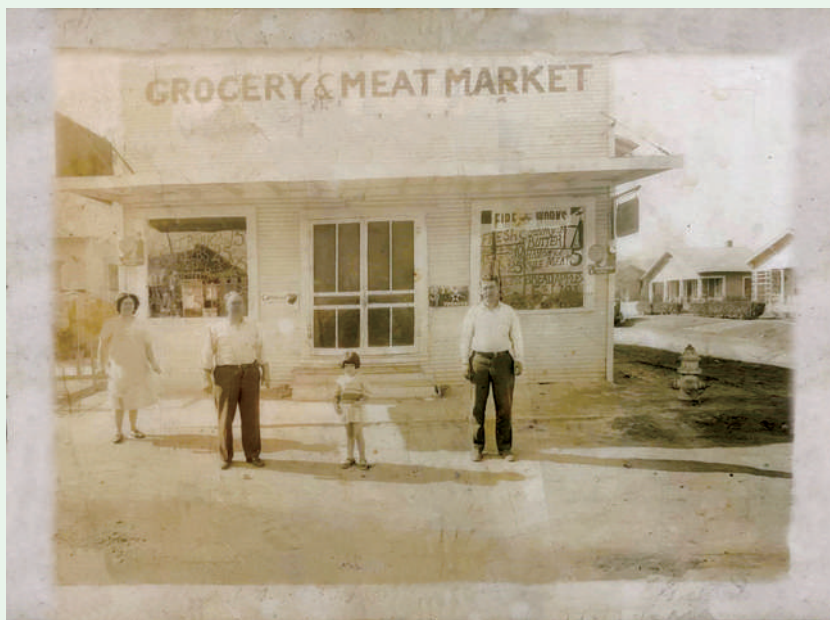


Do you remember Centeno Supermarket?



By José Yole Centeno

Do you remember when you'd walk into a Centeno supermarket and instantly be welcomed by the smell of fresh pan dulce? Do you remember when Centeno supermarket showed their solidarity with union farmers and only carried union-made grapes? Do you remember eating tortas and churros at the movies at Cine Mexico with your family and picking up groceries at Centeno's right after? If you remember, please enjoy this article down memory lane and enjoy the pictures! If you were



Centeno Grocery and Meat Market on Colorado and Rivas Street

born after 1990 like me, then I invite and welcome you to read an important piece of Westside history. This is a story of San Antonio's biggest independent grocery chain that had a vision that was far ahead of its time—a time when independents and small family businesses could thrive in our city.

At one time the largest independent grocer in San Antonio, Centeno's Supermarket began with José "Joe" Sr. and Jesusa "Jesusita" Centeno. José Sr. was born in Matamoros, Mexico, and was the son of a physician. He and his father found their new home in Laredo, Tx, where his Father continued to practice medicine. In 1914, José Sr. decided he did not want to follow his fathers footsteps to pursue a career in the medical profession and moved to San Antonio to look for his future and found it in his love for the retail business, working at a dry goods store. As a young man he worked with Joe Barash who owned two clothing stores and Isidor Brenner, the founder of Solo Serve, furthering his skill set in the retail business. Jesusa Centeno was born in Floresville, Texas. In 1922, she met José Sr. by chance while she was visiting her sister in San Antonio. Within a two week romance-filled courtship, they got married. In 1928, the Centeno's soon began selling groceries out of their small home

on 415 Rivas Street.

Jesusa Centeno took care of the business at home while José Centeno Sr. ventured early mornings to do the buying at the city markets and went to his job where he worked selling clothes for Brenner's. In 1930, they were able to focus on their business full time with Jesusa as Treasurer and José Sr. as President with their three children Joe Jr, Lilia (Lily), and Eloy. As the family grew, so did the business and by 1940, the family moved locations to 500 Arbor Place. With hard work and perseverance during

the Great Depression, they built this small operation at a time when few Mexican Americans were succeeding in business.

On November 9th, 1948, the first Centeno supermarket (Store NO. 1) which would serve as the family's flagship was located at 2300 W. Commerce and later renumbered as 1802 W. Commerce St. Centeno's opened their doors with open arms, proudly serving the Westside by the Westside, described as "the finest and most independent supermarkets in San Antonio with a free parking lot to fit 500 cars and with 8 checking counters." Centeno's supermarket attracted the Prospect Hill communities with genuine hard-to-find Mexican food ingredients, large Carnecería, Produce, Pandaria and a Pharmacy. While the Supermarket was represented and managed by the sons, Joe Jr. and Eloy Centeno, Jesusa Centeno retained her role as Secretary-Treasurer and continued to be a familiar sight at this location. Greeting customers, bagging groceries, anything to make her patrons feel they were getting the attention they deserved. She would train hundreds of employees who would later run successful retail operations of their own. She was the truest definition of a matriarch, a pioneer of the modern woman, a guiding force in the development of the city's first successful Mexican



José Centeno Sr., Cantinflas, Eloy Centeno. Photo courtesy of Raquel Centeno.

American owned business.

Joe Jr. would speak for the store until his unexpected death in 1956 due to a sudden attack of appendicitis. This left the family devastated, and were caught in a vulnerable moment when Howard Butt of H-E-B. expressed his sympathy through a stationary cream colored letter. Within 24 hours, H-E-B executives visited the supermarket with a proposal to buy out the store. José Sr. thanked them for their offer and declined but would never forget how H-E-B tried to exploit the family during their time of grief. Neither would Eloy. That experience set the tone he needed to pursue his brother's vision of expansion. Eloy took on the position as president of the company, and with his leadership, began to expand and with time Centeno Supermarket naturally became a cultural institution of the Westside, preserving and uplifting the communities that they served.

