



# The Hing's Save Money Market:

## Family-Owned Store Marks Centennial in 2020

By David M. Brown

**The Hing family in Superior, west of Phoenix, knows the small-grocery business, in and out of, up and down the aisles.**

Led by Michael Hing, the family owns Save Money Market in the copper-mining town midway between Mesa and Globe. Next year, he and the family celebrate 100 years since grandfather O.C. opened his first grocery on Pinal Avenue.

Built in the mid-1960s by Michael's dad, Ally, today's 10,000-plus-square-foot store on Main Street offers canned and packaged goods, fresh produce, beer, wine and spirits and is particularly noted for its roasted Hatch chiles at late-summer harvest, carne asada, and its social-media phenom, Meat Boxes.

Here, too, shoppers can also buy parts for evaporative coolers and propane for barbecues as well as other convenience items. This is the 20th-century general store thriving in the first quarter of the 21st-century because of family spirit, innovation, resourcefulness and tenacity.

Also, part of the third-generation leadership are brothers Leroy, Richard and Anson. "We were all born

in Superior, attended college to pursue other careers and have all returned back to the grocery business," says Michael, who graduated from the University of Arizona in Tucson with an agricultural engineering degree.

Dad, though, advised him to stay in the aisles and off the farm: "Don't be the producer," he told me. "You want to be the middleman and not live by the weather."

The four brothers share responsibilities, based on interests and skills. Richard, Michael's youngest brother, is the operations manager; Leroy, second oldest, performs accounting and other office duties; Michael, a master butcher, oversees the grocery, meat and produce departments; and the eldest, Anson, who recently retired from a teaching career, helps with pricing and maintenance.

They are assisted by three of Michael's four children, daughters Naomi, the current AFMA Jim Hensley Scholarship winner; Augie, this year's valedictorian at Superior High School; and son Ally, his youngest, who's helping with maintenance and repairs on the weekends. In addition, the store employs 10 full-time and eight part-time Superior residents.

A word-smithed mission statement doesn't hang in the back office: The family has lived its hometown

mission for decades. "It's basic," Michael says. "Just try to offer the customer the best price delivered with the best family service."



Augie, Michael and Naomi Hing

## Rich Town History, Rich Family History

Superior is named for the Wisconsin town and first boomed more than a century ago when silver and then copper hit at mines such as the Silver Queen and the Silver King. Founded October 2, 1882, the town grew as a result of investments by the Magma Copper Company, which began extracting ore in 1911.

Surrounded by Tonto National Forest, the small bedroom community of about four square miles once had a population exceeding 7,000 but saw that plummet by more than half when copper mining stopped in the mid-1990s. Some called Superior “plywood city” for its boarded-up storefronts, explains Michael, who served as mayor for 13 years during those tough times. A number of residents are retired, often with five and six generations here. Since the mine’s closing, many are employed in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

One area-defining landmark is Picket Post Mountain, where the pioneer military had a small garrison, today the site of the Boyce Thompson Arboretum. The well-known preserve was founded by Colonel William Boyce Thompson, a geologist for and principal of the Magma Copper Company and early friend of O.C., who helped finance his first grocery store, Michael notes.

Known as “Mr. Superior,” Hing came from Guangdong Province, China, to San Francisco about 1910 and worked in a restaurant — just a few years after the great earthquake of 1906 had devastated the city. In 1911, he was in Phoenix, working there until 1914.

Always searching out the next opportunity, he moved to the copper-mining town of Ray, just south of Superior, working as an orderly until 1918. Next stop was Superior, where he opened a restaurant at Main Street and Magma Avenue, a few blocks from today’s store.

“I always wondered what brought granddad here,” Michael says. “There was nothing here, just brush, just dirt. But, he could see the future, he could see that this town would do well because of the mining.”

In 1920, O.C. began the legacy family business, a grocery store at Pinal Avenue and Porphyry Street. Soon after he opened the second, on Main Street. This was destroyed by fire in the 1960s, and the family purchased the Coleman Ice Plant property to build the current full-line grocery.

He was drafted for World War II, but it ended before he could serve. At home, though, he worked with the National Victory League and later performed other services, such as providing for the town’s first subdivision of new homes after the war and helping to finance miners into them at payments as low as \$25 a month.

This civic commitment, which the Hing’s continue today, came despite segregation of the Chinese. “To this day Richard, Michael, and Anson continue the family tradition of running the store and contributing to the community,” says long-time resident, David Lira. “Hats off to the Hing family.”

