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## National Supermarkets employees plan reunion

By **TIM LANDIS**

**THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

Posted Apr 22, 2009 @ 12:03 AM

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The "manager's cubicle" is one of those memories that seems bound to come up at a weekend reunion in Springfield of former employees of the old National Supermarkets chain.

"The manager would stand in the cubicle upfront and make sure you weren't standing around and everyone was paying attention," explained Springfield resident Diane Holdreith, who worked for 18 years as a checkout clerk before National was bought out in 1995 by Schnucks Supermarkets Inc.

Self-service also had a very different meaning before do-it-yourself scanning, bagging and carting of groceries, Holdreith added.

"We took everything out of the carts. We checked it, bagged it and put it back in the carts. The customer didn't have to do anything. The manager had umbrellas available to make sure everybody got out to their cars when it rained," Holdreith said.

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Betty Peel poses for a portrait with her original National uniform outside her home in Riverton Tuesday, April 21, 2009. Jason Johnson/The State Journal-Register

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At one time, St. Louis-based National had three Springfield stores: on West Jefferson and North Grand Avenue East and in the Town and Country Shopping Center. The North Grand store closed in 1987. Schnucks closed the Jefferson and MacArthur stores after building in new locations.

It has been seven years since the last reunion, a stretch that brought another series of shifts in the grocery business. Wal-Mart now has two 24-hour supercenters in town. Jewel supermarkets left the market. Quincy-based Niemann Foods Inc. phased out Cub Foods in favor of County Market and relocated stores.

Longtime manager Jack Pierson marks the closing of the National store at Town and Country as the start of problems now facing MacArthur Boulevard.

"It was a gold-mine store. Look what it did to MacArthur. You've got the cash-loan stores and everything else," said Pierson, who said he spent 33 years at Town and Country.

Pierson, who plans to attend this weekend's reunion, was the one in the cubicle.

"It was a front-end management office. We watched the customers and made sure they were serviced well," Pierson said.

Pierson said the loss of union jobs also was a major change for the industry (Schnucks remains unionized).

"We paid close to \$11 an hour back in 1980, and now you have a lot of people who aren't even making that," Pierson said.

Holdreith said she went back to school after National shut down and now works as a chemist with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency in Springfield. But she said she has not lost her checkout clerk's eye.

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She also offered a bit of consumer advice.

"I could probably work in a grocery store. I watch them (in checkout lanes), and sometimes they'll put in the wrong code numbers. You don't know unless you get home and check the receipt," Holdreith said.

Riverton resident Betty Peel, who stayed with Schnucks after the buyout, now manages the seafood counter at the Sangamon Avenue store. Peel kept her National uniform and also has a collection of newsletters and circulars.

Her stops included the Jefferson Street store, which she said pulled a lot of customers from the Statehouse complex just to the southeast.

"The deli and seafood counters were really busy. We did a lot of lunch business with state employees, and that carried over when they were on their way home," Peel said.

The last reunion in 2002 drew about 100 people, and organizers said they are hoping for a larger turnout this time. Peel said there has been discussion of making it a regular event, perhaps even an annual reunion.

"We'll see how it goes this weekend. We'll see how many people show up," she said.

Tim Landis can be reached at 788-1536.

### About National Supermarkets

Company headquarters in St. Louis; operated nearly 60 stores at the time of a 1995 buyout by Schnucks Markets Inc., also based in St. Louis.

National stores in Springfield were at 709 W. Jefferson St., closed in 2001 (now Avenue Thrift Shop); 920 North Grand Ave. E., closed in 1987 (CVS Pharmacy now on the site); and Town and Country Shopping Center, closed in 1996, (now Blue Cross/Blue Shield).

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Source: Archives at The State Journal Register

### Want to go?

What: Reunion of former employees of National Supermarkets in Springfield

When: 4 p.m. Saturday

Where: Field House Pizza & Pub, 3211 Sangamon Ave.

Want more information: Contact Diane Holdreith, 522-8245 or Billy Allen, 787-1989

### Redevelopment plans for MacArthur to be discussed at mixer

An update of plans to redevelop MacArthur Boulevard will be presented as part of a "neighborhood mixer" scheduled for 6:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday at South Side Christian Church, 2600 S. MacArthur Boulevard.

The program also will include an update of the MacArthur extension, scheduled for completion this year between Wabash Avenue and Interstate 72.

The event, sponsored by the MacArthur Boulevard Business Association, is intended for residents and business owners within a half-mile radius of the boulevard. There also will be time for questions.

The association was formed in 2006 to encourage renewal of the boulevard between South Grand and Wabash Avenues.

Comments (5)

#### **4MyKids**

6 days ago

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I was a long, long time shopper of Nationals. It was the only store I shopped at. For a short time I lived in St. Louis and shopped at Schmucks and really hated their customer service and was so glad to be back in Springfield. But then Schmucks bought out Nationals and implimented their poor service so I ended up moving over to Shop N Save. I will never shop at a Schmucks even if they promise to be lower than everyone else on just 'the front page'.

#### **spfldgirl**

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Schmucks--I love the new name! My niece calls them Crook's.

#### **Sarahb**

6 days ago

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Wow those are some funky uniforms. lol Reminds me of the 70's.

#### **The-dogs-and-me**

6 days ago

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My gosh, I did not realize the T&C Nationals closed in '96. It seems like it was just a few years ago. I agree with manager Jack Pierson -when Nationals closed, it left a big whole and let to the nightmares of the quick loan places that now recide there.

I recall how the shopping carts flipped open from the front and the checker unloaded the cart...there was no need for a

conveyer belt to move the item to the checker. Gosh those were the days.

Myself I admit to going places like Walmart for items other than produce, meat and the occasional buy one get one free...but for produce, meat and their advertised items I would rather shop at Schnucks. I would guess I go to Schnucks at least 2-3 a month. At the Sanagamon Center store, there is a red-head middle aged female checker that is always friendly and I try to get in her lane if I see she is there. So perhaps I go to Shnucks because of the convenience and friendly staff...but they also do have some deal along with great selection of meats/produce.

**rationalthought**

6 days ago

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My mother, and lots of her friends used to wait, no matter how long the line, to have Katherine check them out at the National at Town & Country. She, and lots of the other cashier's knew lots of the customers by name, and all of them were very friendly. Login or register to post a comment:

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