In 1968 Store No.2 located at 319 Castroville Road and Barclay opened its doors. It was architecturally unlike any other grocery store in San Antonio — it was extraordinarily large, with 25,000 square feet and its exterior exuded a Spanish-Moorish style with large arches, lamps, and tejas (roof tiles). Within four years, the chain expanded to Store No.3 located on Interstate 35 and Southcross. In 1976 Store No.4 on 3481 Fredericksburg Road (Currently H-E-B university) and a few months later, Store No. 5 located on 511 Fair Ave. In the 1970s, Centeno partnered with other businesses, notably with Cine De Mexico and Big Star Family Center discount stores. Both of these partners would be at the Castroville location, and the combination of these stores would later be coined as Centeno Marketplace, that included toy, auto, clothing and furniture departments.

“¡Si Centeno no lo tiene, es que usted no lo necesita!”

Centeno's was known for curating and providing a selection of national brands but also known for importing popular Mexican products you couldn't get at an ordinary supermarket. These items included nopalitos, chili ancho, chili cascabel, piloncillo, chocolate Mexicano, chili poblano, mole

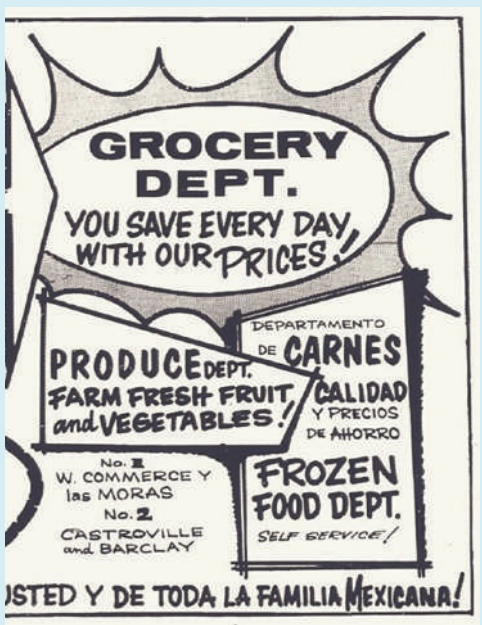
pipian, mole verde, jícama, papaya, mango, tomatillos and hundreds of other foods. This is exactly what made Centeno's stand out from other competing grocers at the time.

Eloy Centeno believed in being socially involved. He was a volunteer official for the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and other charities. In 1970, Centeno became the first Mexican American trustee of the City Public Service board. He also partnered with Raul Jiménez by volunteering the store's ovens to bake turkeys for the Thanksgiving community dinners that are hosted to this day at the Henry B. González Convention Center. He ensured that the store offered toy sales every December so that they were affordable for families in the Westside. He also sponsored celebrations with free food and entertainment by famous Mexican recording artists and film actors like Mario Moreno “Cantinflas”.

The store's expansion came to a halt the next decade, followed by a two year price war known as the Great South Texas Grocery War that took place from 1983-1985. Eloy Centeno accused Kroger Stores Inc. of Ohio and H-E-B Stores Inc. of Corpus Christi, of raising prices 11.9% higher in cities such as Laredo, Brownsville and Corpus Christi, while their prices remained low in San Antonio. This impacted smaller businesses in San Antonio who could not compete and went bankrupt, thus making room for Kroger and H-E-B to monopolize the grocery market in the city. Eloy made the case that this practice, known as predatory



1948, Centeno Supermarket 1803 W. Commerce St. Photo courtesy of ITC.



pricing, was illegal under federal antitrust laws. "The consumer is king and if you act individually and collectively, you will be able to bring sanity to a situation which, if left unchecked, will lead to economic disaster for hundreds of allied suppliers, related businesses and thousands of employees. This will also mean higher food prices for you." (Said Eloy Centeno in an advertisement raising awareness in the community where he predicts what will happen.) This statement rings true now



2-6316-95072 Opening Store #3, Southcross, Nov 1972
Opening Centeno Marketplace #3 on Southcross, November 19, 1972.

in 2023, as we are struggling today with higher food costs. In 1985, Centeno Supermarket won a lawsuit of an undis-



2-8315-69887 Opening new Centeno Market on Guadalupe St April 1968
Opening new Centeno Market on Guadalupe St. April 1068.

closed amount against H-E-B for predatory pricing. Towards the end, Centeno's reported losing about a million dollars a year, causing shareholders of the company to pull out before declaring bankruptcy. Employees decamped and branched out to the bigger chains in 1990. The last property standing on

Southcross had closed its doors as a Centeno Marketplace but later in the year, converted as a flea market (Centeno's Pan Am Flea Market) until it officially closed its doors in 1997. Eloy Centeno passed away November 13th, 2008 at the age of 78. At a time when the Westside was considered to be hard-core unemployable, Centeno supermarket created employment, with skilled laborers, many of whom started their own businesses. It created an economy, and became a cultural institution of the Westside. Like much of history made by working class Chicanos/Mexicanos, this history has been and is at risk of erasure. It is my desire and interest to preserve this history, one that rightfully belongs to the Westside. That is also an interest of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center and the Museo del Westside.



Eloy Centeno at the 500 Arbor place location, 1940. Photo courtesy of ITC.

BIO: José Yole Centeno, born and raised in San Antonio, is a musician, organizer, and youth advocate and a proud resident of the Westside.



I personally welcome and invite our community to be a part of an exhibit dedicated to Centeno Supermarket at the Museo del Westside in the near future—an exhibit that will consist of photos, mixed media, articles and memorabilia. It would bring me great honor and joy to read and receive testimonies of stories and photos of our communities and families at Centeno's supermarket and with your consent, include them to be part of this archival journey.

—Please write me at: Centenoexhibit@gmail.com



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