In 1945, with partner S.C. Wing, O.C. opened a Save Money Market in nearby Coolidge, which was later sold to Holly, one of the Hing’s 10 children.

The boys and girls were educated for careers in education as teachers and lawyers and engineers. “You know, it’s the American story. Immigrants want something better for their kids, so the push was to become a professional, a white-collar person,” he says.

One brother graduated from Harvard University. Ally, Michael’s dad graduated at the top of his engineering class at the University of Arizona in Tucson and accepted a job from Westinghouse in Baltimore. But he returned home in the 1950s, unpressured by O.C.

“Generally, in a Chinese family, it’s the eldest son’s duty to take on the family business, but I don’t think this is why he came back. I think he believed that the manufacturing industry was changing and he didn’t see a future there. I think he also preferred working for himself and not someone else,” he explains.

Ally started working at the family store in Ray. Here he met Eddie Basha Sr.’s dad, Najeeb, who started the family grocery business in the small mining town near Superior.

As a teenager there, family friend Chuck Warren worked for Ally as a carryout and stocker and delivered groceries. In Superior, he’s watched Michael operate his business, seen his children grow up and accomplish much. “The Hing families have been great friends and, more importantly, have had a great impact on our communities and the people in the area.”

Innovation and adjustment were as essential to Ally as they had been for his father. Now 91, he still visits Save Money Market, usually on Sundays, offering insights and unedited suggestions.

Closing the Ray store in the 1970s, he opened a space in a small Tucson mall, eventually took the rest of the spaces, then built a 15,000-square-foot-store across the street. He began offering discounted prices, new to the local industry.

“The big vendors wouldn’t supply him because of pressure placed on them from competitors, so he had to haul in milk and bread,” Michael says.

Now, everyone “discounts.”

Then the Tucson store began selling bulk and natural foods. “People looked at him as weird,” Michael notes of his dad.

Today, Whole Foods, Sprouts and Natural Grocers have built robust companies because of these products, and other stores mandatorily include them as part of the company mix.

“Access to food is critical, for a community to survive,” says Mila Besich-Lira, the mayor of Superior and fourth-generation native, whose great grandfather, Paul, was a miner and entrepreneur. “Without a local market, our community would have experienced even greater hardships”.

“The Hing family never gave up, and they have built an honored legacy in Superior of feeding and helping the people of Superior for generations, both in the boom times and when times were bleak. The most recent modernizations and sales promotions at the market have been important additions to our community.”

## Chiles, Salsa and Meat Boxes

The family has tenaciously overcome the challenges of competition from small and large companies and the internet. In fact, they have used their leanness and the largeness of social media to advantage.

As many as eight or nine Superior grocery stores were once in business, but all have closed because the families have not carried on, Michael explains.

Today, the new Family Dollar store in Superior has affected the business. Nearby Globe has a Safeway, Fry’s and Walmart. In the other direction, 15 minutes toward Mesa and the Valley, is the Gold Canyon Bashas’. And, in Kearny is Norm’s Hometown IGA. “We know that many of the people who work out of town just stop at the major chain stores to buy their goods,” he says.

The biggest challenge concerns how a small market grocer can offer competitive pricing. “Innovate,” he always hears his grandfather whispering to him: Think out of the box. He did, with a Meat Box.

Michael has tracked meat prices for years: as they soared, dropped, then rose again. “The market seemed to accept that consumers are going to buy at that price,” he says.

So, about a year ago, Michael devised a program in which store and internet shoppers could assemble similar or a combination of cuts at a superlative price: T-bones, rib eyes, chicken, pork, pepper bacon and carne asada.

About this time, he had just taken a chamber of commerce seminar in social media. So, he called the coordinator of the event and asked her to help. “I’m not in to this sort of stuff,” he told her.



Now, social media is into him. New tech is changing the 99-year-old grocery business.

For the 2018 Super Bowl, he advertised a Meat Box; his social media coordinator posted it on Facebook. Forty sold at \$60 a box, most to out-of-towners who were happy to drive to Superior and pick up the boxes.

He did another one for Easter at \$80, with a value-add offer of more for \$100. They sold 150.

“Where are these people coming from?” I asked myself,” he recalls. So he queried the customers who were driving to Superior for them. They were coming from the Valley nearby but also from Flagstaff, Sedona, Yuma and New Mexico.

He’s now getting thousands of site clicks every month. The store even purchased two 45-foot cooler trailers from a Bashas’ supplier to warehouse them after the boxes are prepared.

