

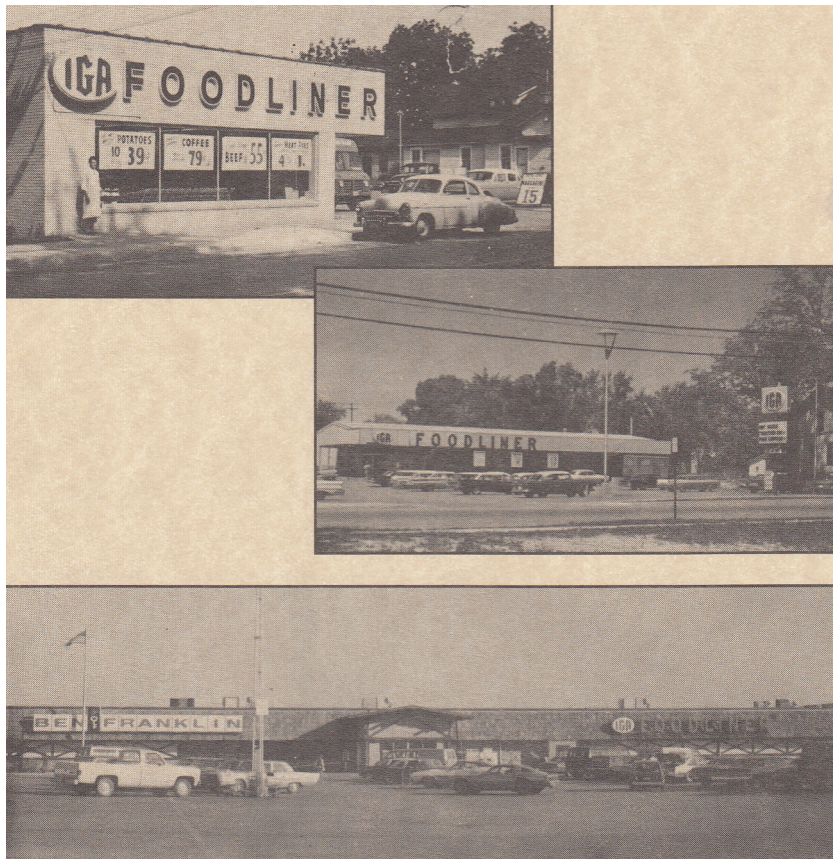
Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner / Ben Franklin 40th Anniversary 1950 – 1990

Edited by Stewart E. Lauterbach, Museum Director, Frankenmuth Historical Association

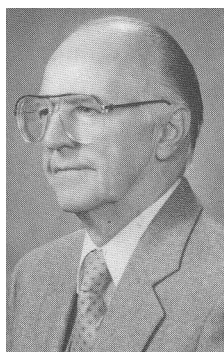
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The information for this essay was taken from oral interviews with T.W. "Bill" Johnston, Dave and Tom Johnston, and from an unpublished manuscript, "Our Nomination for IGA Retailer of the Year T.W. 'Bill' Johnston," prepared by the Michigan Division of Super Food Services, Inc. 1987. Photographs are from the Johnston's collection and the Retailer of the Year Application.

[In 2003, Tom and Dave Johnston, owners and operators of the Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner and Bridgeport IGA, signed an agreement to sell both grocery stores to Kroger Company of Michigan. Frankenmuth Historical Association published this booklet in conjunction with its Annual Meeting. The 1990 version of this history is now out of print and has been converted to this format for educational and research purposes. Information obtained from this booklet should include a reference to the source: Frankenmuth Historical Assn. Images courtesy of the Johnston family.]



T.W. “Bill” Johnston was born on a farm outside of Hillman, Michigan on November 18, 1911. He spent his youth in Battle Creek and graduated from Hillsdale College in 1933 with a business degree, having been president of the student body and also of Delta Tau Delta Fraternity. Later that year Bill began to work as a Sales Representative for General Foods, calling on retail stores in Detroit as well as all over northern Michigan. During these early years he was exposed to a wide variety of retail food philosophies including early efforts at large combination stores featuring self-service and discount prices.



