Capital Grocery customer Hugh Shankle heads home after a trip to the neighborhood store. Located on Spanish Town Road, it has been in business for most of this century, but the current owners are about to retire.

‘It’s always been there’

Spanish Town store venerable, beloved as transition looms

By TOM GUARISCO
Advocate staff writer

The shoes of three generations have worn smooth the concrete floors of the Capitol Grocery in Spanish Town, but now the store’s future is uncertain.

Owner Tony Guercio and manager Randy Hutchinson plan to call it quits this year after a 32-year run operating one of Baton Rouge’s oldest grocery stores.

Dorothy Archer Daniels, a neighbor who was born in 1902, remembered shopping there in the 1930s when it was Hernandez Grocery, with proprietor Adelle Hernandez.

Gary Vines Sr. shops for dinner with his dog, Tyke, at Capital Grocery last week. Management allows pets — within reason.
living above it on the second floor.
"It's always been there," said Daniels, a retired teacher. "It was a blessing for me because I could grab something and run."

Capitol Grocery has kept the old flavor of its predecessors, a mom and pop grocery like the ones that dotted every neighborhood before chains absorbed them or supermarkets knocked most of them out of business.

This is the place where many of the 2,000 downtown residents walk for milk, beer and a little company.

"I don't have customers, I have friends," said Hutchinson, who has managed the store for Guercio since 1967. "Ain't nothing like Spanish Town, USA."

Guercio said he wants to sell it.
"I'm 66 and it's time to quit," Guercio said. "I'd like to sell it to someone in the area."

Downtown residents interviewed last week said the store is vital to their way of life, the only store within reasonable walking distance. Davis Rhorer, downtown's top economic development official, shares that feeling.

Rhorer, executive director of the Downtown Development District, said Miami planners instantly recognized the store's value as they surveyed the area last year before drafting their master plan to revitalize downtown.

"I recall walking half a block down the street," said Rhorer, who lived in Spanish Town for 12 years. "That's plenty long enough to tell tales on neighbors, a common activity at the store. Fisher remembers rocking a little baby named John on her knee in New Orleans many years ago - today that baby is Senator President John Hainae.

The store is as social as it is mercantile. Its bulletin board is a distillation of daily life. It features notices of apartments for rent, fugitives on the lam, upcoming music gigs and posters of lost dogs.

Randal Landreneau, a 27-year-old chef, said the store is the neighborhood's common ground.
"It's like a neighborhood bar - everyone knows your name," Landreneau said. "They pull a pack of my brand of cigarettes before I even ask them - they just know.

Donnie Lombas, 38, walks to the store almost daily, even though he can drive to larger supermarkets where the beer, milk and meat are cheaper and in more variety. He keeps Capitol Grocery in his routine because of its character.
"The store is an extension of the neighborhood, and the neighborhood wouldn't be the same without it," Lombas said.

For one thing, it is smack dab in the center of Spanish Town, a community of opposites with roughly a thousand residents who represent about every walk of life.

Spanish Town got its name from the Spanish Canary Islanders who settled there in the early 1800s. During downtown's prosperous early days, Spanish Town and Beauregard Town were the closest residential areas.

Some stately homes still stand today, the former homes of old-line families. But as some of those first families died off or moved away, Spanish Town grew popular with city directors from that time. Its phone number was "4.

Abner and Adelle Hernandez ran the store for decades after that. In 1929 it became Jinney Jungle, and stayed that way until 1940 when Adelle Hernandez named it Hernandez Cash Grocery. She later dropped "Cash" from the name.

Peter Crifasi Sr., who retired from the grocery business 10 years ago, remembers accompanying his mom to the Hernandez store before the State Capitol was built. Crifasi, who is 83, even competed with the store for a time, pushing a fruit and vegetable cart around the area where the Capitol now stands.

In 1961, she sold it to "Hambone" Haileo Cox. Longtime customers said he got his name because he was a whiz at slicing hams.

About a year later Cox sold it to Clarence and Irene Pilcher who operated it as C&I Grocery. The Pilchers called it quits in 1964 and sold it to Sam Scurcia Jr., the first

Keith Hall buys groceries from Capitol Grocery store manager Randy Hutchinson and his wife, Sarah, last week. Hutchinson has managed the store since 1967, but he and owner Tony Guercio are retiring.

the neighborhood.

The stylish old houses caught the eye of gay men and women, and even today the neighborhood is known as a stronghold in the gay community.

Shoppers at the store reflect the neighborhood's eclectic mixture of state government big shots, retirees, yuppies, laborers, hairdressers, professors, students, lawyers and doctors. One customer might sport wild tattoos, and the next might be a judge.

Deep roots
The store has been in business since at least the 1920s, when it was called the Golden Rule Bakery and Grocery, according to city directories from that time. Its phone number was "4.

Abner and Adelle Hernandez ran the store together until Abner died, and Adelle maintained it for decades after that. In 1929 it became Jinney Jungle, and stayed that way until 1940 when Adelle Hernandez named it Hernandez Cash Grocery. She later dropped "Cash" from the name.

Peter Crifasi Sr., who retired from the grocery business 10 years ago, remembers accompanying his mom to the Hernandez store

of three Italian families to run it.
Scuoria sold it to Vincent Paola in 1966, and Paola turned around and sold it to Tony Guercio a year later. It has been Capitol Grocery ever since.

The next chapter in the store's fascinating history may be written by a geologist. Hamilton Shaw, who works with the state Department of Environmental Quality and lives next door to the store. He hopes to buy it and keep it open.

Shaw has bought and fixed up three houses in the neighborhood, and hopes to make the grocery his boldest project yet.

"I'd like to have this be a neighborhood-propelled grocery," said Shaw, 35. "I'd like the neighborhood to support it."

The owners said the building, the store and its contents will cost around $400,000. Shaw is in negotiations to buy it, but figures he's an underdog. He has experience renovating properties, but none running a grocery store.

He figures to keep cashier Ed Markham and other key employees if he buys it. Guercio said if the deal with Shaw does not work out, he'll put the store on the market.

Shaw said he wants nothing more than to buy the store and keep it running.

"This is probably my last thing as it relates to taking a diamond in the rough and making something positive for the neighborhood," Shaw said. "I like the challenge, and I might be here at the right time."