

# Downtown to Lose Friendly Store?

By MARCUS WALTON

For 52 years, the friendly store on the Plaza has sold everything from christening gowns to burial suits. In some local families, three generations of brides have fitted wedding dresses there. When the children came along, they got their first shoes at the store.

It is one of the final holdouts, a sensible general clothing store on a downtown block bristling with expensive new specialty shops. It is Bell's, and the family that has owned and operated the store on the Plaza since 1926 says it may be moving to the suburbs in little more than a year.

Bell's current lease at 116 W. San Francisco St. expires in January 1984. New owner Gerald Peters has said he will raise Bell's rent when the lease expires, but has offered to lease space in his building to the store at below-market rates—"at a price that just breaks even on the mortgage"—as an inducement for Bell's to stay.

Members of the Bell family, however, say that the expected rent hike and building changes planned by Peters will almost certainly force them to seek a new location outside central Santa Fe.

Since the death of her husband a little more than a year ago, Marilyn Bell has worked with manager Ed Cornelius to keep the family store open. She said her sons, Jon, a freshman business major at the University of New Mexico, and Lance, a junior at Santa Fe High School, will take over when they finish school.

Neither son plays an active role in operating the business now, but both took part in recent conversations with Peters about possible terms for a new lease.

"Mr. Peters said he wants us to stay, and has offered us first option on the place," Jon Bell said. "And he hasn't set a firm figure on the rent. But he's talking a market rate of \$16 to \$18 a square foot.

"He's given us the option of reducing our floor and storage space from 8,000 square feet to 2,300 or 4,600 square feet. But say we cut it to 4,600. At \$18 a square foot that's nearly \$83,000 a year, instead of the \$25,000 we're paying now. We don't make enough profit to cover a jump like that."

Peters said he is willing to charge the Bells only enough rent to break even on their share of his mortgage on the building, even if it is at a below-market rate.



The staff at Bell's: Business that's basically local

## Downtown developer Gerald Peters is the subject of this week's Santa Fe Newsmaker interview on preceding page.

"Bell's is paying about \$2.50 a square foot, under a long-term lease that was arranged in an age when people were paying 6 percent interest rates and inflation was non-existent," he said. "Things are completely different with the modern economic conditions.

"The mortgage I'm paying on that building is quite a bit larger than the lease income, and I'm absorbing the loss. I want Bell's to stay there. They are a fixture in downtown Santa Fe. They can help make it a vital marketplace that functions for the whole community. But I've got to charge enough to break even on the mortgage."

About 1½ years ago, Peters bought the west half of the block on the south side of West San Francisco Street,

between Galisteo and Don Gaspar, including the building that houses Bell's. He has plans to build a mini-mall with shops, office and restaurant where Walgreen's and Elliott's 98-Cent Store used to be, and perhaps link that mall to the Bell's building with an interior walkway that will exit on Galisteo. The mall will be three levels on Water Street, two on San Francisco.

"He talked about a candy shop similar to one he'd seen in Ghirardelli Square [a collection of tourist-trade restaurants and shops in San Francisco], where you can watch the candy being made," Jon Bell said. "He also talked about a designer shop for boots and shoes, and an exclusive luggage shop."

"The problem is, what he plans will cater more to the wealthy and the tourists, rather than to the local middle-class families that form the backbone of our business."

"We're caught in a two-way squeeze, essentially," Bell continued. "The higher rents will kill us even if our business stays healthy, and the shops he plans for the

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# Stepping Back into a Gentler Past

Walk through the double glass doors at Bell's, just west of the Plaza on San Francisco Street, and step into the past, to a gentler day when "service with a smile" was more than an empty slogan on an advertising broadsheet.

Though the clothes are modern and attractively displayed on chrome racks and shelved in ordered stacks, Bell's still somehow retains the comfortable, cluttered feel of an old dry goods store. There may be a daring set of scarlet lingerie featured in the women's clothing section, but still there's the impression that a cracker barrel and a wood stove must be hidden somewhere 'round back.

