

# The Complete History of the Dispensa Carnivals, Castle of Toys and Kiddie Kingdom.

**Kids are King**



**at Dispensa's  
Kiddie Kingdom**

Elmhurst / Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois (1975-1984)

# Chapter 1

## The Birth of an Empire

It was a very humble beginning for Dispensa's Castle of Toys and Kiddie Kingdom. The Founder was Nicholas S. Dispensa (1888 - 1970). He immigrated to the United States with his parents at the age of five. His Father, Joseph had four brothers and eventually all of them came to the States.

Nicholas S. Dispensa (later to be known as N.S.) was one of four children born to Joseph and Sabeta, but he was the only one to survive, the other three died in infancy or in early childhood.

In 1904, N.S. married Rose (1891-1958). She was born in the United States. As fate would have it, Rose had the same last name as N.S.. Together, they had nine children (4 girls and 5 boys) over a span of 29 years.

N.S.'s first job was working for the Railroad. In those days, the Italians that worked for the railroad worked laying and repairing track. Somehow he became friends with a (railroad) fireman. He took the fireman to his home for some old fashion Italian cooking and homemade Italian wine. Before long they were good friends. Then, as fate would have it, the fireman was promoted to engineer, and needed to select a fireman to work with him. He chose N.S. but ran into trouble with management because N.S. was Italian, and the Italians worked on the track, not in the engine. The engineers and firemen were Irish. But, he persisted, and N.S. got the job. N.S. recalled that first day on the job, and said that his good friend, the engineer, told him, "You see that gauge, if it moves one degree above or below the mark, you're back on the track."

N.S. was a shoemaker by trade, in the days when shoemakers actually made shoes. So after he earned enough money as a fireman, he and Rose opened and ran a shoe shop in Chicago. Those were very lean years, and they looked for ways to increase their income. They saved their money, and finally, N.S. was able to buy a used chain-drive Mack dump truck.

Buying a dump truck was a wise move, because, at that time, the City of Chicago was building very large buildings with basements three and four stories deep. There was a need for trucks to haul the landfill from the building sites to the dump site (Lake Michigan).

N.S. drove to the building site, picked up a load and hauled it to the lake. When he got there he put the truck in reverse and back up as fast and as far as he could. When the truck sunk up to the axle, he dumped the load and waited for a bulldozer to hook a chain to the truck, and drag him and the truck back to the street. Then he went back for another load.

If you would like to visit that landfill site, go to the Adler Planetarium, Soldier Field, the Field Museum of Natural History, McCormick Place, the Shed Aquarium and Northerly Island (Meigs Field Airport), all were built on landfill that N.S. helped create in the early 1900's.

N.S. kept plenty busy, running the shoe shop at night and weekends, and hauling landfill in the daytime. During the day one of his sons, John (1912-1994) would deliver the repaired shoes and pick up shoes for the next days work. John also helped him repair shoes, and became quite good at it, but they wouldn't let him use the huge commercial sewing machine that sewed the soles on the shoes, so they took that work to another shop.

John always liked to tell that story, especially the part where he made the deliveries on his bike. His Mother was afraid he would lose the money he received from the customers and paid to the repair shop, so she tied a string around his neck with a small cloth bag attached. He used the bag like a cashbox, collecting from the customers, and paying the shoemaker from that little bag.

N.S. was a very talented man. In addition to his sharp business sense, he played the coronet, and sang Opera. One summer, he and his cousin Nick (who the kids called "Uncle Nick") got a job playing with a circus band at night. They worked at the Circus all summer long.

Each evening on the way into the Big Top, they passed a Ferris Wheel. The Ferris Wheel always had a line a "mile" long. After the Circus, they would leave the Big Top and again the Ferris Wheel had a long line. This impressed N.S., and he thought that this was a good business to go into, after all, he already had the truck to haul it around.

So, the next summer (1919), N.S. and Uncle Nick got together and purchased a Ferris Wheel. That summer they booked with another Circus, and were soon to learn that when people were going into the Circus the Ferris Wheel had a line, and after the Circus there was a line waiting to ride, but all the time the performance was going on, the Ferris Wheel stood idle. But as difficult as those early days were, that was to be the beginning of an amusement empire admired by generations of kids, and envied by other amusement operators all over the county for their unique and innovative approach to the business.

# Chapter 2

## The Early Years

The early years were tough. Moving the Ferris Wheel with the Mack Truck didn't work out immediately, because that first year N.S. booked with a traveling circus, and the circus moved by rail. So, each week he would have to tear the Wheel down, stack it in a pile, and hire a wagon and team of horses to haul it to the railroad yard so it could be loaded in the baggage car. Then he boarded the train and rode it to the next town where the whole scenario played out again.

The train ride from town to town cost \$100 each time they moved, and when you're charging 5¢ to ride the Wheel, that's a lot of money. It took 2,000 riders just to pay for the train, and that's not counting the men he hired to help with setting up, tearing down and loading and unloading. He also needed money for room and board.

N.S. realized very quickly that this wasn't going to work. Uncle Nick saw that too and sold out to N.S. after the first season.

Even N.S. realized that the circus route wasn't the way to go, so at the end of the season, he left the circus. For the next two years he hooked up with another ride owner who had a Merry-Go-Round, Whip and a ride he called the Sea-Plane, but it looked like a Chair-O-Plane with Rocket Ships on it.

He was finally starting to move the Wheel using the Mack Truck, which cut his expenses considerably, but they didn't want to get too far from home because vehicles weren't too reliable in those days. Besides, they could only travel about 17 miles-per-hour because the roads were bad and the truck had solid rubber tires which was nothing like the inflated tires we have today. To go any faster would shake the ride until it fell apart or fell off the truck.