***T.W. “Bill” Johnston,
Founder of the
Frankenmuth IGA
Foodliner.***

In 1942, Bill accepted a position with Standard Brands in Detroit, but left them in 1944 to work for the Progressive Wholesale Company, an IGA supply depot in Bad Axe, Michigan. Bill was promoted to Sales Manager in 1946 when Progressive bought out the Redman Wholesale Company in Alma, Michigan.



The first IGA store located at 308 S. Main Street.

By 1949, one of the functions of Bill’s job as Sales Manager was to help new stores get started. It was in this capacity that he worked with Don Karcher, helping him to set up a new IGA Foodliner in Frankenmuth, Michigan. The store was located at 308 S. Main (currently the front half of Satow Drug Store), and consisted of 4,000 square feet and a dirt parking lot. By December, Don wanted to sell the store, and Bill bought the franchise.

Bill Johnston liked the Frankenmuth location and was impressed with the volume of business done by Fischer's and Zehnder's Hotels. However, making the business a success was harder than Bill had initially imagined it would be. People were hesitant to accept the "new" self-service concept. At first they didn't think that the pre-packaged food was fresh. Bill tells the following story:

It was about that time that the "frying chickens" came in. Before that they were called "spring chickens" when they were small. They were only available in the spring. I remember selling one lady, a "frying chicken", out of season so to speak. She said, "There is no such thing as that – a spring chicken this time of year." That's the way this thing has developed.



***Promotion of "new" packaged pancake mixes about 1955.
From left to right: Front row – Dave Johnston, Tom Johnston;
Back Row – Ron "Shadow" Eischer, Bill Rau, Don Chase, Bob Johnston.***

Initially, many people suspected erroneously that pre-packaged self-service meats were just leftover scraps wrapped up for quick sale. But upon trying them, customers found that the quality was as good if not better than custom cuts. They also eventually came to appreciate not having to wait in line, as well as the increased availability of the product. With a self-service operation, one could walk in the store anytime during its regular hours, and pick up some pork chops rather than wait until when the butcher was in the store. Pre-packaging also made economic sense, and the significant savings in labor costs for the store could be passed on to the customer through lower retail prices.

Another problem Bill Johnston had to face early on was the local competition. In 1949, seven other groceries existed – Central Meat Market (Fred Hubinger), Hubinger General Store (Hattie Hubinger), The Ortner Company Store, Fred Gugel and Sons, Trinklein and Conzelmann, Rau Brothers, and the Corner Grocery (Marcus Kern) – although the town had only 900 residents, many of whom were related, still spoke German, and were often loyal to their neighborhood grocers. But business with migrant workers in the area helped get the store established.

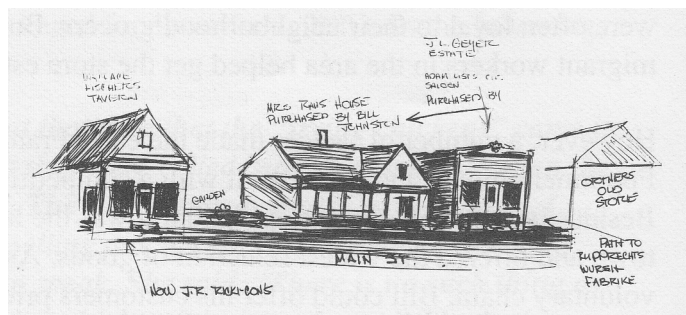
However, a number of factors made the early Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner unique, and provided it with a competitive edge. Besides being a self-service operation, it was the largest store in town and offered the widest selection of goods. As part of a voluntary chain, Bill could offer his customers prices competitive with those of the A&P and Home Dairy stores in Saginaw, yet save his customers a trip out of town. For the city of Frankenmuth the advent of the IGA Foodliner represented the coming of the modern supermarket.



