

Jon Lassus, Sr.



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In 1925, Jon Lassus' grandfather August opened his first filling station near downtown Fort Wayne.

"My grandfather was in the hotel and coal business in Fort Wayne. A friend of his, who was president of Tokheim Pump Company, told my grandfather that gasoline was the future," says Jon Lassus, Sr. "My grandfather's home was on the corner of Wayne and Anthony streets. To prepare for this future in gasoline, in 1924 he moved the family house next door and built a filling station on that corner. The first Lassus filling station opened on March 25,

1925."

After only three years in business, August Lassus died of a heart attack, leaving his wife and seven children. His second oldest son Elmer was 21 years old and in college at the time. Elmer came home, and working with his two brothers, August Jr. and William, and his mother, he ran the filling station until his Mother's death in 1952.

"My dad Elmer expanded the business to include six gas stations and a sister company that provided heating oil to customers," Lassus says. "Through the years, the business continued to expand. Today, because of our hard work and the family's dedication to continuing what our grandfather August started, we have 37 locations in northeast Indiana and northwest Ohio, and we employ about 400 people."

While his father and other family members worked in the family's filling station business, Lassus got his first job working in a grocery store.

"As a junior high student, in addition to studying, I was active in sports until a back injury," Lassus says. "Because my sports involvement then had to be limited, I took up magic. About that same time, I started working at Rogers supermarket, for 75 cents an hour."

Lassus worked at the supermarket for a year. Then, when he got his driver's license, he started working at the family gas station.

In addition to working and studying, Lassus was also gaining entrepreneurial and business skills through his activities with the Junior Achievement company

program. In fact, Lassus remembers his first Junior Achievement company effort, which made and sold mitts to wash babies.

“We named our company Wash-a-Babe,” Lassus remembers with a laugh. “The next year, our company was responsible for producing a half hour program on WOWO radio, during which high school students performed their talents.”

To honor his entrepreneurial work through Junior Achievement, in his senior year in high school Lassus was the Junior Achievement Achiever chosen to speak at the annual recognition banquet.

“I always had aspirations of going to college and working for the family business,” Lassus says. “So, after graduating from Central Catholic high school in Fort Wayne, I studied business administration at Xavier University.”

Through college, Lassus continued to date his high school sweetheart, Kathy, who was in nursing school. They were later married. By the time he was 30 years old, Lassus was active in the family business, and he and Kathy were raising their four children.

“When I graduated from college and came to work at Lassus Brothers Oil, Co. in 1960, I couldn’t believe that after 35 years in business, we still had only six stations, in only one city,” Lassus says. “Because those six stations were enough to support everyone in the family, however, no one saw the need to grow the company any bigger.”

As his first job in the business, Lassus first worked in the sales division of the company. He called on fleet accounts, working to increase the Lassus Brothers Oil Co.’s proprietary credit card sales to these companies.

“In those days, filling stations sold private brands of gas, not the branded gas we see today,” Lassus says. “We were selling our gas 1-2 cents below the branded stations and doing well. We sold only gas, and the stations had lube bays but no mechanics.”

In 1965, Lassus became executive vice president/assistant to the president at the company. That same year, he developed the Lassus profit-sharing plan for employees. Beginning in 1968 and continuing into the early 1970s, the company further expanded and opened locations outside Fort Wayne including stations in Auburn, Decatur and LaPorte.

“I felt it was important to grow the company so our employees could grow with it,” Lassus says. “I wanted to give the company and its employees bigger and better opportunities.”

By 1972, Lassus was the company's president, and the business was operating 12 stations across the northeast Indiana region. In 1973, Lassus saw a new opportunity and seized it.

"We had vending machines in our stores, and I founded Anthony Wayne Vending Company because I thought 'we can do this as well as our supplier,'" Lassus says. "We also had a pay phone company business at one time, too. Both of those companies have been sold now, though."

In 1974, the oil embargo caused numerous challenges for citizens and gas stations across the nation.

