

REFERENCE

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Kurt Ellison

Co-Owner Dick Wong, with clerk Barbara Castro, helps customer at the checkstand.

# Daylite Market in its last days

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The days of shopping at Daylite Market are nearing an end. The store is going out of business. Not because its owners want to get out of the grocery business and not because they are having financial problems.

It's just a matter of being in the wrong place. Daylite Market, which has been operating in the downtown for 47 years, is on the 200 block of Main Street, and, as part of the city's redevelopment plans, that block is to be razed to make room for a new post office and new commercial development. All the stores on that block will have to be vacated; those on the southern part of the block, including Daylite, must be out by Nov. 1. Daylite's owners have set Oct. 18 as their last day of business. Daylite's owners are still negotiating with the city on a final settlement for the purchase of their property and equipment, and the expenses involved in closing the store.

The store got its start in 1939 as the Daily Meat Market at 227 Main St. Fred Wong, who had owned a number of small markets in the San Joaquin Valley before moving to Watsonville, was among some 12 partners in the original store. In the beginning, the store was mainly a meat market, selling just a few grocery

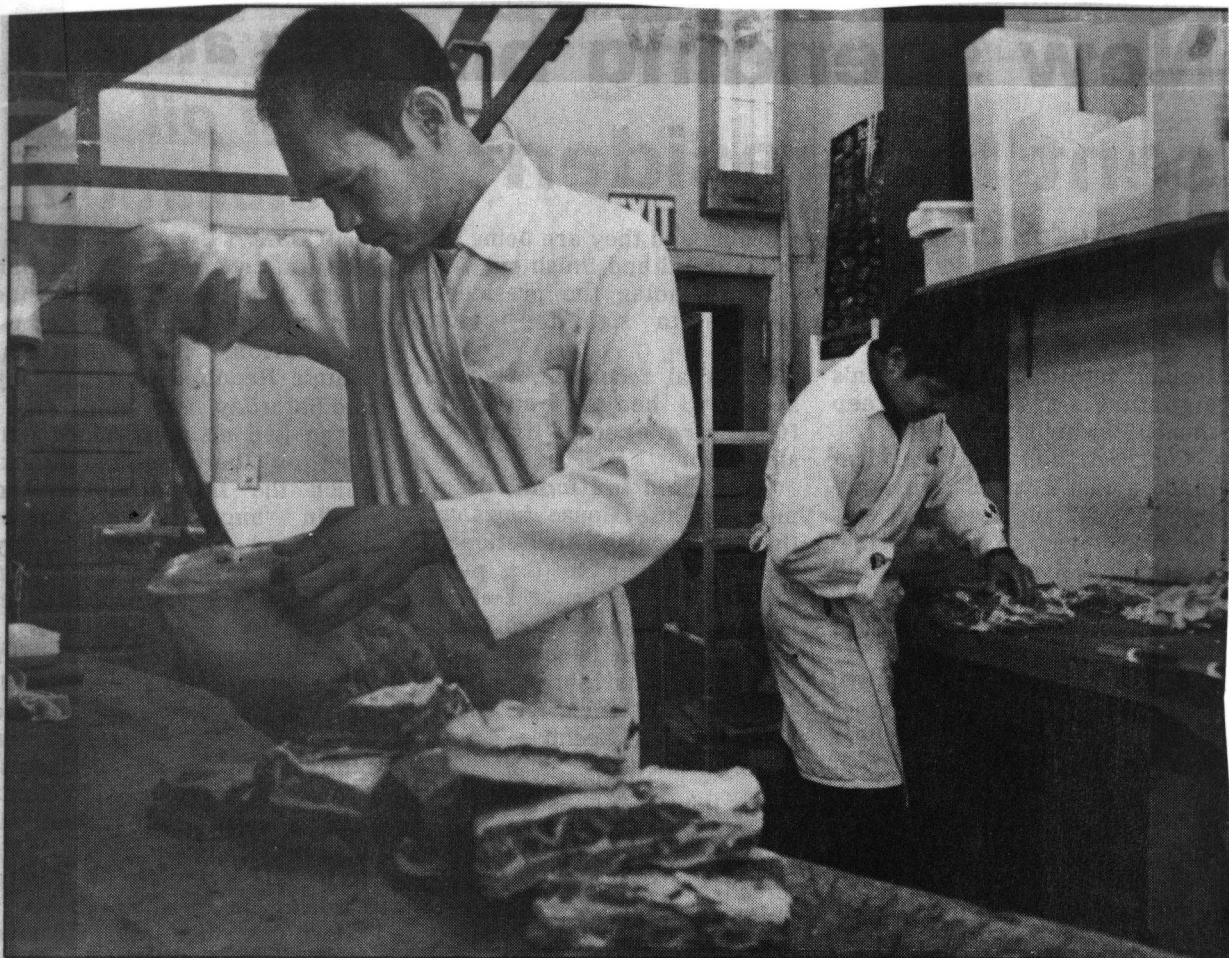
items on the side, Fred's son, Ernie Wong said. When most of the partners of the Daily Meat Market were called off to war, the store closed. It reopened in 1946, this time under the name of Daylite Market. It was still a fairly small store, concentrating on the butcher business. Ernie began working in the market in 1950 and was later one of the partners when the store expanded. In 1953, the partners decided to open a full-fledged supermarket and moved two doors north. The new Daylite Market opened at 235 Main St. — where it stands today — and was still operated by about a dozen partners, Ernie Wong said. Over the years, a few partners started buying out the shares of the others, until it was down to four owners. But, as those owners have died and retired, they passed their shares along to their children and the ownership of the

