

Susan and Danny Falkenstern of ABC Distributors

*A NARRATIVE EXCERPTED FROM
AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW*

WITH VIRGINIA LILLIS SMITH, OCTOBER, 2015

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Susan Falkenstern:

In 1967 Fred Antonini, Nelson Haje, and my mother Alma Rowe bought the used-material [salvage] store ABC Demolition which became ABC Distributors, a building supply, on Jefferson Davis Highway. Allied Plywood and Union Iron Works were nearby. ABC sold wrought iron to Tom Sarris's New Orleans House [restaurant]. Early on we acquired a bunch of used gas masks. Years later when the hippies were marching on the Pentagon, we sold all of those gas masks. We never ever thought we would sell them. We went to demolish the old Raleigh Hotel at 18th and Penn, in town, only to find that the owners had literally left everything there. As a child, all of our sheets had Hotel Raleigh stamped on them. A lot of people bought used brick from us. I remember learning how to clean used brick as a child. I also remember writing my first [sales] ticket when I was twelve.

About 1969 the business moved a block away, to the old Pentagon Lumber building, on Clark Street, for ten years. Davis Industries, a big junkyard, was nearby. When Charles E. Smith built Crystal City in 1979 we moved to Shirlington Road even as Shirlington was going through a lot of change. Back then there was Best Company, Jelliff's, [women's clothes], Drug Fair, [Marriott's] Hot Shoppes, Cherner Lincoln Mercury dealership, and, of course, the Weenie Beenie [sandwich shop]. In 1989 my mother bought out her two partners. The bank would not lend her money until she added computers to the business for keeping inventory control.

Our clients were mostly small contractors. At ABC Distributors we sold a little bit of everything you needed to build a house, everything but trusses. My mother was one of the few people who would extend credit to these small



Danny Falkenstern

Interior of ABC Distributors, Arlington, Virginia.

businesses. But we never delivered. One thing that was unusual about ABC Distributors is that we never owned any delivery trucks.

Danny Falkenstern:

The business was in three sections: Susan was in charge of the lumberyard and the building materials, which are primarily outdoors. Georgia-Pacific was a major supplier. Bob Presgrave handled special orders for 24 years. He'd help clients who ordered from catalogs. Susan's brother Barney Lynch originally handled hardware. When the store was taken over by Susan's mother, Barney had the whole store reconfigured. He changed the orientation of the aisles, and really organized the product mix terrifically. He was a master merchandiser. Barney maximized that space. I think we had about twenty-seven thousand SKU numbers in the store. A SKU is like a bar-coded number that identifies a particular product for inventory purposes. Now everything, even a nut and a bolt has a UPC label. Today you can scan a nut and a bolt, but before it was all typed in by description. Like a lag bolt—if you buy say a half-inch by six-inch lag bolt, our description would be L126, L for lag and half by six. Or a carriage bolt would be C. We had our own sort of internal system. Merchandise was on the walls, floor to ceiling. We had these little nifty things called nabbers. They were like a

little four-foot grabber, and you'd have to use them to grab stuff. It was either a picker-upper or a puller-downer, depending on which direction you were going.

I joined the hardware department in 1994. We had ten departments in the store: hand tools; power tools; lawn and garden; fasteners, which included screws, nuts, bolts, nails, for every kind of thing that you could put together. This was probably our largest SKU's department, probably had three or four thousand items in that one department.

Next was plumbing; HVAC and electrical; then paint and paint supplies, which was a big, big department for us because we sold a lot of caulk and a lot of adhesives and, all the stuff that goes with it: paint brushes, rollers, primer, porch paint, concrete sealers, stains. Fortunately, we had a vendor for years, Felmor Corporation, and they had a regular salesman Lee Sherman who came by weekly to go through our inventory and write a suggested order for us. Felmor went out of business when Hechinger went out of business because Hechinger was one of their biggest customers. Felmor had been in business for seventy-five years. They were replaced by Five Star out of New Jersey, and Lee Sherman went to work for them.

Next was roofs, gutters and ladders. Number nine was polyethylene sheeting, a big seller for us. The tenth department was just miscellaneous, but miscellaneous encompassed a lot of things, like all the cabinet hardware, gate hardware, Stanley hardware, locks.

Susan Falkenstern:

People really liked the personal service they got. Everyone working at ABC had been there for a long while, and they knew what they were talking about. We had, at one time, as many as twenty-two, twenty-four employees. By the end, I think there were just twelve of us left. I sat behind the counter at the front door, we used to call that my corner office with a view. I greeted everybody. It's amazing how many people's faces and names I remembered. The year the Redskins won the Super Bowl we had a Hogette Day for the clients. All the employees dressed up as Hogettes. We had one customer, a big Dallas fan, who came dressed as the pork inspector. We also had Christmas lunch each year for the clients. We never advertised, just grew by word of mouth. Arlington County Parks department bought from us, and Georgetown University and the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.

We went from manual records to computers, and we fought it kicking and screaming, but it was really an improvement. Before that, we added all the tickets by hand. You had to add them in your head or with calculators.

If you bought so much material from Georgia Pacific through the year, they would send you on a vacation. I went to Thailand with my mother and my sister went to Hawaii with her. So we had some nice vacations. It was really

quite a bonus for people that worked hard all the time. We went to St. Martin on a cruise sponsored by the wholesaler Frederick [MD] Trading. Nora Gabladon and her husband, Gabby, from Arlington Hardware were on the trip and Rick Iglesias who owned Virginia Hardware. So we knew all the local people that were in the same business. So it wasn't like you were really in competition with them. We were sort of on the same team because we're all fighting the same odds against all these big people, the Home Depots.

Danny Falkenstern:

As far as maintaining the inventory, we never scanned in our list to buy. Our store was so compressed that when things got low the people at the counter would write it down. Our computer was set up for optimum stock level and when you should reorder it and all that kind of stuff, and if you wanted to, it would spit you out an order. But even when reps came from the vendors, we would review their order because we knew that at certain parts of the year we would sell more of one item and less of another. We just never let anybody order for us. We were pretty much in control of our inventory. It was just easier for us to write it down, and I would send the order for our main supplies on a Telxon machine over the phone line.

Susan Falkenstern:

Early on, if you wanted to buy a name brand item it came through a sales rep for the manufacturer. You couldn't buy from a wholesaler, only a sales rep. Now we have a wholesaler, Orgill, out of Memphis where we can buy everything. Cherrydale Hardware, Ayers, and Brown's in Falls Church all have the same wholesaler that we have. That makes it easier on the manufacturers because they'd sell a huge amount to this one wholesaler, and that wholesaler would sell it to stores like us.

The industry has changed tho. Overseas outsourcing took away the small guy's uniqueness. Our business model is not flying with kids who want to shop online and have it delivered yet we've gotten got traffic from new people thanks to Yelp. This is a 24/7 job even when you're not there because you're always thinking about something. We had a good forty eight years. I expect the community will miss us but not as much as I'll miss them.

About the Author

Virginia Lillis Smith conducts oral history interviews about Arlington businesses for the Center for Local History, Arlington Public Library. She is a retired art dealer and a lifelong Arlington resident.