Bill Johnston and a friend at the first IGA store.

As owner and operator, Bill's responsibilities included ordering, managing the produce department, scheduling the checkout counters, writing the advertising copy, keeping the books, making deposits, paying the bills, setting up displays, and even for a short time acting as butcher. His assistants included Harold Sinkler in the grocery department, three cashiers, and Roy Beyerlein, who helped with delivery and several years later would help manage the store.

In the early days variety was limited. For example, the frozen food section consisted of an eight foot case of orange juice and some vegetables. The health and beauty aids case was only four feet long. Produce was limited to sixty or seventy items which were really seasonable. People were hesitant to buy produce, preferring instead to eat what they could raise in their own gardens. By contrast, today the store boasts 170 feet of different frozen food products, 144 feet of health and beauty aids and 108 feet of produce with over 350 varieties to choose from.



300 Block S. Main before construction of first store.

In January of 1950, Bill Johnston moved his family – his wife Marguerite and sons Robert 10, Dave 7, and Tom 2 – into a home next to the store where they lived until 1956. Occasionally the family experienced minor problems with patrons of the Main Street Tavern driving into their house or their white picket fence as they left the tavern parking lot.

In 1954, Bill went back to work for Progressive Wholesale, and Harold Sinkler, who had worked in the store as the Assistant Manager, assumed its management. Between 1954 and 1962, Bill held numerous positions at Progressive Wholesale and its successor Super Food Services, including those of General Manager for Progressive, Vice President of Sales for Super Foods, and General Manager of Super Foods' Vassar, Saginaw, and Detroit distribution centers.

However, he kept his hand on the helm of the Frankenmuth IGA. In 1959, due to increased volume, more extensive merchandise, and a need for more space, Bill purchased eight pieces of property and put them together to build a new facility (7,200 sq. ft.) across the alley at 260 S. Main, the site of the former Black Forest Restaurant. At this location the business remained basically the same but operated on a much larger scale. During the time the IGA was at the 260 S. Main location, the number of employees grew from twenty to sixty.



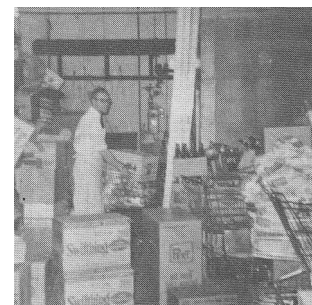
***In 1959, in order to accommodate increased volume,
Bill built a second store across the alley at 260 S. Main Street.***

In 1960, Bill was working out of Chicago and residing in Frankenmuth, though his job as Vice President of Sales took him all over Michigan, Ohio, New York and Florida. He would return to Frankenmuth on the weekends to work at the IGA store on Saturdays and do the books on Sunday when nobody was open. Later that year, based upon the successful experience of big city store, the Frankenmuth IGA expanded its business hours to include Sundays. This was another innovation which required some getting used to, especially by those with strong feelings about keeping Sunday as a day of rest.

In May of 1964, Doug Stone came to work at the IGA from a large chain in the Detroit area. He managed the store until 1967 when he left to work for Superfood Services, Inc. In June of '64, Bob Hudec joined the staff as the meat manager. That same year Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner adopted the RLP or "Our Low Prices" program stressing discount prices.

In 1966, Bill quit his position at Super Foods to manage the Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner full time. He also expanded the back storage space and later tore out the wall separating the porch from the store to add more room for wider selections of general merchandise, health & beauty aids, frozen foods, dairy goods and produce.

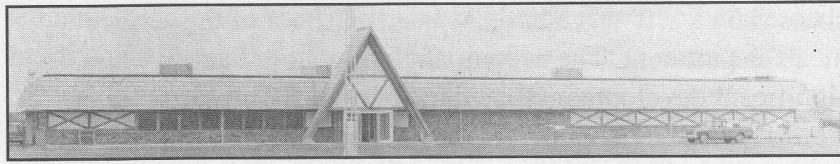
About this time the Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner was the only grocery store in town. Trinklein and Conzelmann had burned down in 1957, and Rau Brothers, the last of the competitors, closed their grocery in 1968.



