

Industry do 1986

By LANE WALLACE
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WHEN A competitor builds a mini-storage center, Ted Crocker wants to see a job well done.

Crocker, who is involved in a network of such centers in California and Arizona, isn't trying to lose business. He simply feels a need for a strong reputation for the industry as well as for his own firm, Crocker's Lockers, which this month opened a 330,000-square-foot facility on Herman Court.

Crocker recalls a few times when he's appeared before a city council or planning commission to seek approval for his projects. "I'll hear one of the members complaining about one (a mini-storage center) he's seen in another town." Though the complaints are about somebody else's business, it makes Crocker's selling job a little tougher.

"I'd rather see somebody go in and do it right," said Crocker, who added that his firm and a number of others are doing just that.

The industry, which was in its infancy when Crocker, 40, and his brother, Dick, 41, built their first mini-storage center 10 years ago, "has become more sophisticated. The leaders have always pushed for quality projects. A lot of thought goes into them," Crocker said. (Some, including Crocker, prefer the term self-storage over mini-storage.)

The Crocker brothers, who grew up in Watsonville, built their first mini-storage lockers on Larkin Valley Road in 1975 and later sold it; it's now AAA Mini-Storage Warehouse. "It rented well. We felt pretty good about it," said

Crocker, recalling that at the time there were "three or four" mini-storage facilities in the Bay Area.

The industry grew, and the Crockers were part of it — there are now 31 Crocker's Lockers. They are owned in various partnerships, all of which Ted or Dick or both were involved in getting started. Dick, who recently opened a center on Fair Avenue in Santa Cruz, is not involved in the Herman Court operation; it's owned by Ted and several other investors.

One of the keys to success has been finding good locations.

Ted Crocker said one of the keys to the success of Crocker's Lockers has been finding good locations. Nowadays, it takes a little more time to find those good spots than it did five or 10 years ago. "There are a lot of areas which have reached the saturation point, including some parts of the Bay Area," he said.

Another key, Crocker said, is keeping up with all the little refinements in building and maintaining storage centers.

For Crocker's Lockers, the latest is an elaborate security system, which has been installed in the Santa Cruz and Watsonville locations. Most mini-storage sites have some type of security system to keep outsiders away, such as an electronic gate controlled by a card. The new system at Crocker's Lockers, built by Mini Storage Security Company of Phoenix,

Ariz., goes a step beyond. Each customer has a different secret code, which he punches to get into and out of the grounds. This allows a computer to keep track of the time people enter and leave. There are also surveillance cameras trained on the buildings. In case of a break-in, the computer and cameras would show who was on the grounds at a particular time.

The center is open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. If a burglar had a mind to hop the back fence at night, he'd have to deal with two guard dogs. There's also a watchman, who has an upstairs apartment overlooking the grounds.

Crocker said he could "count on the fingers of one hand" thefts from his other locations. The tight security is a selling point, he said, noting that some people store some fairly valuable things.

Crocker said that even with the additional security, he is able to be competitive. Rental prices in South County, he said, average 60 to 65 cents a square foot. "We average 63 cents a foot," he said.

Mini-storage isn't the only business for the Crocker brothers. They started the Crocker's fast food restaurants, which had locations around Santa Cruz County; they sold the chain in the mid-70s, several years before it went out of business.

Ted, who lives in Seascapes and has an office in Los Gatos, and Dick, who lives in Solvang and also has an office here, are both involved in real estate development.

They intend to keep expanding the Crocker's Lockers chain. "We should have four or five more up this year," Ted Crocker said.

