

Portland Country Market

by Doris Sherrow, October 1999

In the late 1700s, quarry owner **Timothy Russell** built himself a large, comfortable colonial-style house on the lot where Portland Country Market now stands. Russell's property included a profitable indenture with an early quarry company - an 1819 lease gave him \$10 for each square rod of property quarried behind the house. When he died in 1840, the house descended to his son, Daniel.

In 1862, Civil War troops were sent off from the Russells' place. **Rev. Samuel Emory** of Trinity Church recorded in his diary for August 25: "Officiated as chaplain in front of Mr. Russell's for the company raised here, about to leave for New Haven... Presented swords to the volunteer company at the picnic in Mr. Russell's grounds, and made a speech with fear and trembling."

When **Daniel Russell** died in 1869, his occupation was listed as "care of his own finances," which entailed some \$300,000 in land, buildings and quarry stocks, equivalent to over \$20,000,000 today. The house passed to his son Frederick, who had been living there with his young family for several years.

Frederick eventually moved out of town, and the house became quarry housing. Toward the end of its days, it was a boarding house called the "Portland House." In 1929, fire raged through the building, gutting the interior. Soon after, Timothy Russell's grand house was razed.

At this point, the property was acquired by **Morris Joseloff** and his associates. Joseloff had emigrated from Russia in 1900. With his brothers, he founded **Economy Grocery**, which merged with **First National Stores** in the early 1900s. He made tremendous profits, which he plowed back into his adopted country. He donated millions to **Brandeis University, Yale School of Medicine, Wadsworth Athenium**, and the **Joseloff Gallery of Art** at the **University of Hartford**.

In various towns around Connecticut, Joseloff and company typically bought up a parcel of land in the town center and set up a supermarket on the site. The vacant lot at 272 Main was ideal. A deed from April 14, 1931, mentions "a one-story building" on the lot - the new supermarket.

From 1931 until 1957, First National Stores operated from this site, although in its first decades, it shared the building with at least two other businesses. **Wannerstrom's** appliance store occupied the 30 feet at the end closest to the bridge, and the **Conklin Pharmacy** occupied the northernmost 20 or 30 feet. The grocery store had made the middle section. A tavern and a dry cleaners also occupied various corners of the building at one time or another.

In 1957, First National moved to Marlborough Street, to what we identify today as the Tri-Town Plaza. For a year or so, the building at 272 Main stood vacant, until **Don Demar**, a 26 year old who was running a small market in Hartford, contacted Joseloff's company. Demar had little capital to sink into the store, but Joseloff seems to have liked his style, and offered him generous terms. Don started up the Portland Supermarket on July 17, 1957. He fondly remembers Joseloff's combination of extraordinary business sense and rare generosity.

Until 1961, **Fire Company #1's** second firehouse, a small gambler-roofed house-like structure built in 1923, stood neatly between what was long **Brownstone Pharmacy** and the supermarket. People had fewer cars, and more people walked to the grocery store, so the front spaces were enough in the 1940s and 50s! In 1961, the town took down the firehouse, and parking behind the store was opened up. (A 1980s beautification effort threatened to make those front spaces into three slots of parallel parking; the will of the people prevailed, however, and kept this supermarket as wonderfully convenient as it is!)

Don admits to putting up the unique tower/bird condo on the south side of the front. "It was a 60s thing..." he says, somewhat ruefully. Recently I watched Katie, a young neighbor, showing her toddler the cute birdies up in their many nests in the tower. Almost certainly, her own mother, **Mary Ann**, must have shown little Katie the cute birdies up in their nests, some twenty or thirty bird-generations ago! Of such stuff are traditions made!

In 1983, Don sold the supermarket to **Warren Carlson**, the current owner. Carlson's son, Warren Jr. ("J.R."), came home from vacation that year to discover that he was no longer running his dad's store in Meriden. He'd been switched to the new one in Portland! Sixteen years later,

he's still at it, coordinating the millions of demands and needs and mix-ups involved in feeding much of Portland. About the business, standing like David amidst the Super-Goliaths, he says: "It gets harder every year..."

Down cellar on the plywood walls are hundreds of signatures. Kids who worked in the store over the decades signed their names, and usually a date. And somehow, that sums it up. This little supermarket is about people, about a more human scale of life. Not some site-leveling behemoth, controlled by out-of-state or even foreign interests. It's about seeing your neighbor when you run down for a loaf of bread. Saying "hi" to your son's friend as she works the register.

The birds in the condo hope we keep it that way.