

Rebuilt Smetana Grocery still popular gathering spot

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Reporter
Photos by Doug La Rue

A Duddley's Draw in Smetana, Texas? Smetana Grocery may be a grocery store, but its atmosphere often resembles the informality of Northgate.

Smetana is located five miles west of downtown Bryan on Texas Highway 21.

The store has been rebuilt three times, but it remains the most popular gathering place for young and old of the community.

What other grocery store allows customers to enjoy a cold beer while they shop, play a game of dominos or shoot a friendly game of pool? The community of Smetana was founded in 1887, when Jacob Sramek opened the Smetana Grocery and officially named the community Smetana. Sramek's store served as post office and grocery store and he as postmaster and storekeeper.

Sramek named the community after the 19th century Czech composer, Bedrich Smetana, who composed songs of protest against the oppressive Czech rulers and patriotic songs to unite the Czech people into a nation.

His store was the only building in town for many years and developed into a natural meeting place for the community.

Sramek opened his store in the late 1800s (nobody remembers the exact year).

In 1928, his son, John Sramek, took over the family store and built a new Smetana Grocery to replace the original. He didn't take over as postmaster — the post office wasn't in the new store — but he served as justice of the peace.

In 1972, Lee Don Bienski, John's grandson, took over as storekeeper while working on his doctorate in chemistry at Texas A&M. After completing his degree, Bienski taught at A&M for one year.

Realizing his roots were in Smetana Grocery, he left teaching and assumed the life his grandfather and great-grandfather had lived.

After operating the store for 10 years, Bienski and his wife, Carolyn Davis, Brazos County Court secretary, decided they needed a larger, more efficient store.

In 1982, he started putting his ideas for a new store on paper and Davis started to prepare the town-people for the new building.

When the new store opened Dec. 31, Bienski had a hard time convincing some of his friends to leave the old store and come to the new one.

The new two-story building houses the grocery store downstairs that eventually will offer a delicatessen as well as the fresh meat and vegetables Bienski and Davis grow.

The back of the first floor has tables for talking and drinking; beyond these are two pool tables.

Bernhard Reiser is the young German architect who designed and built the new store. Reiser lived in West Germany when Bienski first telephoned him in 1984 to design the store. The next year Reiser came to the United States to build it.



Daniel Matlek, left, and Bernhard Reiser discuss the installation of the counters in the main room of the new Smetana grocery store.



Bernhard Reiser, the German architect who designed and built the new grocery store, takes a minute to relax outside by his VW van. Reiser had the van shipped in from Germany.



This former Smetana grocery store is destined to become a barn for the Bienski family. Lee Don Bienski represents the third generation of his family to take over running the Smetana store.



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