store, has expanded to again include many partners. Through the many changes, Daylite has gained a reputation for its fine meat department — a holdover from its start as a butcher shop — and as a friendly, family-run store, that adds a personal touch to an everyday service. "This town went from all independents to almost all chain stores," owner Dick Wong said. Daylite was one of the last of the supermarket-type stores not run as part of

a chain. When it leaves, only Happy Burro, Freedom Food Center and Heights will remain as independents. The independent stores are an asset to the community, Wong said, because they are responsive to local needs, and because they borrow and spend their money in the community. The forced-closing of Daylite Market will affect not only the owners, but some longtime employees, and the customers who have come to rely on Daylite to supply most of their grocery needs. For Daylite's loyal customers, the closing of the store will be an inconvenience. For some, such as Virginia Herring, of Maple Street, Daylite is the only full-service supermarket within walking distance of their homes. Herring often used her trips to the grocery store as an excuse go out for a walk. And, when she's been sick and unable to get to the store, she's been fortunate enough to get the store to send the groceries to her home. For others, like Willie Gonzales, of Hudson Landing Road, it was just a favorite store, one they came to rely on to supply all their grocery needs. Gonzales has been a steady customer at Daylite. See DAYLITE page 8 ▶

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Butcher Jason Tam cuts meat, a product Daylite Market has been noted for.

## DAYLITE

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for 30 years — he was already shopping in the store by the time some of the current owners started working at the store when they were in high school.

One customer of the store, Rosita Tabasa, is getting hit twice by the redevelopment plan. Her restaurant, the Philippine Gardens, is also on the 200 block and is one of the businesses that has to be vacated in the next few weeks so the city can begin making room for the new post office. What's more, she's losing the Daylite Market, the regular supplier of meat for her business.

Tabasa said she will take a little break from work, then hopes to reopen her restaurant at a new, as yet undetermined location. When she does, she'll be looking for a new meat market.

"Most of the downtown caters to the working people, out in the fields," partner Dick Wong said. "They're going to have to find another place to go."

When the store closes, it will mean 15 people, including the managing partners, will be out of work. Partner Eddie Gong plans to take a little break.

"The city's going to put me in retirement for six months," he said, alluding to the unemployment benefits he expects to collect. Then, he'll probably look for a new job.

"I worked here 24 years. I was planning to work 10 more years, then give (the business)

to my son," Gong said. "He'd be just the right age." His son is now 14 years old.

Barry Gong, another owner, but no relation to Eddie, said he, too, will have to look for another job.

A third partner, Dick Wong, the son of Ernie Wong's cousin, said he hasn't given much thought to what he'll do next. Now, he's just concentrating on negotiating a fair deal with the city.

While Barry, Eddie and Dick are all angry, their anger doesn't show through to their regular customers. They've continued to conduct business in a friendly manner, and even while discussing the imminent closure, were relaxed. Eddie even seemed outwardly cheerful.

"The fight's been taken out of us," Dick explained.

Ernie Wong, who still owns an interest in Daylite but is retired, said the closing will affect him just like it will a lot of his longtime customers.

"I don't know where I'm going to buy my meat," Wong said. "I'm a butcher by trade, so I'm pretty picky." He joked that maybe when he found a good butcher, he would sell his information to others in search of good service.

Two people who will feel the pinch when the store closes are Daylite employees Gary Albo and Bill Howard. They are, respectively, just 1½ years and 6 months away from being fully vested in their union pension. If they don't find other union jobs, they will lose what they had accrued to date. Neither is optimistic about finding a

union job in the area.

"I'm scared and I'm frustrated," Albo said. "The people who own the business can invest their money or something. The people who work here get nothing."

Albo is bitter that the city's assistance to the business does not include assistance to the workers who are losing their jobs.

Albo and Howard both said they've been looking for another union job in the grocery business, but it hasn't been easy. They are journeymen, the highest-paid non-management workers, and believe stores prefer to hire lower-paid apprentices who can be trained in the store's own methods of operation.

The grocery business in Watsonville is somewhat depressed, Dick Wong said — there are just too many of them — making it all the more difficult to find new jobs.

The Daylite owners had considered relocating, but now have given up any such hopes. They looked at several locations, all of which turned out to be unsuitable. At one point, they were told they could lease a spot on the other half of the 200 block once a development went in. This didn't excite the owners.

"Why would we want to sell this place and lease another?" Barry Gong asked rhetorically.

"We've been here more than 40 years. It's just a sad thing to see us close up and leave," Dick Wong said. "It's not that we had financial problems."

"We had plans to expand. That's merely a thought now."