The salespeople at Bell's are like friendly aunts and uncles, somehow. They don't push and yet they don't ignore. They let a customer make the choice, but if the person needs help, they know the inventory like a familiar face.

All in all, it feels like a resting place as much as a store, a spot where a sale is only incidental to the conversation and the comfort. There is no subtle Muzak message to buy, buy—only a simple display of quality goods and a family atmosphere.

Considering the history of the store and the family that owns it, the atmosphere at Bell's is honestly come by.

When Morris and Ethel Bell came here to open their first Santa Fe clothing store in 1926, they brought with them a tradition in family merchandising that spanned continents and generations.

Ethel's father, Lieb Vigdorovici, was a wholesale meat dealer in Romania before the family emigrated to the United States in the late 1890s to escape anti-Jewish persecution. Ethel worked for several years in a Denver department store and later for a dry goods company before she married Morris.

Morris' father was Avrom Zvi Belitzer, who as a young man gave up a promising career as a rabbi to manage his father-in-law's general store near Vilna, Lithuania. Morris fled to the United States in 1902 to avoid conscription into the army of the Russian czar, and anglicized his name to Bell.

Morris married Ethel in 1916, and for several years he peddled dry goods, notions and clothing from the back of a horse-drawn wagon, first in Denver, then southern Colorado and finally northern New Mexico, often staying in the homes of ranchers and farmers along his trade route.

Morris must have liked what he saw in New Mexico, because in 1921 he and his wife moved to Espanola, to open a modest dry goods and general clothing store.

Ethel's experience as a clerk and saleswoman stood them in good stead; while peddling, Morris had built a reputation in the area as an honest tradesman who cared for his customers. Their little store prospered, and in 1926, they moved to Santa Fe and opened a larger department store.

From the beginning, Bell's offered just what the store sells today: good, sensible clothing for the entire family at an affordable price. Whether it was sturdy shoes for growing children, a wool suit for father or a smart-looking Sunday straw hat for mother, all the family clothing needs could be taken care of at Bell's.

After Morris died and his older son, Gerald, went to work as an engineer in Los Alamos, Irving—the younger son—co-managed Bell's with his mother until her death.

Like his father, Irving Bell married a woman with sales experience. Marilyn Bearman Bell had worked for many years in her father's Birmingham, Ala., haberdashery before she moved to Santa Fe and married Irving.

Though they made inventory concessions to changing fashion, Irving and Marilyn Bell sought the same customers that Morris and Ethel had—local families of moderate means were the backbone of Bell's business.

"You're somebody at Bell's" has been not only an advertising slogan but a working policy since the store opened, according to longtime employees. From the start, Morris and Ethel built lasting ties with their patrons and employees. Irving continued that policy, and since his death a little more than a year ago, store manager Ed Cornelius has carried it on under the direction of Marilyn Bell.

"The Bells have always treated their help and customers like family," said Molly Martinez, who has worked as a sales clerk at the store for nearly 50 years. "That's why I still work here after all these years, and that's why I have customers who come all the way from Espanola and Chimayo. Their parents used to buy clothes here, now they buy here, and one day their children will. It's like home and family."

Martinez's statement is borne out by the long tenures of her co-workers. Toni Gutierrez has worked at Bell's for 43 years, Connie Duran 36 years and Lucy Tapia has clerked at the store for 32 years. Emma Montez, although a relative newcomer, has 15 years' seniority.

But no one is immune to change, not even Bell's. If the family's fears prove correct, rising rents will force them away from the Plaza and out to the edge of town before their current lease expires in January 1984.

Landlord Gerald Peters has said Bell's will have to streamline its operation to survive downtown, but the family is reluctant to do so.

"We are the only home-owned department store left downtown where local people can buy clothing for the whole family, infants to grandparents," Marilyn Bell said. "We are a family store, and we want to stay that way."

— WALTON