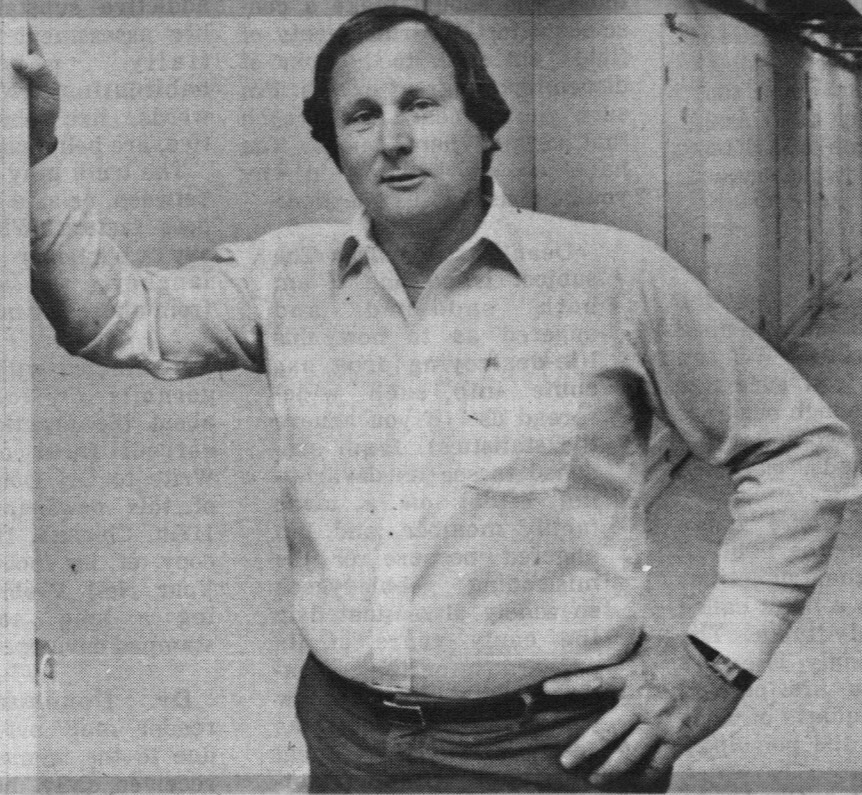
Mini-storage big business for Crockers

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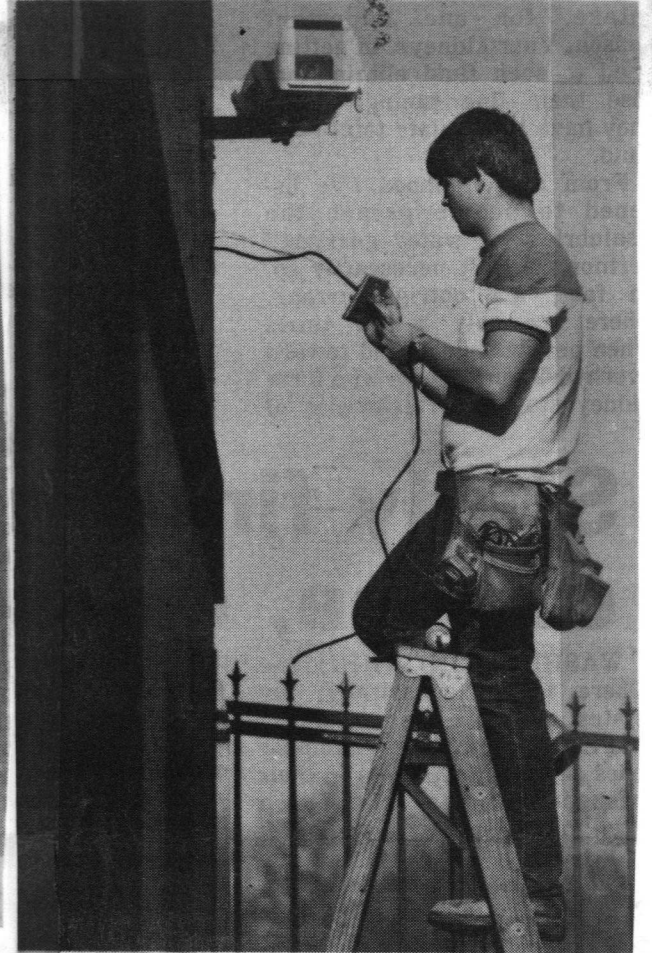
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January 28, 1985

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Ted Crocker has installed a high level security system at the new Crocker's Lockers.



Christopher Brewer installs a surveillance camera at Crocker's Lockers.