

Making Something Out of Nothing in Mt. Erie

By Randy Olson

For many years, residents of the Mt. Erie area had to travel several miles to purchase grocery and household items. Realizing that need in the community, Mike and Lisa Smith, together with Mike's brother, Mark, set out to provide a facility to meet those needs. In 2003, they purchased the old grocery building in downtown Mt. Erie, next to the post office, and began to clean it up prior to the Mt. Erie Days' 150-year celebration. They opened "Smith Brothers Surplus" in May of 2003 using saw horses and plywood to display auction merchandise and a few food items they had acquired. This primitive beginning to the store began as a Saturday-only venture from 8 a.m. to Noon, and continued that way until the end of the year.

The initial response was good. Residents were happy to have something available to them, even though it was very limited at first. As interest grew, Lisa tried to convince her husband to bulldoze the place and build a new building on the same site. She had a vision of creating a combination pizzeria/coffee shop that could offer a variety of menu items and beverages anytime of day, as well as supply residents with needed staple items such as bread, milk, eggs, lunchmeat, soda, chips, microwavable foods, etc. Mike was determined to make the existing building work, so he did extensive remodeling, installed new windows, bought store shelving from an existing pharmacy in McLeansboro, found coolers in Carbondale, and bought excess merchandise from a variety of sources.

In May of 2004, they held their grand opening just before Mt. Erie Days in June. It was also the 1st Anniversary since their primitive beginnings. Today, Smith Brothers Surplus is much more than the name implies. They feature a coffee shop with tables and chairs,



Buffet Style Pizza, as well as different menu items daily ranging from cheeseburgers and salads, to submarine sandwiches and breakfast pizza. The store is decorated in Coca Cola décor, as Lisa is an avid collector. The coolers are stocked with food items and the shelves are lined with a variety of merchandise ranging from tools and gifts, to household items.

The store hours are now Monday through Thursday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturday 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

"We occasionally open at special times for other reasons," said Lisa. "During Deer season, we often open at 4 a.m. offering coffee with biscuits and gravy for the hunters in the area." The Smith's are busy people, so they have very dependable employees who also help operate the community store. Lisa and Mike both work at Champion Labs, and Mike is also a licensed real estate agent with Hometown Realty in Fairfield. Mike's brother Mark, is a mail carrier in the Geff area. The two brothers also operate a custom harvesting and mowing service.

Located just under the water tower in Mt. Erie, Smith Brothers Surplus has become an oasis to weary travelers, farmers, and area residents alike. "With the price

of gas what it is today, we offer a convenience to many people, saving them time and money from driving to Fairfield, Flora, or other towns to buy a few needed items," said Lisa. "A lady came in for eggs one day and we were out, so I went and got her four eggs from my house down the street. It's all about being friendly and helpful to people."

Smith Brothers Surplus receives their electricity from Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative. "The cooperative has been good to us," says Mike. "Anything we have needed, the service has always been dependable." Smith Brothers Surplus is also utilizing the new business directory feature on the Wayne-White website. "It's an affordable way to promote our business with photos, a description, and a link to our own website," said Mike. You can visit the store online at www.SmithBrosSurplus.com and in the Wayne-White business directory at www.WWCEC.com. Better yet, the next time you are in or near Mt. Erie, take a moment and stop by Smith Brothers Surplus. Enjoy a cup of coffee or a slice of delicious buffet-style pizza, while you browse the variety of merchandise. Just look for the big white Mt. Erie water tower and you are there.