This Memorial Day, the store did hundreds: Think inside the Meat Box: “With a promotion every month, we’ve added another quarter to our bottom-line sales: We expect six more weeks of annual profit each year,” he says.

So, too, small innovations have helped. For years, people have come to Save Money Market for Hatch chiles, a signature crop from New Mexico sought out for its smoky taste and spiciness. They’re in harvest annually from the first of August through the end of October.

A couple years ago, he had 50 bags left, so he wondered how to sell them. Grandad spoke to him again, gave him a sign. “I went out and put up a few signs on the highway and sold all of them that day. So, every year during harvest, I put them up as part of the promotion.”

Someone also told him he would sell more chiles if he roasted them. So, he bought a roaster. Recently, his brother Anson has been doing the roasting on property. “I told him: ‘Because you have retired as a teacher, I will teach you your first job here,’” he says with a laugh.

While working directly with farmers from Hatch, New Mexico, this year, the store expects to sell 3,000 bags during the season.

In addition, he’s always looking for new products, especially from mom and pops producing unique high-quality items. One New Mexico farmer sends him a salsa that’s a hot seller.

## What are You Going to do with the Future?

“Grandad didn’t discuss the past very much,” Michael says. “He always asked us, ‘What are you going to do with the future?’”

The family has looked to AFMA for decades to help with that crystal ball. “AFMA keeps us informed about what’s going on in the local markets and the changes for good and bad,” he says. As more people order on-line and with more home deliveries, cashless and self-checkouts and prepared food for pickup at the store, that assistance will continue to be vital.

“Save Money Market has been an active member of AFMA since the trade association was formed in 1943,” says Debbie Roth, the state grocery association’s vice president/general manager. “Known in the community of Superior and on social media for their outstanding meat market operation, the Hing family’s continuous innovation keeps them competitive and relevant in the Arizona marketplace.”

Michael would like AFMA to pursue a student wage lower than the new minimum wage, which has significantly impacted his and other Arizona small businesses. In addition, because grocery stores have become more skill oriented, a tax-credit program would be beneficial.

Regulations and regulators are also of concern: in particular, the pressure to upgrade equipment to meet standards and WIC stipulations, which often reduce shelf items to loss status.

The number of wholesalers that can provide independent grocery stores goods

priced similarly to what the chains pay is decreasing. “We always need a food wholesaler that will give us an equal playing field,” he says, noting that other warehouses are averaging 15 percent to 20 percent higher than the chain store warehouses. And, because of mergers and takeovers, new wholesalers in the industry want minimum purchase drops and fuel charges for deliveries.

Much of the Save Money Market inventory product is supplied by long-time vendors such as National Wholesalers, Intrepid Wholesalers (New Mexico), Four Wholesale Meat Distributors and others. But the store is facing a loss of vendors, as large companies are buying out other distributors and cutting services and deliveries to smaller operations.



*Downtown Superior and Apache Leap*

An economic renaissance, though, is expected in Superior. Twenty or so years ago, the largest underground ore body of copper in North America was discovered near the city’s other landmark mountain, Apache Bluff or Leap, where in 1875 Apache warriors threw themselves and their horses off the cliffs to avoid capture by the U.S. Army. By legend, the tears of the widows turned to the area’s black opal, which is sold as small polished mementos to visitors.

The new copper cache should be capable of producing up to 25 percent of national consumption for 60 years and provide 5,200 jobs, many of them robotics based and high paid. When the Environmental Impact Statement is approved by the Forest Service, and opposition by environmental and Native American groups successfully responded to, The Resolution Copper Company will begin drilling shafts, and miners will return to the city.

His grandfather may be whispering to expand because of this, but the four brothers are now just planning internal changes, such as refining and starting departments not offered. “A new location for a store is very costly in today’s market, a large investment,” Michael says.

The family Gen-Z-ers: Is the traditional grocery business in their high-tech futures? Richard’s daughter, Queenie, is just in high school, as is Michael’s son Ally, who works at the store on the weekends: “He likes to fix things, so I give him all the tools he needs,” Michael says, smiling.

His eldest, Altin, is a recent graduate of the Air Force Academy and is serving his country in Texas. Sister Naomi is excelling at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, while still helping at the store on the weekends, including meat-cutting, and Augie will be entering college in the fall, destined for success in whatever she chooses.

“We do not apply pressure to the kids to continue at this time,” he says. “My children have been involved since they were young and are very capable of running the business, and my brothers and I have at least 15 years left of active management. So I tell them now they can go out and find careers and come back. You always have home.”

