



Plath's Meats Incorporated

JOHN PLATH'S 110 YEAR
OLD FAMILY BUSINESS
IN DOWNTOWN ROGERS
CITY SHARES HIS
GRANDFATHERS'S
ENTREPRENEURIAL
LEGACY

Photos and Story by Phil Eich,
Storyville Social, as part of the
Michigan Main Street Story
Series

My grandpa came over here from Germany in 1913 all by himself with \$50 in his pocket. Before he moved, he had apprenticed with a friend to learn how to be a meat cutter and sausage maker. He thought Rogers City could use another good meat store, and he opened one. The original building is still there next to Westminster Park, being used as a dentist's office today. This was at the time before the outlying areas had electricity, so he built a freezer and locker plant where we'd freeze the beef and pork for farmers, and local people could have a key to a locker where they'd store whatever food they might want to freeze.

When my dad got out of the service, all of his buddies were going off to college on the GI Bill. He said, 'I'm going to go to

college,' but my grandpa told him, 'The store will teach you what you need to know,' so he stayed. I wish he would have gone, but I suppose he had to learn things in his own way.

In the 50s, the business really took off after my dad bought it from my grandpa. Restaurants from across Michigan would come to Rogers City to pick up the product, so he started a meat truck in 1958 right after the Mackinac Bridge was opened. We ran meat all the way from Bay City, to Sault Ste. Marie, up the west side in the Petoskey, Harbor Springs and Boyne Falls area. That's how our name got out: restaurants would have our meat on their menus and people would ask, 'This is fantastic. Where did you get this from?'

Then he started a mail order

business that we still operate. When U.S. Steel started down here, the big shots would come up from Pittsburgh by train and wanted to take some home, so we'd pack it up and send it back with them. Then they wanted things for Christmas, so we started shipping it down to them for Christmas. It grew to the point where when we were kids, we would have 'stuffing parties' where we would stuff 10,000 envelopes in November for all the people on the mailing list from all over the country, and then box up products at Christmas time.

December gets pretty wild around here. We start making the product right after Thanksgiving so we can ship it out a week or two before Christmas, meaning it's nice and fresh. We don't freeze anything, we just send it out. Freshness is important, but it's also the way we cure and smoke the meat; we do it the same way my grandpa did, along with using all the sausage recipes that he brought over from Germany.

If it's not broke, don't fix it!

When I got out of high school, I went sailing on the Great Lakes for 10 years on the freighters because there weren't really many options for work at the time. I sailed out of Rogers City, and there was a time where I had gone under the Mackinac Bridge more than I'd been over it.

I got out of sailing in 1986 when the steel industry in this country went down the tubes. There was no steel to ship, and I had 30 days of work that year because all of the boats were laid up. I had two kids and a third on the way, so I knew I



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had to find something different. My dad needed more help here at the store because he was getting older, so I came back and began working here.

Family-owned businesses say that you should go out and do something else for a couple years so you know if you want to come back, and that's what my son Jonathan did. After high school, he got into trucking, driving a semi down to Pennsylvania and through the mountains in the oil and gas fields. At the same time my brother Tim wanted to retire, Jonathan wanted to get out of truck driving, so he came back and worked with him for a year or two and then took over.

There are five boys in the family and I'm number four out of five. My three older brothers are retired and my younger brother Mark runs our store in Petoskey. He got out of high school in 1980 and there wasn't much for him to do, so he went to college for CAD, designing homes on the computer. He worked in Petoskey for

years, and then in 2008 when the housing industry took a dive, the business he was at for something like 25 years closed up.

Prior to the business closing, he was hauling bacon and hotdogs over to his buddies at work because they all loved them, so he says, 'What do you think about opening a store over there?' At first it was like, 'Ah, I don't know,' but it ended up being a pretty darn good idea. We opened in Petoskey in 2010 and it's just gangbusters over there.

Plath's is a 110-year-old family business—and we still have fun doing it. I'm 65, so people ask, 'When are you going to retire, John?' and I say, 'Well, when I get tired of playing store, I guess!' I like meeting the people coming in the front door, especially the locals and the summertime folks. They say, 'Hi, how are you doing?' We might not know everybody's name, but we sure know their faces.

The thing I like about Rogers City is the town, the people in it, the locals and also the tourists coming in. It's a small community, with not a lot of traffic. It's a wonderful county and wonderful town. We're all like a big family.

Here, you can relax. Vacation means 'vacate.' You can slow down and basically do nothing if that's what you want to do. You want to walk around and do some shopping. You can go to the big cities if you want to. We've got our little stores and things like that. It's safe, and there are miles of open beaches. You can actually see the lake. You don't have hotels that you have to look around.

- John Plath, Plath's Meats Incorporated

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