

Happy Burro Market expands

Watsonville landmark moves across town

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WATSONVILLE — The Happy Burro Market has reached the end of its trail.

After 25 years of selling Mexican groceries, the landmark supermarket on Main Street recently closed its doors. John Franklin, Happy Burro's owner, is riding his business across town. He took a 10-year lease on Tropicana Foods on Freedom Boulevard eight months ago and calls it the expansion of his old store.

"We've gone from the little burro to the big burro," said store manager Gilbert Munoz. "The new store is up to date. To me, it means that we progressed."

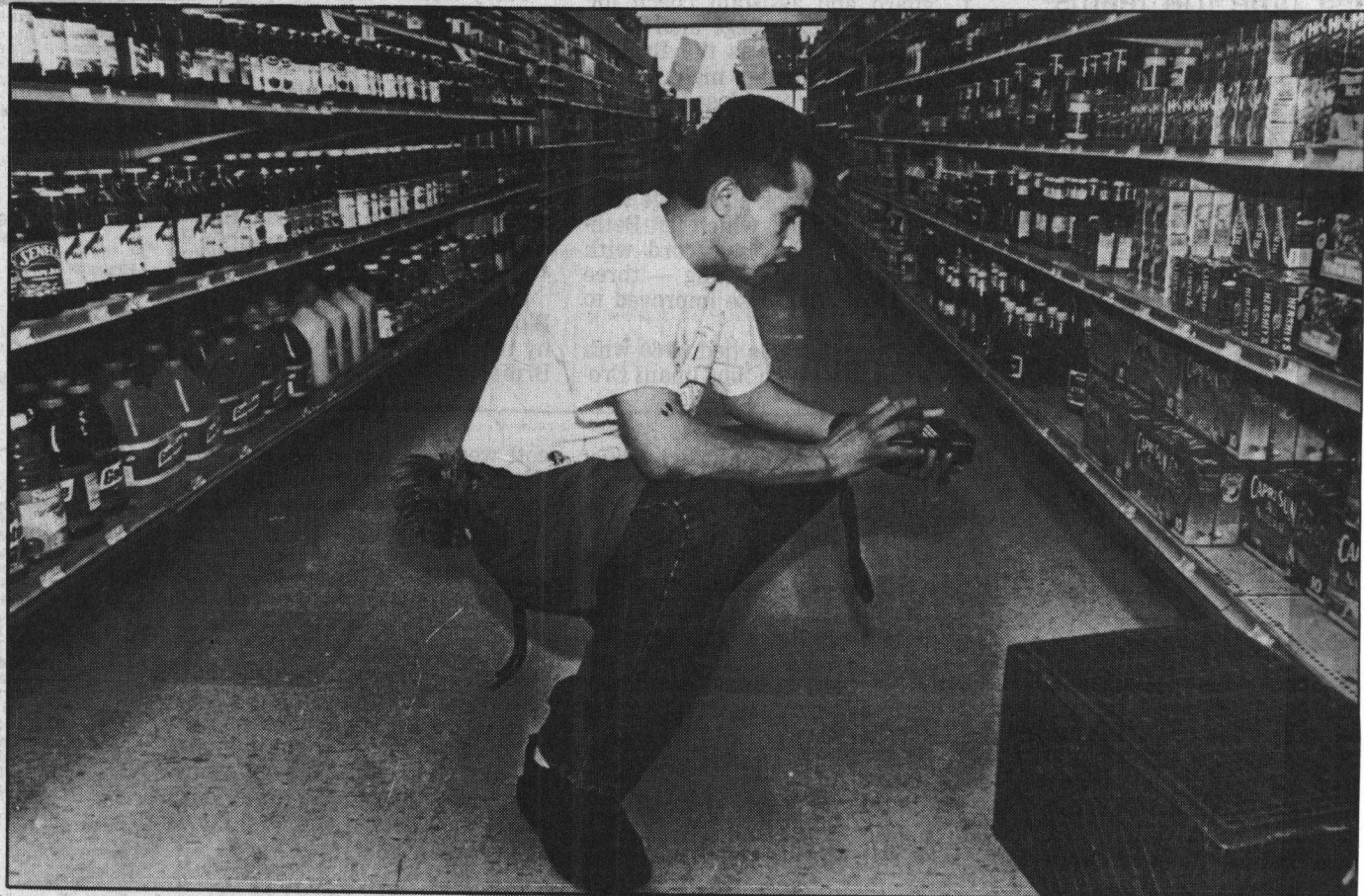
Happy Burro doubled its staff to 25 at the new location, which has about 7,000 square feet of additional space for displays and products.

Munoz says he hopes longtime customers will follow the Happy Burro to the new location in the Crestview Shopping Center.

"Keep it clean. Give service. You don't lose anything," he said.

But he will have competition for his old customers. Watsonville businessman Javier Vasquez plans to open La Esperanza market in the former Happy Burro store at Town and Country Center at 1260 Main St.

Vasquez operates seven markets, mostly in Salinas and Santa Cruz County. The 8,800-square-foot building on Main Street is being remodeled to accommodate La Esperanza, which also specializes in Mexican food products and has a butcher shop. La Esperanza is expected to open in March.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Jose Sanchez takes inventory at Tropicana Foods in Watsonville Monday.

Patrons of the new Tropicana will find the same products and items that were offered at the old Happy Burro: imported spices and sauces from Mexico, canned chiles, soups, pastries, cookies and candies. Fresh meats cut Mexican style, a wide selection of pinatas, and fruits and vegetables from south of the border are also familiar offerings to former Happy Burro shoppers.

The larger store offers some modern conveniences, including scanner pricing and ATM service. As always, the

staff caters to customers in Spanish or English.

People "think they're in Mexico in here," said Munoz.

"I do believe The Happy Burro was the first store of its size that came along and actually catered to the Mexican people," Franklin said. Most large supermarket chains and retailers are waking up to the Hispanic customer, he said.

Franklin even plans to keep the burro as the company trademark, even if

he is dropping the Happy Burro as its name.

And where did that name come from?

Munoz tells it like this: One of the first owners of the Happy Burro Market was traveling through the Southwestern U.S. on vacation. He stopped at a restaurant for a meal. Part of the decor was a painting of two frolicking burros wearing smiles and kicking the air.

"I guess he liked what he saw," Munoz said. "Two happy donkeys having so much fun."