

Chapter 1

The Birth of an Empire

It was a very humble beginning for Dispensa's Castle of Toys and Kiddie Kingdom. The Founder was Nicholas S. Dispensa (1888 - 1970). He immigrated to the United States with his parents at the age of five. His Father, Joseph had four brothers and eventually all of them came to the States.

Nicholas S. Dispensa (later to be known as N.S.) was one of four children born to Joseph and Sabeta, but he was the only one to survive, the other three died in infancy or in early childhood.

In 1904, N.S. married Rose (1891-1958). She was born in the United States. As fate would have it, Rose had the same last name as N.S.. Together, they had nine children (4 girls and 5 boys) over a span of 29 years.

N.S.'s first job was working for the Railroad. In those days, the Italians that worked for the railroad worked laying and repairing track. Somehow he became friends with a (railroad) fireman. He took the fireman to his home for some old fashion Italian cooking and homemade Italian wine. Before long they were good friends. Then, as fate would have it, the fireman was promoted to engineer, and needed to select a fireman to work with him. He chose N.S. but ran into trouble with management because N.S. was Italian, and the Italians worked on the track, not in the engine. The engineers and firemen were Irish. But, he persisted, and N.S. got the job. N.S. recalled that first day on the job, and said that his good friend, the engineer, told him, "You see that gauge, if it moves one degree above or below the mark, you're back on the track."

N.S. was a shoemaker by trade, in the days when shoemakers actually made shoes. So after he earned enough money as a fireman, he and Rose opened and ran a shoe shop in Chicago. Those were very lean years, and they looked for ways to increase their income. They saved their money, and finally, N.S. was able to buy a used chain-drive Mack dump truck.

Buying a dump truck was a wise move, because, at that time, the City of Chicago was building very large buildings with basements three and four stories deep. There was a need for trucks to haul the landfill from the building sites to the dump site (Lake Michigan).

N.S. drove to the building site, picked up a load and hauled it to the lake. When he got there he put the truck in reverse and back up as fast and as far as he could. When the truck sunk up to the axle, he dumped the load and waited for a bulldozer to hook a chain to the truck, and drag him and the truck back to the street. Then he went back for another load.

If you would like to visit that landfill site, go to the Adler Planetarium, Soldier Field, the Field Museum of Natural History, McCormick Place, the Shed Aquarium and Northerly Island (Meigs Field Airport), all were built on landfill that N.S. helped create in the early 1900's.

N.S. kept plenty busy, running the shoe shop at night and weekends, and hauling landfill in the daytime. During the day one of his sons, John (1912-1994) would deliver the repaired shoes and pick up shoes for the next days work. John also helped him repair shoes, and became quite good at it, but they wouldn't let him use the huge commercial sewing machine that sewed the soles on the shoes, so they took that work to another shop.

John always liked to tell that story, especially the part where he made the deliveries on his bike. His Mother was afraid he would lose the money he received from the customers and paid to the repair shop, so she tied a string around his neck with a small cloth bag attached. He used the bag like a cashbox, collecting from the customers, and paying the shoemaker from that little bag.

N.S. was a very talented man. In addition to his sharp business sense, he played the coronet, and sang Opera. One summer, he and his cousin Nick (who the kids called "Uncle Nick") got a job playing with a circus band at night. They worked at the Circus all summer long.

Each evening on the way into the Big Top, they passed a Ferris Wheel. The Ferris Wheel always had a line a "mile" long. After the Circus, they would leave the Big Top and again the Ferris Wheel had a long line. This impressed N.S., and he thought that this was a good business to go into, after all, he already had the truck to haul it around.

So, the next summer (1919), N.S. and Uncle Nick got together and purchased a Ferris Wheel. That summer they booked with another Circus, and were soon to learn that when people were going into the Circus the Ferris Wheel had a line, and after the Circus there was a line waiting to ride, but all the time the performance was going on, the Ferris Wheel stood idle. But as difficult as those early days were, that was to be the beginning of an amusement empire admired by generations of kids, and envied by other amusement operators all over the county for their unique and innovative approach to the business.