub for shoppers, people would also literally flock to the lunch counter every afternoon at 3:00 p.m. to be in on the radio show that consisted of Ohrt's interviews and chats with people that were present.

The store was owned by Emil and Vi Koenig and opened on September 13, 1941. According to telephone directories in the Pioneer Museum, it was first located at 212 North North Avenue in the early 1950s. It later moved to 308 and 309 North North Avenue and remained at that location from the mid to late 1950s until the 1960s.

Koenig had very little money for inventory, consequently he instructed his employees to inform him whenever a customer wanted something that he didn't stock. If someone asked for something that wasn't available in the store, Koenig would run to Woolworth's, which he referred to as his stock room, purchase the item, and in turn sell it to the customer for his cost. Making his customers his first priority enabled him to gain steady customers and in turn eventually increase his stock inventory.

In 1943, Emil Koenig was drafted into the military leaving his wife and one other woman to run the store. In his absence, although initially apprehensive, the two women ran the store quite successfully.

During a 1980 reunion of Emil and Vi Koenig with their former employees in Fairmont, Koenig portrayed his store as somewhat of a forerunner to stores like Target. The saying around town when his store was in operation was, "If you don't find it at Koenig's, they don't make it yet." Koenig boasted that businessmen would travel from all over the country to see how he ran his business and to view his innovative displays. Also considered somewhat of a taskmaster, Koenig would often conduct fingernail and hairnet inspections of employees working in the restaurant. The Koenigs moved to Minneapolis and eventually sold their store in 1965.

As with the demise of the neighborhood corner grocery stores, the "Mom & Pop" retail stores are a thing of the past being unable to compete with the big retail chains of today. However, the one compelling aspect the big retail chains can't supplant is the nostalgic memories of the Koenig's store and lunch counter that many today will remember fondly. The sights, the sounds, and the aromas wafting from the restaurant stir up

memories of a simpler time, a sentimental era affectionately remembered and appreciated by those that were fortunate enough to personally experience it.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