Also, the Mack body wasn't big enough to move the entire ride, they had to make two trips. That wasn't practical, because the other rides were up and running, and they were still hauling the equipment from lot to lot. The solution to that was simple, hire someone to haul it for you.

This was almost like going back to the rail yard. On Sunday night they would tear the Wheel down and pile it on the ground. Then about midnight a company called Zipman Furniture Movers would have a driver bring a truck to the lot so N.S.'s crew could load the wheel into it. Then when they got to the next lot the Wheel would have to be taken from the truck and piled on the ground because the driver wouldn't wait for them to set it up. The cost of the truck and driver was \$50 each week. That's better than the \$100 for the train, but not much.

Their route started in St. Louis, Missouri in March, arriving in Chicago by May and heading back toward St. Louis in September. The season ended in St. Louis in October.

The reason this route was selected was that Spring came about two months earlier in St. Louis than in Chicago. That extended the season by four months.



It became apparent that this wasn't the answer either. So, after two years on the road, he decided to book the Wheel with a dance hall operator in Michigan City. The idea was that when the people got tired of dancing, or just wanted a little alone time with their girl friend, they would come out to ride the Ferris Wheel.

This sounded great. He didn't have to hire a crew to take down and set up the ride each week, he didn't have to hire a truck, move the ride, he didn't even have to buy gas for the ride, because the dance hall operator wanted an electric motor because the gasoline engine would be too loud right outside his dance hall entrance.

But, there is always a fly in the ointment. First of all, he didn't have an electric motor, and had to buy one. There was another problem, but before we delve into that, let me tell you a little about how a Ferris Wheel is erected.

The bottom part of the wheel is assembled on the ground. The towers are made up of two pieces that are simply called the top tower and the bottom tower. First the two bottom towers are assembled with braces in the front and back (knees) and sides (wind braces). After they are assembled, the top towers and main axle are assembled on the ground. Here comes the tricky part. Using a rope, a series of pulleys and the motor, the top towers are fastened to the bottom towers, and lifted into place. Finally, the motor is used to lift each of the twelve spokes that make up the wheel, into place,.

N.S. ordered the motor, but it hadn't arrived in time to put up the Wheel, and he had to open when the dance hall opened. He was assured the motor would be delivered in time for opening, but not in time for setting-up. So, the only thing he could think of was to hire a farmer and his team of horses to pull all the parts into place. It was a time consuming and costly solution, but it had to be done.

There was money to be made at the dance hall, but when he had the route at least he was in Chicago during the middle of the season and could come home at night, but now he was gone all summer, and Rose was home trying to take care of the kids. Needless to say, one year in Michigan City was enough.

# Chapter 3

## Kids to the Rescue

In Chapter One, you were introduced to the family of N.S. & Rose Dispensa. As you will recall, they had nine children. Those children were born in two clusters, three boys and three girls in the first thirteen years, then, after a gap of 10 years, they had another girl and two boys.

The first involvement of the kids was in 1926 when John was 14 years old. He had seen a banana peddler going up and down the street yelling “BANANOS”. John noticed that the peddler was going from block to block, and didn’t make a sale. John, as young as he was, realized that people weren’t going to leave their homes and come all the way down to the street, just to buy a couple of bananas. But, if you brought the fruit to them, they would probably buy it.

Fruit was a luxury in those days. Sometimes young children would get an apple or banana as a birthday or Christmas gift. Money was tight, and toys as we know them today didn’t even exist.

So, John asked his Dad (N.S.) to go to the fruit market and buy him a case of oranges. N. S. said he didn’t have time to waste buying oranges at the market, and told him to ask his Uncle John who worked close to the market.

That first week, Uncle John bought a case of oranges for 10¢ a dozen. John set out selling the oranges door to door at 4 for a nickel, or at 15¢ a dozen. He sold out in one day and made \$1.20 profit on his first day of business. His fruit peddling business grew by leaps and bounds, ordering more and more fruit, until Uncle John got tired of hauling fruit for him.

What does this have to do with the carnival business? Well, John started the fruit peddling business in 1926. At the time, the carnival business was 7 years old. The carnivals only operated from very late April to early September. That left almost seven months of the year without any income.

That’s when John started to pitch his fruit peddling business to N.S.. He pointed out that he was bringing home money each day on just the small business he was running. Why not do it on a larger scale.

N.S. agreed that it would be a good winter business, so they bought a used truck with an enclosed body, and all four of them, N.S., Joe, John and Paul worked in the fruit peddling business.

The first route they established was near 79th & Ashland (Chicago). They worked the houses in the daytime because families lived there and mothers were home with the kids. Then in the evening they called on the apartment buildings because that’s where the single people or working couples lived. They weren’t home in the daytime. Calling on apartment buildings was much more difficult than calling on the houses, because they would climb three flights of stairs only to find that the customer wanted one apple, or two bananas.

The peddling business grew until they had three separate routes, one near 79th

& Ashland, and two in Blue Island. They soon realized that the Blue Island routes were out grossing 79th Street, so it was abandoned and they opened a third route in Blue Island.

So, with the peddling income in the winter, and the carnival income in the summer, they were able to keep body and soul together.

In those days, work came first, education, and everything else came last. None of the three finished grade school, but did learn to read and write. All, that is except John. John was severely dyslexic, and because dyslexia wasn't understood in those days, and in spite of all their efforts, he never did learn to read or write. But, as is usually the case, he was a mechanical genius, designing and building things that revolutionized the carnival industry. But, we're getting ahead of ourselves here, we'll get to that later.

For the next few years they teamed up with other ride owners in the city and while any one of them didn't have enough rides to operate a carnival by themselves, they would have enough by pooling their resources.

During those years the family moved from 23<sup>rd</sup> & Wentworth (Chicago) to 56<sup>th</sup> & Albany (also in Chicago). The house on Wentworth was near Chinatown, and the house on Albany was on the Southwest side of the city. Both neighborhoods were good, but there was more room for the growing family and carnival equipment on Albany.

