

business blossom

Audra Cleland's suggestions eventually changed feed and seed store to a garden and pet center

By Barbara Bailey
of the Daily Courier

Just about everybody knows Chet's Garden and Pet Center. But did you know it started out as a feed store, and that it might still be one if it hadn't been for Audra Cleland?

Cleland, now 99, and a resident of the Royale Garden Health Care Center, went to work for Chet Tompkins in 1944, when he was running the Star Feed and Seed business, which also sold groceries.

"In Southern California," she says, "I had a grocery business with my husband, and we moved up here to a 20-acre farm in 1941. It was during the war and I was learning to bake bread, so I bought a 25-pound sack of flour at Star Feed and Seed east of Fourth Street on the south side of the railroad tracks. Chet carried it out to my car for me, and he asked me to please go to work for him — he knew I had a grocery store in California. Groceries were being rationed, and he was so busy he hadn't updated the point-system information on the shelves for three weeks. I spent the first couple of days fixing the stickers, and I didn't get to make my bread," she recalls with a laugh.

In the spring, Tompkins would buy a few flats of cabbage, lettuce and tomatoes from Morgan's Greenhouse on old Redwood Highway and sell them to his customers, along with food and animal feed.

"I passed the nursery on my way to work, so I started delivering the flats to the store," Cleland says. "I'd never been in a nursery before, but I'd been in business and knew that you had to make money, so one day I bought 12 geranium plants, took them to the business, had a display made, and sold them all. I bought flats of different plants I saw at the nursery and took them to work, although I didn't know if I would get canned for that."

The plants sold, and far from getting herself fired, Tompkins agreed to let Cleland increase the store's plant inventory.

"I kept increasing the number of plants any time I saw extra money to be made — that's what the boss was paying me for. I did-

n't make floral arrangements because there was no time for it, but eventually, we stocked loose flowers, and Star Feed and Seed Store became known as Chet's," Cleland says.

She was also responsible for starting up the store's pet department.

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Audra Cleland

Former Chet's employee

"The old store had a big bay window," she says, "and I told Chet that I wished we had a fish tank to put in it. He brought one down from upstairs, and we sold goldfish. Gradually we added birds. We started with three or four canaries, and added dogs and cats. If I could sell it, we stocked it."

Cleland's daughter Edna Smith says that her mother and Chet "got along like a brother and sister. Chet had a soft heart, and he was a wonderful person. He was a character around town, and everybody knew him."

Chet told Cleland to keep track of her own hours on the job, which she did, on a Grants Pass Pharmacy calendar, "because he couldn't be bothered. I worked full-time and did anything that needed to be done. I bought the plants and watered them, and I had no job description. I was learning something every day, and I read plant magazines thoroughly. If you're in the plant business and you don't keep up, you're not a good sales person. I became a plant, fish and bird expert.

"One hot summer day," she remembers, "I was coming back from lunch and I saw an attorney in town carrying two bags of nitrogen under his arm. I asked him, 'What are you doing with that this time of year? You're going to burn up everything in your yard.' From then on, he talked to me before he bought stuff," Cleland adds with a laugh.

During World War II, Smith's husband, Burton Smith, was in the service overseas. The Smiths couldn't get a phone installed in their home during the war, so one day, while on leave in San Francisco, he left a message for his wife at Chet's, inviting her down for a visit.

Smith says, "Chet listened in when the call came. Gas was rationed then, so I didn't have the gas to make the trip, but Chet told me to go home and pack. He held out his hands and gave me gas stamps that he'd accumulated. So I took the baby and drove straight through to San Francisco to see my husband before he went back on ship. How many men would have done that?"

Chet came to the rescue again during the Seattle World's Fair. "Chet listened while a friend of mine told me about the World's Fair, and said she hadn't been anywhere for a long time," Cleland says. "Chet came over and told me 'You're going in the morning.' I called Viola and said, 'We're leaving for Seattle at 5 a.m., and you're making the sandwiches.' We went to the Space Needle, and had a lot of fun. I'll never forget that. He cared about us like family."

She says that Chet "wasn't demanding, but he had a way of commanding respect. One boy who came to work at Chet's broke a bottle of stuff his first day. He said, 'Here goes my job.' He went upstairs and apologized, but Chet said that another person wouldn't have mentioned that they broke something. He told the boy to go back to work."

When Chet's outgrew the old facility and moved to its present location in the 1970s, Cleland says it was "like a funeral for Chet and me because we were so used to the old place."

When she retired from Chet's in 1986, they had a big retirement party with all of the clerks and their families. "We ate and had the best time. At first, I found no pleasure outside of the store, and I still read any magazine or newspaper that has gardening articles."

Cleland enjoys her life at Royale Gardens. "It's a joy being at this facility, because a lot of the people here were customers of mine at Chet's," she says.