

Couri License and Title Service

Est. 1910

A large family with a long history in the Peoria area, Mike and Kemla Couri touched many lives when they began their small, family business one hundred years ago. Mike and Kemla Couri were married in Aitou, Lebanon in 1907. They came to America in May of that year. Mike worked at the Rock Island Railroad in the ash pit while Kemla carried a heavy suitcase peddling goods throughout Peoria County. The couple saved money and, in 1910, the “Mike Couri Grocery” opened in the front room of their home on Washington Street. Mike continued to work on the railroad while Kemla managed the business at home.

In 1914, Mike left the railroad to open “Couri Brother’s Groceries” on South Adams Street. After being in the country for seven years, Mike, Kemla and their children became citizens. In 1925, Mike partnered with Tom Rafool and opened a grocery store in East Peoria. With the end of Prohibition, sons Joe Couri and Joe Rafool convinced their fathers the store should sell alcohol. In 1933, a bar was installed and “The Glee Club” was run by the two sons.

By 1936, Mike and Kemla Couri had eleven children. They opened a new store – “Mike Couri and Sons Groceries and Meats in East Peoria” – with many family members working alongside them. The Depression years were difficult, and Mike’s generosity was well-known throughout the area. The extension of credit to his customers in “the Bottoms” was not uncommon, and he was also known to give away food, when needed.

Mike’s son, Joe, opened a second store, “Couri’s Complete Food Market” in 1936. During WWII, Joe served in the army and family members continued to run the store. The family also operated two taverns in East Peoria near Caterpillar – “The Diesel Tap” and “The Bee”. The seven Couri sons opened “Couri’s Food Town” in 1951 and it was considered the first “super market” in East Peoria.

In 1978, at 93 years old, Mike Couri passed away. Ten years later, in 1988 and just following her 100th birthday, Kemla Couri died at home. In that year, “Couri’s Food Town” closed and the brothers moved back to the Washington Street location where they operated a quick mart. The quick mart business became “Couri License and Title Service” in 1988, and this business continues the long Couri tradition of running a family business – together.

Congratulations to Couri License and Title Service on becoming a Peoria Historical Society Centenarian organization.