***Bob Johnston in the backroom of the second store
April, 1965.***

Bill Johnston's sons eventually entered the family business. Bill's oldest son Bob managed the store for some time between the late '50s and 1964. After completing his MBA in food marketing and transportation from MSU in 1971, Tom Johnston joined his father in the management of the store. In 1972, Bill purchased the local Ben Franklin at 328 S. Main (presently "The Pause that Refreshes" Coca-Cola museum) from Marcus Trinklein and hired his son Dave, previously a Credit Manager for General Electric Credit Bureau, to manage it. Dave remembers that, on his first day at the Ben Franklin, Marcus Trinklein was twenty minutes late in coming down to the store and opening it for him. It had probably been twenty years since Dave had last set foot in the store and it seemed as if it hadn't changed a bit. Dave had no previous experience in the variety store line and for just a few minutes wondered what he had gotten himself into.

When Bill bought the Ben Franklin, he hoped to make it part of the new supermarket he was considering building in a projected shopping center north of town. After receiving assurances from the city council that it would extend the city limits to include the new shopping center, a partnership was formed, the property was acquired, and work began in the fall of 1972. The property had been planted in sugar beets and Bill remembers Zeilingers bulldozing off the top layer of soil, sugar beets and all, so that construction could begin.



▲ *The third location at Bavarian Mall. Note that the IGA doesn't yet about the other Mall businesses.* ▼



Interior of the new Bavarian Mall store.

Several months later, on May 15, 1973 the Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner celebrated the grand opening of its present location at 435 N. Main. However, the plans for the consolidation of the Ben Franklin and the IGA under one roof were initially thwarted by a clause in the Ben Franklin franchise agreement requiring that a wall divide a supermarket from a variety store in a shopping center. Ben Franklin Company felt that supermarkets didn't take care of variety or general merchandise very well and therefore wouldn't let the Johnstons put up a Ben Franklin sign.

Despite this resistance, the Johnstons moved the variety items to Bavarian Mall, leaving the fabric and craft goods at the 328 S. Main location and calling it the Fabricana. At the end of a year's successful operation, Ben Franklin was convinced to revise their policy. They not only granted the Johnstons permission to use the Ben Franklin name, but began to advocate similar combinations nationally.

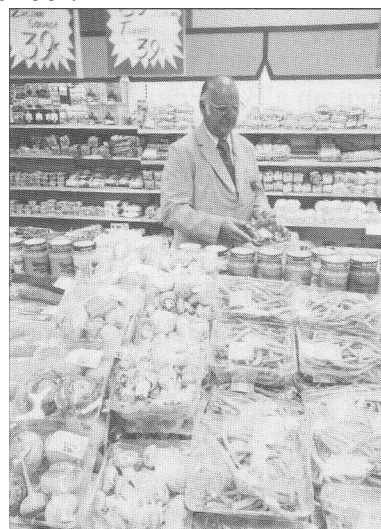
A second major innovation at the new store was inclusion of a deli/bakery. The deli, which offered pre-packaged salads and cheeses on a self-serve basis, was an offshoot of the service meats department. The accompanying in-store bakery was a significant development too, since previously most groceries were supplied by commercial bakeries.



Innovations such as electronic checkout devices have kept the Frankenmuth IGA on the cutting edge of the industry for forty years.

Since 1976, when the space between the IGA and Hoffman Drugs was closed in and an addition made to the backroom, the store has been expanded and remodeled several times. Likewise, the management has kept up with innovations in technology. In 1977, electric cash registers were installed at the check out lanes. These machines made running the front end of the operation by computer possible and prepared the way for the use of modern scanning equipment. Installed in 1981 and still in use, these scanners use a laser to read an object's UPC code and eliminate seventy-five percent of the human error factor associated with the cashier's job. In addition, the scanning system automatically records how merchandise is moving.