It was the first three boys Joe (1908-2006), John (1912 - 1994) and Paul (1914 - 2003) that took the business from one Ferris Wheel to a carnival company that ran 4 separate carnivals each week for 20 weeks each summer. That's 80 carnivals each season. Each unit was called a "set" of rides, and each set had its own route.

Wait a minute? There are three brothers, and four sets of rides, how did that work. Seeing that the next brother (Anthony) was still in school, that job was given to the eldest grandson, Richard Doria. Richard had just finished four years in the Marine Corps.

But first, we should talk about the kind of carnivals they operated.

There are two kinds of carnivals, the "traveling" carnival, and what's called a "40 miler". A traveling carnival has a route like described in Chapter Two; starting at one point, traveling a route, and returning to the original point at a time in the future. A true traveling carnival has a route that goes year round, not getting back to the starting point for one full year. So, the St. Louis to Chicago route was a hybrid, not really a traveling carnival in the true sense of the word.

A "40 miler", on the other hand, is a carnival with a home base, and doesn't travel more than 40 miles from that base. They come back to the base each night so the crew can return to their homes, sleep in their own beds, and eat their mother's (wife's) home cooking. Dispensa's was a 40 miler.

When N.S. bought that first Ferris Wheel, Joe was 11, John was 7, and Paul was 5. But, like every family business, the kids went to work early, helping out when and where they could. In the early years, during the Circus, St. Louis, and Michigan era, the boys were too young, but when N.S. hooked up with the other ride owners in Illinois and became a 40 miler, the kids began to help out.

The year was 1925, and the eldest son, Joe, was 17, John was 13 and Paul was 11. There would ultimately be 5 boys in the family, but the two youngest Anthony and Nicholas weren't even born yet.

The boys, like all young people, were full of ambition. Soon they began to pester N.S. to expand. They wanted to buy more rides. He objected saying that they had all to do to handle the Ferris Wheel, but they insisted that it would pay to hire a few people to help them, rather than struggle along with just one ride.

They didn't have any money, so they began buying rides on time. They religiously made the payments each month, and developed a good reputation among the carnival ride manufacturers. Again their timing was perfect, because a few years later the Country was paralyzed by the great depression.

The depression was a good time for most carnival operators, because while a man couldn't afford to take his kids on vacation, or eat in fancy restaurants, he always had a nickel or two in his pocket to ride on a carnival ride.

In the meantime, carnival operators that didn't plan ahead, or were poor businessmen, were unable to stay afloat, and began to lose their rides for lack of payment. This proved an advantage to the family because they had developed a good reputation among the ride manufacturers. When a ride was repossessed the ride manufacturers called the Dispensa family and offer it to them first because they knew that eventually they would be paid.

The terms were simple, "Take it and pay me what you can when you can". They bought many rides on that basis, and made full payment on every one of them.

# Chapter 4

## The Carnival Business Evolves

The Carnival Business was changing. After the war (WWII) the days of just setting up in a vacant lot and opening for business were gone. Soon permits and sponsors were required. So, the carnival operators would seek out sponsors like Churches, American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars Posts, Fire Departments, and in later years, Jaycee Groups to sponsor their carnivals.

But, these organization weren't happy to just sponsor, they wanted a piece of the action. So, an entirely new industry was born, suppliers of tents, games and prizes.

At first the family worked with people that specialized in this business. They had tents, games and prizes, and rented the tents, and provided the prizes to the carnival sponsors. What the sponsor made on the games was theirs to keep.

The tent suppliers were better at marketing than the ride operators, so soon they "owned" all the "spots" (carnival locations), and were in a position to select who they wanted to supply the rides.

After a few years, it became apparent that the tent companies were giving the best spots to their favorite clients and giving the other ride operators whatever was left. Were there kickbacks, bribes or some other kind of under the counter deals being made? We'll never know, but the fact remains that Dispensa's was being pushed out.

So, in 1945 the Dispensa Family went into the tent and merchandise business. They had the advantage of seeing the other tent men make their mistakes, and capitalized on them. That first year they build 40 "regulars". A regular is what the industry called the small tents that were used for jar games, carnival wheels or games of skill. They measured 7 feet by 12 feet, and were open on one side. At the back of these booths there were shelves to display the prizes for the games.

The competitors built their regulars something like today's strip malls. They strung five, six or seven in a row with a common wall between each. Then one piece of canvas was used to cover all the booths. These booths were higher in the front than in the back so the water would run off.

John never liked this design, not only were they unattractive, but the back of the tent, where the prizes were displayed was low, and did not lend itself to a good display of the prizes. Furthermore, the front was open so that operator and the customer were standing in the sun or rain.

The tents he designed were free standing and sported a gable roof so the back

of the booth was as high as the front. Also, now the customer didn't have to string five, six or seven booths together. They could place each booth in a separate location. And each booth was completely enclosed with canvas on the two sides and back, with a counter and awning in the front. The awning could be closed at night for wind and rain protection.

But that wasn't all the tents that were needed. Larger tents for refreshments (food), raffles and bingo were also needed. He again revolutionized the industry by building free standing booths without ropes and stakes. The day of the Circus type tent were gone. His tents were free standing and didn't even have a pole in the center to hold up the canvas. The tents were built with gable roofs like a house, but they were covered with canvas instead of shingles.

Finally, the question of the Bingo Tent still had to be addressed. The industry used booths with benches for the Bingo players to sit on. This was unacceptable because in those days, women wore dresses or skirts. Lifting their legs over a bench was not only distasteful, but immodest. So, John designed a bingo tent with stools for the players to sit on instead of benches.

Ultimately, canvas booths gave way to trailers to house the games, and the Dispensa's kept up with the times.

