The History of Robert's Seafood Market
Est. 1916

How it All Began

Henry Robert was born on July 4, 1886 in St. Imier, Switzerland, a small village less than 6 miles from the French border. The family name was pronounced “Row-behr”. A testament of the close proximity to France and the French culture. However, “Henri” grew up in the true Swiss tradition of creating incredible quality and world-renowned watches. He attended “watch making” school for 3 years crafting the art of making Longine watches. But, Henry yearned for something more. He had heard of the great opportunities and wonders of America through friends that migrated to the heartland of the “new world”, in Illinois.

At the age of 19, Henry made the decision to leave his beloved Switzerland and set sail for the United States aboard the S.S. LaLorraine, arriving at New York Harbor on June 5th, 1906. His final destination was Mattoon, Illinois, where he had secured a job as a repairman at a friend’s watch store. The friend had migrated from Switzerland the previous year and had corresponded with Henry about the opportunities in America. When Henry arrived he could only speak broken English, but was fluent in French and German. However, he adapted well to his new home. Only 3 months after arriving in Mattoon, Henry was “discovered” by the travelling general salesman for the Illinois Watch Company, Julius Armbruster, who recognized young Robert’s talent for watchmaking. Armbruster secured a job for Henry at the main factory in Springfield, Illinois and he moved to the Land of Lincoln in the fall of 1906.

Henry Robert settled in the north end of Springfield near the Illinois Watch Company factory. He worked as a watch repairmen from 1906 to 1908 and then was listed as a “banker” for the company from 1908-1910. He kept saving his hard earned money, as he knew in his heart he wanted to do something “greater” with his life in this land of opportunity. Henry Robert remarked to a friend in the late 1940’s about his experience at the watch factory. After working there for five years, in 1911, when a portion of the watch plant was shut down for a remodel, Henry walked out and said “If I go back, I’ll be there for life”. He vowed “I’ll not go back”. And he did not. He was ready to do something more fulfilling in his life.

A young Henry Robert (c. 1905) before he made his journey from Switzerland to the United States. At this time he was a watch repairman for Longine. Photo courtesy of Robert’s Seafood Market

BY BRIAN AIELLO
Since moving to Springfield in 1906, Henry Robert had resided at a variety of locations on the north side of town, always within a 3 block area of the Illinois Watch Company, which was located between 9th and 11th streets and North Grand Avenue. He had become familiar with the north end of Springfield and was intrigued by the local neighborhood grocery stores. In fact, after he left his job at the factory in 1911, he invested his hard-saved earnings in to the opening of a grocery store at 610 E. Miller St. It was called H. Robert’s & Co. Henry part- nered with Marden K. Sawyer, who had been a clerk at R.M. Dockum’s grocery store located at 723-725 E North Grand Ave. Marden hired his sister, Florence Sawyer, as the book keeper for the new store, a job she had also done at the R.M. Dockum grocery store. Henry utilized the experience of Marden and Florence’s retail grocery background as he learned the business. Within six years, Florence would become Mrs. Henry Robert.

In 1913, Henry Robert and Marden Sawyer moved their grocery store to 709 E. Enos Ave. They stayed at this location for four years expanding product that his local, neighborhood customers requested. In 1916, the store was listed as “H. Robert’s & Co., Henry Roberts and Marden Sawyer proprietors - Fancy & Staple Groceries, Fruits and Vegetables in Season, Confectionary & Notions”. After growing the business for almost four years, Henry was enjoying the retail grocery business, but was again looking for “something more”.

In the fall of 1916, Henry found his next opportunity. One day he was walking by a fish market in downtown Springfield and was very interested in the display of the fish in the window. He had no experience with fresh seafood, but Henry really connected with this food product and had thoughts of how this was a business he could really grow in the Springfield area. At the time there were about 5 retail fish markets in downtown Springfield. Henry found one that was willing to sell.
The Seafood Business in Springfield in the Early 20th Century

At the beginning of the 20th century, most transportation methods for fresh seafood were not ideal, especially with products being shipped from coastal areas to the Midwest. The rail system and waterways offered the most expedient routes. Even with motor vehicles now operating in the 1910’s, lack of practical interstate roadway systems, refrigeration equipment, and overall costs prevented this from being a viable option until near mid-century. For local seafood delivery, horse and wagon were still the norm for deliveries into post-World War I.

