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Meijer looks back at retail history

Sixty years ago Hendrik and Fred Meijer opened a store in Grand Rapids called Thrifty Acres and pioneered the American supercenter. While that innovative concept has grown into a retail phenomenon, Meijer aims to continuously improve the shopping experience and support community organizations in ways that embody the retailer's values.

"The opening of Thrifty Acres in June 1962, was history in the making, although I'm not sure our dad and grandfather realized it at the time," said Meijer Executive Chairman Hank Meijer. "They saw an opportunity to serve their customers better by offering a great variety of merchandise all under one roof. Dad would love to be here today to see how their fundamental philosophy has continued to guide our team members and serve our customers."

The father-and-son team began to imagine the concept in the 1950s. In 1955, one of the small company's supermarkets added a department to sell general merchandise. Dubbed the "Home Center," it offered clothing, shoes and accessories, hardware items and housewares, in addition to the supermarket offerings Meijer had always provided. By the end of the decade all but the smallest Meijer Supermarkets had Home Centers.

In June 1962, Meijer took the Home Center offering to a new level with the introduction of the concept they called Thrifty Acres. This new retail environment combined a complete supermarket with a full range of general merchandise, a café, a pharmacy and other services, selling all its merchandise through a single set of checkouts. The family was betting the company, taking an enormous gamble to offer shoppers unprecedented variety and convenience. The retail landscape would be permanently changed. The stores would come to be known as supercenters.

The first Meijer supercenter, identified internally as Store 011, was created when an 80,000-square-foot addition was made to a supermarket in Grand Rapids, MI. The new building housed 25 departments, including men's, women's and children's clothing, shoes, appliances, accessories, fine jewelry, housewares, hardware, toys, sporting goods, home fixtures, furniture and a pharmacy. This was in addition to the full supermarket already in operation. Meijer owned the building and operated the supermarket and health and beauty care departments, with most of the remaining departments leased to vendors.

Since the opening of the original Meijer supercenter in 1962, the Grand Rapids-based retailer has grown steadily, expanding across six Midwestern states with 266 supercenters and grocery stores.

The original supercenter was expanded again and again, but was otherwise relatively unchanged until 2010, when the company unveiled an all-new supercenter on the same site. This multi-year construction project took place while the original building was still serving customers. Some of the wooden arches that supported the roof of the original store now welcome customers at the main parking lot entrance.

Today, the original supercenter location boasts all the technological innovation Meijer stores provide across the Midwest, including Shop & Scan shopping technology, as well as online ordering for curbside pickup and home delivery.

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