As you can see, John was the engineer that designed and built the tents and trailers. All three were hard working, but John was the idea man.

Now that they had the tents, the next challenge was purchasing the prizes to stock the games.

Originally N.S. assumed that job because Joe, John and Paul had all to do to handle the ride and tent aspect of the business. Then, about 1948 the job was given to one of the younger brothers, Anthony (1930 - ). Anthony was chosen because up until then, he was the only one to finish high school.

The war had just ended, and people needed everything; toasters, irons, ironing boards, coffee pots, blankets, lawn chairs and almost anything else you can think of. During the war all of the country's factories and natural resources were used to produce war materials. Then, when the war ended, everyone at home needed these basic goods, as well as the servicemen returning from overseas.

So, that was what we carried, household goods and appliances, some sporting goods, some leisure products, but mostly household appliances. Another factor was that electric appliances were making their debut, and people were no longer happy with the hand operated mixers and grinders. They also wanted electric coffee pots, griddles and fry pans.

We didn't have any problem with credit, because we used the ride manufacturers we were working with as credit references. They gave us glowing recommendations.

By the spring of 1948 we were ready to launch our latest venture, the tent and

merchandise business. We began calling the sponsors that we were already working with, and offered them a complete package from one source, rides, games, tents and merchandise. We were able to line up one spot early in the year. Then word of mouth took over, and one by one all of our sponsors began calling. We only lost one account that year.

When you think of a carnival the first thing you think about is the rides, then the games, and finally the food. We never really got involved in the Hot Dog and Hamburger end of the business, but the one food area that we did get involved in was the Popcorn, Peanuts, Cotton Candy.

Originally they worked with a Mr. and Mrs. Nelson. They owned a popcorn wagon and “traveled” with us all summer. They were retired, and after the season, they left for Florida. After several years with this arrangement, it occurred to the family that we were supplying the rides, tents, games and prizes, and Nelson was coming in with his wagon, scooping up the profits and high tailing it to Florida. So he was approached and stated that we wanted a fee for him to sell at our spots. He wasn’t a very good businessman, because he refused, so the next year we were in the popcorn, peanut, cotton candy and snow cone business.

In a family business, everyone works, even the wives and kids. So, for four carnivals, they needed four Popcorn Wagons. Three of those wagons were run by Joe, John and Paul’s wives and kids, and the fourth was run by John’s eldest son Nick’s wife and ultimately his kids. Each of these was owned by the wives and what they made was theirs. It wasn’t a lot, but it was nice pin money. Of course, the wives had their regular daytime duties in the office, and in the evenings they ran the food concessions.

Now the carnival business is complete; we were supplying the rides, tents, games, prizes and some food. Until this time, the company was operating under two names. Dispensa’s Amusement Enterprises was in charge of the rides and tents, and Dispensa’s Merchandising Company was in charge of the games and prizes. In 1951 the name was changed to Dispensa & Sons Complete Carnivals.

The two younger brothers Anthony (1930 - ) and Nick Jr. (1935 - ) worked in the business for a number of years, but later decided to pursue other interests.

But, by this time, the next generation of Dispensa’s were finishing their education, because in that day and age, working was still #1 in a family business, but not if it interfered with school. All the third generation kids worked in the business while they were in school; after school, weekends and during summer vacation.

However, most of this generation thought that they could do better on their own, and did not pursue a career in the business. The only two that held the course was John’s two sons, Nick (1937 - ) and John Jr. (1939 - 1986).

When Anthony left, his responsibilities fell to the John’s eldest son Nick. His

other son John Jr., took over the tent portion of the business. Each had full responsibility for their respective divisions right out of school.

Nick's responsibilities included purchasing the carnival prizes, warehousing, pricing, and delivering to the carnivals. John Jr.'s responsibilities included maintaining the tents, ordering replacement canvas tops, planning the delivery and return routes, erecting and dismantling the tents.

Nick and his wife Sandy (Sennebogen) had three daughters; Mary (1960 - ), Jane (1962 - ) and Linda (1965 - ). They worked in the office and/or store. John Jr. and his wife Dolores (Miller) had three sons (John III (1960 - ), Randy (1962 -) and Bryce (1964 - ). They worked with their father, moving tents in the summer, and working after school and weekends in the store's hobby department.

So as you see, the family business prospers.



# **Chapter 5**

## **Modernizing the Carnival Business**

During the Mac truck era, the carnival business was in it's infancy. The method of moving the rides was primitive. First a ride would have to be disassembled and either put on the ground or in a crate. For example, each Merry-Go-Round horse was put in a crate. Each Ferris Wheel seat was put in a crate. Also, the heavy pieces that hold a ride up, are the first parts that have to be loaded on the truck. After all, you can't load the beams and center pole that hold up the Merry-Go-Round on top of the horses.

Tearing the ride down, putting it on the ground and/or in the crates was a difficult and time consuming process. Then after the ride was completely disassembled, loading on the truck began further extending the time needed to "get on the road". Sometimes, the crates made it impossible to load everything on one truck. As said previously, the Ferris Wheel required two trips to get the Ferris Wheel from one location to another.

When they arrived at the new location the opposite occurred. The ride had to be unloaded on the ground because the first pieces needed for assembly were on the bottom of the load. Finally, when the ride was up and running, they had to reload the crates into the truck for storage. In some cases, the crates were used as a fence around the ride.

John was determined to change this procedure. The first thing he did was to devise a way to eliminate the crates by installing racks in the truck. For example, the Merry-Go-Round horses which are the first thing removed from the ride were placed on racks in the front of the truck. No more crates, no more placing the horses on the ground and then picking them up and loading them on the truck. They went directly from the ride to the truck.

