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Lakeside Grocery Gets New Owners

Contributed by Craig Giammona, Sentinel Staff Writer
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Lakeside Grocery has been sold to Alaska Commercial Company, a firm that operates stores throughout rural Alaska. Lakeside will be closed Sunday for inventory and will reopen Monday under new ownership, said Rex Wilhelm, the Anchorage-based president and chief operating officer of ACC.

Lakeside had been a family-owned business dating back to the 1950s, when Viola Smith opened a small grocery store near where True Value is located today, said Cheryl Westover, a longtime Lakeside employee and Smith's granddaughter. In 1959, Stanley Westover, Cheryl's father, bought the business and moved to a small quonset hut near the current location of the Car Quest auto parts store at Halibut Point Road and Erler Street.

Stanley Westover died in a boating accident in 1961, leaving Cheryl's mother, Mardelle, to run the business. In 1977, the family applied for and received a small business loan that allowed them to expand to Lakeside's current location at 705 Halibut Point Road, Westover said. The store opened there in 1979 and remains in that location today.

Prior to the opening of the expanded store, Carolyn Hammack, Cheryl's sister, took over the business and owned it until the recent sale. Westover said Hammack sold Lakeside because she wanted to spend more time with her grandchildren and "enjoy a little bit of life." "We'd really like to stress this has been a community venture as well as ours," Westover said. "We've had terrific support from the community."

Lakeside will host a retirement party for Hammack Saturday and the public is invited to attend. Wilhelm said there won't be any major changes to Lakeside for at least the next few months. ACC is bringing in a new store manager, and the company plans to spend the rest of 2009 "learning the business and getting to know the community."

Wilhelm said that ACC would spend the first few months of 2010 "investing in the business" and making renovations, with the goal of being ready to reopen in time for the start of next year's herring season. Alaska Commercial Company is headquartered in Anchorage, but their stores are in places like Barrow, Nome, Kotzebue, Bethel and Dillingham. In 2003, ACC opened its first Southeast store in Yakutat and in 2006 they purchased two stores on Prince of Wales Island, in Klawock and Craig.

The Sitka store will be ACC's fourth in Southeast. Wilhelm said Sitka will be the largest community where ACC operates. "Sitka is a very large community by our standards," Wilhelm said. He added: "Everything that has made Lakeside important to Sitka, we don't want to lose any of that. We want to continue to provide the service and look to improve that model over time."

Most of Lakeside's staff is staying on through the transition, Wilhelm said. He said there was no plan to change the store's name. He also said customers will not notice much difference in the store's prices, at least for the foreseeable future.

In addition to being the company's president, Wilhelm said he is Alaska Commercial Company's historian. The company was born in Sitka in October 1867, just days before Alaska was transferred to American control. Wilhelm said Alaska Commercial Company got its start when the Russian-American Company was sold to businessmen from San Francisco. "In some ways, this is a homecoming for us," Wilhelm said.

Alaska Commercial Company is a subsidiary of The North West Company, which is based in Winnipeg, Canada.