"The embargo meant gas allocations, and as a company we had to deal with that," Lassus says. "We sold gas until it ran out, then we'd have to close the stations. While it seemed like it should have had a negative economic impact on our business, it actually didn't. Federal guidelines regulated the prices, and our expenses, especially labor costs, were down because stations were closing early, so it was actually a profitable time for us."

About the same time, self-service gas stations became legal in Indiana. Lassus says that was a godsend, and combined with the shorter 1979 gas shortage, helped the company expand.

Throughout the challenges of the 1970s Lassus continued to see potential for growing the business. But, he acknowledges, "Good ideas take time to come to fruition. By the mid-1970s, I was seeing places convenience store businesses such as 7-Eleven open and do well. That's when I started envisioning the combination of convenience store and gasoline sales. But, we couldn't actually implement that until 1980."

By 1983, Lassus Brothers Oil Company was ready to expand again, however. That year Lassus also moved the offices from the original station's location to new facilities on West Jefferson Boulevard. Those offices were later moved again to Magnavox Way as the company continued to grow and expand.

In 1993, Lassus furthered the company's efforts by joining with BP, a global energy company.

"We needed a new image, and BP had 15 locations in northwest Ohio that it would sell to us as part of the package," Lassus says. "I made the decision to team with BP, and we converted our Indiana locations to include BP branded gasoline."

Today the business is much different than the filling station August Lassus started in 1925. Lassus says the sophistication of the business is just one aspect of those changes. In addition to its gas stations and coordinating convenience

stores, Lassus Brothers Oil is also a jobber, supplying gas to other dealer stations.

While growing the business, Lassus was active in the oil industry, as well. He was a member and president of the Indiana Oil Marketers, Northeast Indiana Oil Men's Club and the Business Forum.

Throughout the years, Lassus says that in addition to helping the company grow, he was also dedicated to putting the right people in the right positions within the company. That commitment, he notes, has helped both the company and its employees succeed.

"It's a fun business, and it's still expanding, too," Lassus says. "Just recently, we opened a new location in Warsaw."

As the company expands to new locations such as the one in Warsaw, its pledge to have every station be as clean as possible every day remains a focal point.

"For example, when we took over the Warsaw location at 7 p.m., our employees spent the entire night removing and cleaning everything and restocking it for a 6 a.m. opening," Lassus says. "From the first day of operation as a Lassus /Handy Dandy Food Store, we wanted the location to showcase our company and our commitment to the customer."

Lassus says the company's goal is to have every customer leave our store with a smile on his or her face.

"Buying gas is a necessity, not something we 'want' to do," Lassus says. "At Lassus/Handy Dandy Food Stores, we are making that necessary purchase a positive experience, one done in a clean, friendly environment. When a customer leaves happy, that's how we know we've done a good job."

Customer satisfaction and corporate success have been "great motivators" Lassus says. "Our employees are empowered to make customers happy, and as they grow with situations, we grow as a company."

As the company grew over the years, Lassus and his wife raised three sons and a daughter, Michelle. Their sons are active in the business today; Todd is the company's president; Jon, Jr. and Greg are both vice presidents. Lassus himself is still the company's CEO.

"Passing the business onto the fourth generation was a long process of planning," Lassus says. "We worked with consultants, financial advisors and attorneys to plan the next steps and get the strongest recommendations about how to transition it in the best way possible."

The transition was completed in September 2003, over a five-year period.

“It has been gratifying to have my sons work in the business and today own 95 percent of it,” Lassus says. “I worked many years growing the original family business, and it’s a warm feeling to now reap the benefits of that work and continue to share it with our dedicated employees and the members of the family.”

Lassus also believes in sharing this success with others in the community, because, he says, “I want to give back to the community.”

He has served on numerous boards of directors, including Junior Achievement of Northern Indiana, St. Francis College, the former Summit Bank, and Wayne Pipe & Supply. Lassus has also served as a director for the Chamber of Commerce, Better Business Bureau and Fort Wayne Rotary Club, as well as the American Red Cross, Public Television of Fort Wayne and St. Joseph Hospital Health Foundation. He was also chairman of the building committee and involved with the development of St. Elizabeth Seton Catholic Church.