The other Merry-Go-Round parts that were formerly placed in crates also had racks installed in the truck, but the most important innovation was the sequence in which the ride was loaded. Nothing ever hit the ground. The truck was racked in such a way that every piece that was removed from the ride went right into the truck, nothing hit the ground. Likewise upon assembly, everything went directly from the truck to the ride.

As much of an improvement as this appeared to be, it was only the beginning. The next step was to change the way that rides were assembled and hauled from

one place to another.

As stated previously, while all three were hard workers, John was the “engineer” of the family. Even though he did not have an education, he had the ability to look at a ride, and see ways to improve it, or make it easier to move from one place to another.

One day, one of his nephews saw him standing near the Octopus ride and said that he could “tell by the look in his eye that he was going to cut it up”. That’s a crude but accurate way to say that he was going to change the way it was moved. But it’s also very inaccurate because he never “cut it up”. He never risked the integrity of the ride by changing any structural part. He only found ways to work within the parameters of the ride.

A good example is the first ride that he ever “mounted”. For his first venture he selected the Allen Herschell ‘Little Dipper’ which is a children’s roller coaster. This was the first portable roller coaster ever built. It consisted of forty jacks, forty tracks, forty stilts and eighty cross braces which had to be assembled with nine hundred and sixty bolts, nuts and cotter pins. In addition, there was also a long greasy chain that had to be assembled. The cars were heavy, the braking system was complex and there was a loading platform with a canopy to be assembled. Also there was not an easy way to load the tracks in the truck because they were all different shapes and sizes. In order to get them all into the truck, they had to put similar tracks together to maximize the space. As a result, the tracks were all ‘mixed up’ and had to be sorted out before assembly. It took a crew of six men all day to move the ride.

The first thing he did was build a trailer large enough to hold the loading platform, canopy, first hill, chain, brakes and all three cars. All of this stayed together and on the trailer as the ride was moved from lot to lot. The remainder of the track was loaded on the same trailer on racks in the order it was removed from the ride. Finally, he changed the bolt and nut system of fastening the tracks together to a wedge pin design. When it was completed, it took two men only two hours to set it up or tear it down.

This caught the eye of the industry, and trailer-mounted rides became the norm rather than the exception.

Over the next ten years, John designed, and he and his brothers mounted several other rides. John even consulted with several ride manufacturers on ways that they could mount their rides.

The ride that John was proudest of was the Scrambler. The scrambler was built by the Eli Bridge Company in Jacksonville, Illinois. Moving the scrambler was a difficult, time consuming operation taking six men using a wench at least 6 hours to move the ride.

After John completed his modification of the Scrambler 80% of the ride re-

mained intact, but was folded onto a specially designed trailer. The design was so successful that he and one of his granddaughters (Jane) moved the ride one entire season by themselves.

He called and wrote to Eli Bridge about his modification, and even sent the movies of two people setting up the ride. Nothing happened for quite some time, and then, many years later Eli Bridge sent twelve engineers to our winter quarters to examine the scrambler. Today they are marketing the trailer mounted version for all portable operations.

Rides weren't the only thing they converted. Another carnival operator came up with the idea of eliminating canvas tents, and replacing them with trailers. These trailers looked like tents; they opened in the front resulting in a canopy, counter and shelves like a tent, with the added advantage of being able to deliver, display and return the prizes in the trailer. No longer was there a need to remove the prizes for transport. The brothers built nine of these trailers.

But John did design something that no other carnival operator had. He built a trailer for playing bingo. It was a regular 30' by 8' trailer for highway travel, but when on the lot, it opened to a 30' x 40' bingo trailer with 120 seats (stools), a display rack for the prizes, and a bingo blower (ball mixer).

But regular tents were still an integral part of the carnival business.

Another of John's ideas was a semi-trailer to haul the tents. In those days, semi-trailers came in two designs. There was the low trailer, but that required wheel boxes on the back of the trailer to allow space for the wheels. The other design is the high trailer without wheel boxes.

Neither of these worked well for loading the lumber for the tents. The high trailers were too high to load the tent lumber from the ground, and the lower trailers had two large wheel boxes that made it difficult to load the lumber. What was needed was a low trailer without wheel boxes.

John designed such a semi trailer, and submitted his design to Trailmobile Corporation. He asked them to build a trailer with very small, but heavy duty tires in the rear. That would lower the trailer bed without requiring wheel boxes inside. They built it under protest, stating that the small tires wouldn't wear well.

However, the furniture moving companies knew a good thing when they saw it; that trailer was exactly what they had been looking for, a low trailer without wheel boxes. Look around as you drive down the highway; you will see semi trailers with small rear wheels everywhere.

# **Chapter 6**

## **TALL OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW.**

**JOHN BARTLETT (1820–1905)**

How does one go about building a retail empire? For the Dispensa Family it was born out of necessity. The carnival merchandise business began in 1948, and grew each year. Then in 1951 we wanted to find a way to clear current inventory from the warehouse to make room for the new goods that would arrive in the spring. At the time we owned a building in Hinsdale, a short walk from the downtown business district. In those days, all the retail was located in one area, usually the main street of the town. Our building was a couple of blocks away, and asking people to go out of their way to buy goods was unheard-of because all the shopping was done in the “business district”. But, we decided to give it a try anyway.

We ran some newspaper ads, and even advertised on radio. In an attempt to lure people from the main business district we did one other thing, we introduced discount pricing on name brand goods. Then the rumors started, “Oh no! There must be something wrong with their stuff. Perhaps it’s damaged, perhaps its seconds (imperfects), or maybe it’s even hot.”

Who spread these rumors we’ll never know, but it was probably the retailers in the downtown area, because our customers were going to them and saying they saw the same thing at Dispensa’s for 30% less than the downtown retailer was selling it for.

The merchandise business was just getting off the ground when N.S. retired, and Anthony and Nick Jr. left the business. So necessity caused the brothers to move the merchandise business to their other location (Route 83 and Butterfield Rd. Oakbrook Terrace, IL) in 1953.