In 1982, more space was added to the sales floor for frozen foods and produce, the backroom was again expanded, and a truck well was installed to facilitate delivery of merchandise. The same year the remaining craft and yard goods were moved from the Fabricana and it was closed. Finally, the Johnstons' whole operation was consolidated under one roof.



The most recent remodeling and expansion began in October of 1987 and was completed in October of 1988. Currently the Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner occupies 54,000 square feet and is the largest IGA in Michigan. The utilization of the additional space reflects trends in current lifestyles. For example, the size of the frozen food section has doubled due to the demand for a much wider variety of products, especially those for use in microwave ovens. The produce department has increased twenty-five percent since people are including more fruits and vegetables in their diets. The size of the deli has doubled and a hot foods department has been added, serving entrees such as chicken, ribs, macaroni, and lasagna. The intention is to provide customers with quick lunches, since more people are eating out, and also to allow them to serve quality food for their families with less in-home preparation. Extra cases have been added to the meat department for frozen meats. In the old days, turkeys were generally only stocked in November and December, but now are purchased year round, reflecting a trend by people attempting to cut down on their consumption of red meat.

The dairy case has been expanded to include more varieties of yogurt and chilled juices. In addition more of the Ben Franklin's space is devoted to clothing and variety merchandise. The fabric and craft departments have been redone. In essence the store is a one-stop shopping center, and in a sense Frankenmuth has seen the food retailing business turn full circle – beginning with the general store offering a wide variety of goods and personal service, moving on to the self-serve supermarket, and ending with the modern one-stop shopping center offering everything from hardware, clothing, and specialty baked goods, to auto maintenance supplies.



***IGA/Ben Franklin's owners/operators
Dave, Tom and Bill Johnston.***

1987 was also a significant year for the Johnstons, because that year Bill was nominated by Super Food Services as the IGA Retailer of the Year. He was one of twenty-five finalists and one of the five individuals to win national recognition for "Service to the Community." Over the years, Bill has served as president of a number of community organizations including the Frankenmuth P.T.A., the Frankenmuth Rotary Club, and the Frankenmuth Development Company. He has also been chairman of the Frankenmuth Zoning Appeals Board and a member of the Frankenmuth School Board. His sons, Tom and Dave, have been active in the community too. Dave has been president of the Frankenmuth Rotary and a member of the Frankenmuth School Board. He has served as president of the Chamber of Commerce and is also on the Board of Directors of "Michigan's Own" Military & Space Museum. Tom has served as Vice-President of the Frankenmuth Jaycees and has been a board member of the Frankenmuth Chamber of Commerce as well as a member of the Chamber's Marketing Group.

In discussing future developments, the Johnstons say that they are landlocked – that all of the alternatives for easy expansion have been used up. However, they are certain that they will be able to develop a creative solution for this problem should the need for more space arise. Short term plans including remodeling the front end of the store. Options for new departments such as service, fish, bulk foods, and video are constantly evaluated.

The history of the Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner/Ben Franklin is a success story. Many factors could be cited for this success, but over the years two stand out as the most significant. First, an attitude of flexibility has allowed the business to grow with demand through numerous expansions and several moves. Second, the Johnstons have shown a willingness to embrace innovations in the industry such as self-service operation, Sunday hours, scanning machines, and a floral department. These principles remain the basis of the Johnstons' business today and are best summed up by Tom in the following words: "What's the definition of luck? Preparation and opportunity equal luck. You get lucky if you are prepared and an opportunity comes up. And that's really where we're at. Plus, we have to service our customers. If there is something that we need -- that we have to have to be competitive with others -- then we'll get it. I guess that's kind of where our philosophy is." Obviously this philosophy has worked well for Bill Johnston, his family, and the Frankenmuth IGA Foodliner.



The modern one-stop shopping center today.