



"Between saying and doing many a pair of shoes is worn out." ~Italian Proverb



WILDWOOD by-the-sea: Nostalgia & Recipes Silen's Dept. Store

BY ANITA HIRSCH

Some businesses have existed in Wildwood for many years....some two generations, some three generations and a few even longer. Silen's Department Store has been in business in the same family and in the same location, for four generations.

In 1902, John Silen was operating a marine supply business in the Port Richmond section of Philadelphia where he sold everything from fishing rods to boats. He wanted to move to the shore area to open the same type of business. In 1911, he purchased a lot in Holly Beach on Pacific between Hand and Leaming Avenues where the store is still located. It was fairly close to the beach then and off the beaten track which John liked. A small building was constructed on the property in 1913. By 1919, John and his wife, Selma, moved to Wildwood into a second floor apartment above the store and operated the marine business.

Their oldest daughter Lily (Lillian) was working in the store also. Helen, their youngest daughter, became a school teacher and married K.T. Johansen.

Lily, married Arne Rasmussen, a Merchant Marine. In the 1930's, Lily and Arne took over the Silen's store. Their son, Keith was born in the apartment over the store, where they lived. Now, only offices are above the store.

Keith participated in football in Wildwood and was nominated to the all-star grid team. After graduating from Wildwood High, Keith attended Wilkes College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where he met his wife, Evelyn. After graduation, they both came back to Wildwood, and Keith and Evelyn took over operation of the store in the early 50's.

The merchandise sold at Silen's began to change around 1940. Less marine equipment and more summer clothing and shoes became popular with the citizens of Wildwood as well as the tourists. The business evolved into more of a clothing and shoe store. Four years ago, Silen's stopped carrying children's shoes. Bathing suits and several brands of shoes, including Ugg's became the most popular items.

Silen's is open all year around but most of the business is conducted in the warmer months. When the merchandise changed to resort wear, they began to open every day in the summer. They employ between 4-11 part time depending on the season.

As a generation retired, another took over. Keith and Evelyn Rasmussen retired and live in Wildwood Crest. Their daughter, Paula lives in Arizona. Their son, Barry took over the shoe part of the business in 1985 and in 1990, he took over the entire business.

Barry enjoys working in Silen's. When he was employed there as a teenager, he especially enjoyed meeting customers. He learned a lot about business under his grandmother's watchful eye, "she was a taskmaster. She was the best business teacher I could have had".

Barry attended Wildwood High where he was on the swimming team. He was also on the swimming team at Wilkes College where he majored in business, and also met his wife, Patricia. While at Wilkes, he took a part time job at the Kinney shoe store in Wilkes-Barre.

After college, Barry and Pat came back to Wildwood. He came back to work in Silen's and Pat worked for the Cape May County Welfare Board. Now they work in the store...full time for both. They spend the fall attending trade shows, shopping for merchandise for the following summer, and then as the merchandise is delivered, they spend time ticketing everything and then the season begins and they are busy with customers.

While their two sons chose not to work in the store, they preferred being summer lifeguards instead. They both met their wives, who are both teachers, on the beach. Their son Dan became a financial analyst and lives in Flemington, NJ. Their son, Jim, is a teacher in Keyport, and continues to spend his summers on the Wildwood Crest Beach Patrol.

The location of the store worked out well for Silen's. Pacific Avenue



Silen's 2011



Barry & Pat Rasmussen
in Silen's, 2011



Silen's, c. 1960




Silen's ads from 1942 and 1954



became a well-traveled street in the summers. Part of the large lot that John Silen purchased in 1911, is now welcome as a parking lot.

Recently a woman came in the store to shop and she happily claimed to have found a special bathing suit in Silen's every year for the past 80 years!" Now that is a satisfied customer!



Silen's BLUEBERRY BUCKLE

Pat Rasmussen makes this when guests are expected. It is a good breakfast cake and also good as a dessert, served warm with ice cream.

- 1/4 c butter
- 3/4 c sugar
- 1 egg
- 2 c flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 3/4 c milk
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- 2 c blueberries

TOPPING: Mix together with your hands until crumbly

- 1/4 c butter
- 1/2 c sugar
- 1/3 c flour
- 1 tsp. cinnamon

Cream butter, add sugar then egg. Add dry ingredients alternately with the milk and vanilla to the butter mixture. Batter will be stiff. Fold in the blueberries then pour into a 9x13 greased pan. Sprinkle with the topping and bake in a 375 oven for about 35 minutes.

Thank you to Barry and Pat Rasmussen, and the Wildwood Historical Museum for helping with this article. The ads are from the collection of Dave and Theresa Willams. The 1960 photo of Silen's was featured in a story in The Sun on the history of Bowman's Cooling & Heating.