Each year, as soon as the carnival season was over, we cleared a portion of the merchandise warehouse and built temporary shelving to display the goods. It surprised us to see that most of the customers we had in Hinsdale followed us to the new location.

This went on for a few years, until one day a lady said, “I come all the way out here for your fantastic prices, why don’t you carry toys so I can do all my shopping at one time.” That was the beginning of Dispensa’s Castle of Toys.

John and his wife Prudy were doing the buying in those days because Nick was still in school. Thinking that price was what brought the people to our store, they began with inexpensive, mostly imported, toys. Friction cars, tops, dolls etc., all low priced goods. We sold, and each year we purchased more, until the year that the big “toxic paint” scare hit the country. We were sitting with a warehouse full of toys that were unsalable.

That settled it, no more “Japanese” toys. From then on it was strictly Ameri-

can. Armed with our outstanding credit rating, and little more, John and Prudy went to New York for the International Toy Fair, and began to purchase from the major toy companies of the day, Mattel, Ideal, Hasbro, Lionel, American Flyer, Playschool etc.

When these lines were introduced that Christmas, business skyrocketed. No one sold name brand toys at a discount. And the discount was on everything, not just a few loss leaders. Soon, the entire merchandise warehouse was devoted to sales, and the inventory had to be warehoused in another building.

Then, one day a survey crew came onto the property, and informed us that they were surveying for an interchange that would bring Route 83 over Roosevelt and Butterfield Roads. That interchange would require that 50% of our property, and all the buildings would be taken by the State. Fortunately, we purchased twenty-five acres in the early 50's, and the remaining twelve and one-half acres would be enough for what we had planned for the property.

It would take many years for the road construction to be completed, but the family began to plan for the future immediately with discussions of what the next toy store would look like. Joe said that it should look like a castle, but what he had in mind was more a fort than a castle. John on the other hand said, "That's not a toy castle, I'll show you a toy castle". So he sketched it out on a piece of paper, and after some discussion and a few changes, he took his drawings to Otto Nerad, a young architect in Clarendon Hills.

John didn't hear from Otto for several months, so he gave him a call. Otto said, "You were serious about that?" John assured him he was, and Otto went to work.

The Castle of Toys opened in 1967 with the largest advertising campaign ever launched for a store devoted exclusively to toys. We had been advertising on the small local radio stations in the area, but now we were moving into the big time, advertising on WGN, WMAQ and WLS to mention a few. The radio stations were happy to take our money, but said they didn't think we could sell toys on radio; toys required a visual medium such as television.

Our idea wasn't to sell the toys on radio, our idea was to tell Mom where she could buy the toys that the kids saw advertised on television. And that's exactly what we did.

In addition to the radio campaigns, we ran "double trucks" in all the local newspapers and the suburban section of the Chicago Tribune. A double truck is two full page ads back to back, usually in the center of the newspaper.

In the first year of operation, the Castle doubled the income of the previous year.

The jump from radio to television was a small one. Because, unlike the local radio stations, the major stations "forced" us to hire an ad agency, because if you had an ad agency, the cost of the ads were less. Another way of looking at it is that the radio station paid the ad agency. The reason for this was simple, they wanted only quality ads run on their stations.

Once we had an ad agency, they were able to help us with the production of both the radio and television commercials. Many people today still know the

words for the Castle and Kiddie Kingdom commercials. You can hear and see the commercials elsewhere in this web site.

When the Castle opened, it was the largest free-standing toy store in the world. Later as the idea caught on, the other toy giants like Toys R. Us and Child World came into the picture. Child World even went so far as to copy the Castle's design, using turrets on their stores.

Another factor in our success was that we purchased our toys directly from the manufacturer while the local toy stores were purchasing from a wholesaler because they couldn't purchase in the volume we did. The Castle had 40,000 square feet of warehouse space as well as 20,000 square feet of sales area. The entire Castle was 80,000 square feet.

Later, most of the remaining 20,000 square feet was also converted to retail space, when we opened the Royal Nursery. The Royal Nursery sold baby furniture.

The buying responsibility was spread between John's two sons, Nick and John Jr. Nick purchased the toys, and John Jr. purchased all the hobby items; trains, road race, video games, crafts etc.

The two also had other responsibilities. Nick handled the marketing for the Castle and Kiddie Kingdom, and John Jr. was responsible for the maintenance of the Kiddie Kingdom equipment, and its erection and dismantling in the Park each season.

The Castle of Toys was flying high. Business was great, our radio and TV advertising reached seven states, we were now in the mail order business and even had a wholesale division. We were reaching out to factories and labor unions to supply gifts for their Christmas parties and were very successful at it. John's wife Prudy made appointments with these buyers, and helped them select the toys that fit their budget and the various age groups they were buying for.

# Chapter 7

## Kiddie Kingdom Is Born

All three of the Brothers, Joe, John and Paul had kids, and they all worked in the business during their school years. But, John's sons, Nick and John Jr. were the only two to show interest in the business and continued working in the business after they finished college.

One of Nick's fondest memories comes from a conversation that he, his brother John Jr. and their Dad (John) had with a man named Pete Bertalotti from Westmont. Nick and John were both teenagers at the time. During that conversation Pete asked what Nick and John Jr. were going to do that summer. Both said they would be working on the Carnivals. Pete then turned to John and said, "Oh, your sons work for you?" This took Nick and John Jr. by surprise, because they never had the feeling that they were employees. They waited to see what their father would say, and without missing a beat, John said, "No, my Sons work with me." That comment reinforced their feeling that they were part of the business, not just employees.

