

A HIGHLANDS SERVICE STATION WITH HISTORY

After almost 50 years, Bills Esso is much more than a gas bar

The story of Bills Esso station begins about the time of the oil boom — the original oil frenzy — when Imperial hit oil in Leduc in 1947.

Bob Bills worked in a garage in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan in the late 30's. In 1945 Imperial transferred him to an office job in Edmonton.

He worked in the Alexander Block, in downtown Edmonton, as part of the team that brought the Leduc oil field into production. He was a draftsman, creating cross-section maps from the information supplied by the surveyors and geologists.

Through the grapevine, he heard a couple of guys called the Johnson brothers were selling their two month old Imperial garage franchise just east of downtown Edmonton, on the southeast corner of 73rd Street and 112th Avenue.

For \$6,000 cash, plus two cents a gallon rent, Bob got himself a business. Bob's son Gary took the station over in 1970, and has been running it ever since.

Back in 1947, gas was about 20 cents a gallon. You could have your flat tire repaired for \$2. and your clutch replaced for \$50. Bob would sell about \$35 worth of gas on weekdays, \$75 on the weekends. When he bought the station it only had two bays, so he added a third one.

In those days cars needed plenty of maintenance. Transmissions were the big problem, and flat tires.

If you needed to get at the clutch you had to take off the back wheels, Bob recalls.

You needed muscle and staying power. You didn't go home until the job was done.

As for the flat tires, Gary remembers coming to work after school and seeing a dozen or more tires needing fixing. Today, he rarely sees more than five flats a day.

Over the years Bills Service has seen its share of robberies. Bob remembers once the thieves attached a chain to the window frame at the back of the station, yanked it out of the wall and stole the entire cash register.

The police eventually found it smashed to pieces down on the riverbank. By the time Gary took over the station in the 1970's the place was being robbed as many as 16 times in six months.

Once Gary was robbed 3 times in one week. When his wife



Bills Esso in K-Day garb, about 1965.

went down to the police station to identify the items stolen she overheard the police asking the suspect "what day did you rob the station?"

The answer was: "I robbed it Monday and Thursday, I think my brother robbed it on Tuesday."

The break-ins were usually overnight.

But Gary did go through one hold-up: the guy took \$300. By the time the police caught up with him, he was at the Drake Hotel paying off his I.O.U.'s and so he only had \$100 left in his pocket.

Robberies aren't a major problem now.

These days it's speeding cars.

Gary's had a car smash through his corner window 3 times. He hopes the big flower pot he's put in front of the window will offer some protection.

When Bob Bills first took over the Imperial franchise back in 1947, that area of 112th Avenue didn't look anything like it does today.

The Capilano freeway was still 20 years away. Where there are bridges and ramps now, there were stores — like Dan's grocery across the street.

In the field southeast of the station was a hockey arena, and down where the MS Victory Centre is today, there was Highlands Motors — a Texaco station.

Within 15 years those three blocks between Bills Esso and Highlands Motors became a real business hub.

On the south side of 112th, east of Bills Esso, at one time or another, there was the soda shop known as the Polar Bar, a branch of the CIBC and a grocery store called Wade's.

Eventually, an A & W set up shop next to Bob's. Across the street there was a drugstore, a barber shop, Dan's grocery, Quist's meat market and, for a while, a Shell service station.

And then came the Capilano Freeway.

Funny how it was built right through the business section. Originally, 50th Street was supposed to be the river crossing. It was nice and wide, and straight on the south side. The city had already started buying up properties on the north side in preparation for widenings and ramps.

But for some political reason, city council voted otherwise. And at great expense, the Capilano Freeway came into being.

All those other 112th Avenue businesses are gone now, but Bills Service continues, as good as ever.

Kryisia Jarmicka