Both Nick and John Jr. were given major responsibilities at a very young age. Nick started in the ride division, and began moving rides while still in High School. He managed the crew, and even drove a semi-trailer from carnival lot to carnival lot. When he asked about the legality of driving a semi-trailer when he only had a regular driver's license, he was told "Don't worry, you don't need a Chauffeur's license to drive your own truck". He never learned whether or not this was true, or if it was just part of their way of giving him responsibility.

John Jr., on the other hand, was assigned to the tent division of the business. He had full control of the division and crew. He even had his own fleet of rolling stock to move the tents from location to location.

When they were first starting out, both Nick and John Jr. supervised crews that were many years their senior. One day, Nick was giving direction to an employee who said, "Who the hell made you Straw Boss." Nick's Uncle Paul happened to hear that comment, and said, "I did, and he just fired you."

So the die had been cast, Nick and John Jr. had full control of their crews, and the full support of the three Brothers.

In 1958, Nick married Sandra Sennebogen, and in 1960 John Jr. married Dolores Miller. Both women were welcomed into the business, each with their own responsibilities; Sandra in Nick's popcorn wagon, and Dolores managing John Jr's shooting gallery. Remember, money earned from these operations were not

part of the business, they were owned personally, and whatever was earned was theirs to keep.

As the years went on, Joe, John and Paul were getting up in age, and began to express an interest in slowing down. They loved the carnival business, and didn't want to get out of it completely. For many years they wanted to open a kiddie park, but just never got around to it.

The Dispensa's were not supervisors, they were workers. They didn't know how to direct a crew without being right alongside them lifting their share of the load. Nick realized that there was no way to continue in the carnival business without them being "under the iron". Some other plan was needed.

So, he devised a five year plan to move them from the carnival business to Kiddie Kingdom. The plan provided for two years of Kiddie Kingdom construction with the carnivals still operating at full scale. Then on the third year, Kiddie Kingdom would open, and both businesses would run in tandem for the next three years. During those three years, the carnivals would be slowly phased out and Kingdom operations would be increased. Then at the end of the five years, the Kingdom would be at full operation, and the carnival would be a thing of the past.

Of course, before anything could be done, the property had to be rezoned so that a Kiddie Park could be erected. A metrical part of the zoning process is the public hearing and Kiddie Kingdom's public hearing was quite unique.

The neighbors had seen Dispensa's Carnivals in the area for many years, they saw the toy operation, both in the original building and in the Castle of Toys. I'm sure many, if not most of them, shopped at the Castle. Yet when this new venture was announced, they came out in force to oppose Kiddie Kingdom. As a matter of fact, the first meeting had to be postponed because the assembly hall they selected wasn't large enough to accommodate the crowd.

As usually happens at zoning hearings, the residents were afraid of bringing something new to their community. There were two main arguments against bringing a kiddie park to the area. Both were based on the reputation that many carnivals and kiddie parks have. The first argument was that the food booth would bring rats to their community. Secondly, they said that the "carnival" would bring undesirable employees and that their children wouldn't be safe.

Had they been to any of the carnivals that the Dispensa Family ran over the past 50 or so years, they would have seen that there were no "carnival bums", and nothing but clean, well-run food operations that have passed, and will have to continue to pass DuPage County Health Department inspections.

Anticipating the opposition, the initial request sought a permit for only 12 rides and one food concession. The Family's architect (Otto Nerad) was on hand to answer questions about the quality of construction, and Al Woodward, the family's attorney was there to answer the legal questions. Finally, members of the



Family attended to answer any other questions the residents might have.

The Aldermen of Oakbrook Terrace could see the economic value of bringing Kiddie Kingdom to the city, but had to listen to the protests of their constituents. Finally, after a long drawn out process, the permit was issued.

Apparently, the residents were afraid of the unknown, because two years later, when the Family returned to the zoning committee to seek more rides, more food and to add games to the Kingdom, not one resident showed up to protest the expansion.

In some ways, operating the Kingdom was more difficult than the carnivals in that it was open long hours six days a week, whereas the carnivals only operated in the evenings for four or five days a week. But the main difference was that they didn't have to "move the iron" every week. Once the rides were set up in the spring, only routine maintenance was required until it was time to take them down in the fall.

John Jr. was a hands-on kind of guy. He was responsible for the construction of Kiddie Kingdom. He supervised the workmen, saw that everything was properly constructed and erected. He also took charge of seeing that all the rides were erected in the spring and dismantled in the fall.

After Kiddie Kingdom was in full operation, Joe and Paul were not comfortable working in the Castle because they were hands-on people, and spent the winter months maintaining the rides in the company's warehouse. John Sr., Nick and John Jr. worked in the store. Nick saw to it that the shelves were stocked and reorders were placed, and John Jr. took care of the train and hobby departments.

# Chapter 8

## Kiddie Kingdom's Success

Because we were still running the carnivals, we didn't open the kiddie park until 3:00 in the afternoon, and it was closed on Monday because that day was devoted to moving the carnival rides from one location to another.

In spite of this, Kiddie Kingdom was an instant success. The reason it was an instant success was our marketing campaign. John Sr. had a price for the rides in mind from the time the first shovel was put into the ground.

As the commercials said, "Any ride a quarter, six for a dollar". What made the Kingdom unique was that when you bought six tickets, you got six rides. The competition was charging 2, 3 and even 4 tickets to ride the big rides. Here a ticket got you a ride on anything in the park.

Originally, there were only 12 rides and a food pavilion. What was unique was that the food pavilion was round with the service area in the center and tables under cover around its perimeter. The parents loved this. They could sit in the shade under the food pavilion, and move around the pavilion as the kids moved from ride to ride. Then they could all gather under the food pavilion for a snack before they went home.

But wait a minute, where are the games, shops and the large assortment of food to choose from?

The original zoning didn't allow any of these things. But now, with the new zoning, we were allowed to add all of these things.

In the food category, an Ice Cream Shoppe, Pizza Parlor, a Toy Shop and Candy Shop were added. The number of rides more than doubled, reaching 25 in all including a spook house that the kids rode through. To complete the package, games were added.

As in the carnival days, the food and games were run by Nick and John Jr.'s families. Sandy and Dolores ran the shops (ice cream, candy, pizza etc.), Nick's kids (Mary, Jane and Linda) ran a "prize every time" fish pond, remote control cars, Diggers (cranes) and remote control boats. John Jr.'s kids (John III, Randy and Bryce ran SkeeBall, Tic Tac Toe Game, Coke Game, and a Ball Toss Game where you knock down the cats.

When the Kingdom opened at 3:00, the line extended from the Kingdom's Entrance past the Castle's entrance. As the carnival business was winding down, we gradually changed the opening time for the Kingdom. We tried 2:00, and there was still a line. We tried 1:00 and the line persisted. When opening time finally

reached noon, the line waiting at the door was reasonable. So that became the regular opening time.

The “Six rides for a dollar” campaign was tremendously successful, but we didn’t stop there. Next we introduced another marketing idea that was unique to Kiddie Kingdom. It was called “Kiddie Kingdom Klub”, and it was free. Once a month, the Klub members were sent a newsletter. Kids love to get mail, so the newsletter was mailed directly to them, not to Mom or Dad. They were addressed to the kids.

The newsletter consisted of games, puzzles, articles that interested kids, but most important of all, it contained coupons for either the Castle of Toys or Kiddie Kingdom. The Castle coupons gave club members discounts on the latest or most popular toys. The Kingdom coupons offered 10 rides for a dollar instead of six. There were even coupons for the Ice Cream Shoppe, Pizza Parlor, Toy Shop and Candy Shop.

Ultimately, the Kiddie Kingdom Klub had over 10,000 members, and the coupon redemption rate which is usually less than 1%, reached an amazing 10%.

The “club” idea was so well received that it was expended to the Castle. There we offered the “Royal Modeler’s Club” that catered to train, road racing and model building connoisseurs. There were meetings where they were introduced to the latest in trains, road racing, and other new and different hobby items. During each meeting the members were given special discounts and free refreshments.

Another club was the Royal Doll Club. Once each year we organized a doll show where doll dealers and collectors set up in the castle to display their goods. The club members were invited to attend at no charge and see what the collectors had to offer. They also received advance notice about upcoming sales.

The Royal Inventor’s Club was indeed unique. Members were invited to bring their ideas to the Castle and speak with a professional toy inventor about their idea. They would be given free advice about their idea, and how to market their idea.

Another marketing plan involved a “Birthday Party Plan”. This plan has been copied by every venue catering to kids. Other amusement parks, pizza places and even bowling alleys now have kids birthday parties, but ours was unique. For \$2.00 each child received a hot dog, drink, dessert, a Kiddie Kingdom Crown and 10 rides. No other operation could compete with that price.

Also, for two summers, we brought in a circus for a week. We promoted it in conjunction with the Kingdom, offering a Kingdom/Circus promotion. The Circus sold out all of its performances. The Ring Master said it was the best week they ever had.

Why was Kiddie Kingdom and the Castle of Toys such a tremendous success?

It was successful because the customer came first, and were offered many things that other stores or amusement parks wouldn't even consider.

The customers and employees alike were treated with respect. The Castle and Kiddie Kingdom were clean, neat and run never losing sight of the fact that the customers need and desires were important. The Dispensa family treated the customers like they were family too.

This philosophy served the family well for over 65 years.

# Chapter 9

## So, What Happened?

It's easy to say, "All good things come to an end". But why, there must be a reason.

By this time two of the original three brothers (Joe and Paul) retired. That left John Sr., Nick, John Jr., their wives Sandy and Dolores, and their six kids Mary, John III, Jane, Randy, Bryce and Linda. That's quite a crew, and surely enough to operate the business, even if it were to continue expanding.

So, what happened? Actually, it's very simple. The business was located on a prime piece of property. When it was purchased in 1951 it was farmland. There were two gas stations, Custard Castle (Dairy Queen) and the Sky-High Drive-In in the area. Everything else was farmland.

Ultimately Oakbrook Center and other stores too numerous to mention opened in the area. Drury Lane Theatre, The Oak Brook Club condominiums and many many office buildings followed. As a result the property became very valuable.

So, the property that was purchased for \$1,000 per acre over thirty years earlier was suddenly worth a lot of money.

It soon became apparent that the property was worth more than the business that was on it, and when good businessmen hear opportunity knocking, they answer the door. The decision to close had to be made.

As this is being written, another area landmark, Kiddyland is in the process of closing. They likewise knew how to market their attraction, and began talking about the closing of Kiddyland early in the final season. This brought out hoards of people that probably hadn't been to the park for years, just to get one last ride before it closed.

People often ask why we didn't do the same thing, it likewise would have resulted in additional revenue from the nostalgia crowd.

The closing of Kiddie Kingdom was kept secret till the very last minute because we had a warehouse bulging with toys for the Christmas season. We were concerned that if we made a big thing of Kiddie Kingdom's closing, people would assume that the Castle was closing as well, and we would be stuck with a warehouse full of toys.

After Kiddie Kingdom closed at the end of the season, the rides and games were sold at auction bringing top dollar because of their excellent condition. After Christmas, the unsold toys were sold to our regular customers at tremendous discounts, and everything else was sold to local businesses that needed shelving,

office equipment, and electrical fixtures. Nothing went to waste.

Fortunately, the fourth generation Dispensa's, Nick and John Jr.'s kids, were young enough so that they could each set out on careers of their own. Nick continues to do public service work, paying the community back for their loyal support over the past 65 years. Sadly, John Jr. succumbed to cancer in 1986 shortly after the business was sold.