For centuries, common practices of smoking, drying, and salting fish provided longer shelf life and allowed transportation to distant locations. Much seafood was still being shipped in sealed barrels and canned products were now also becoming more popular. A majority of the fresh fish was still being locally caught at the dawn of the 20th century, but that was about to change with the evolution of transportation. Railroads had already been bringing many seafood products, such as oysters and fish from coastal areas, utilizing the many ice houses that each major city possessed. Many ice houses were strategically located near a rail line.

There was certainly opportunity for someone in the seafood business if they could manage the process of getting fresh caught product from the original source to the final destination and still present a quality product to the customer. In 1917, there were five local seafood retail outlets in Springfield. That number would slowly diminish over the next quarter century as those that embraced changes that appealed to their customer would excel and succeed.

The Beginning of Robert’s Seafood Market

Samuel E. Morris had operated, one of the strangest combinations of connected businesses in Springfield in early 1900’s. From 1911-1916, he was the proud owner of “The Morris Hotel and Fish and Oysters”, located at 429 E. Jefferson St (located across the street from the current St. Nicholas Apartments). It was commonly referred to as The Morris Market for many years. Apparently this combination was not working out for Morris, so he decided to get out of the business. Henry Robert made him an offer to purchase the seafood part of the business, also commonly known as The Morris Market. On December 28, 1916, Henry Robert officially got into the seafood business when he purchased the market for a total sum of $4,250.

Here is what Henry received for his purchase price:

“All stock, fixtures of every kind and character contained in building known as 429 E. Jefferson St. in Springfield, Ill. Also one, gray horse, 1 wagon, and 1 set of harness together with the good will of S.E. Morris and with privilege to use the name of the Morris Market.”

Henry Robert had now found his true passion in life and as was quoted earlier, he commented, “I didn’t know a carp from a catfish, but I went into that business because of its popular food values and the possibilities of building up a great industry!” Over the next 35 years he would innovate and revolutionize the seafood business in Springfield and Central Illinois.

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The Growth and Expansion of Henry Roberts Fish Market

In 1918, two years after Henry Roberts purchased Morris Fish & Oysters, he relocated his seafood business to 125 N. 5th St. (Currently a parking lot located just north of the Alamo near Jefferson St.). He stayed at this location for one year, until purchasing the building that used to be the Charles Murray Seafood Co., located at 629 E. Washington St. (the current Gaffigan Building). It's unclear if Henry purchased the market and equipment from Charles Murray or if he purchased it after Murray exited the business. Either way, Henry Roberts would stay at this location for the next decade and a half growing his business and adding a larger selection of fresh seafood for the Springfield area.

Henry must have apparently subscribed to the business phrase “You always want to be near the other competition”, because by 1919, four of the five seafood markets in Springfield were located within 3 blocks of each other – all on E. Washington St. This was probably by no accident, as the 5 markets were all near the 10th St. rail line and nearby ice houses - key necessities to being in the seafood business in 1919.

The United States entered World War I in April, 1917, and would fully engage ground forces in Europe the following year helping the Allies to victory. Henry Robert, like most other young men his age, entered the service. He left Springfield on May 30, 1918 and received training at Camp Sheridan, AL & Camp Gordon, GA. He ascended to the rank of Sergeant, First Class in the Signal Division. He was at Camp Sheridan, AL. when the armistice was signed in November, 1918 and was discharged February 10, 1919 from Camp Taylor, KY. and journeyed back to Springfield to resume his role as owner of Henry Roberts Seafood Co.

While Henry was away for 9 months serving his country, his wife and brother-in-law managed the business back in Springfield. When Henry returned he went full force back into building his seafood business and his family. His oldest son, Henry, Jr. “Hank” was born in 1920 and second son, Dean, Sr. in 1922. Both would some day carry on the business he was building. A daughter, Marilyn, was born in 1927 and also would work in the family business.

Throughout the 1920s & 1930s, Henry Roberts began to steadily grow his retail fish & grocery market. His sales staff grew as well. In addition to his wife and brother-in-law, he began hiring many longtime and faithful employees that would work for Robert’s Fish Co. Henry was loyal to his employees, as they proved just as loyal to him. There was a trust that was always associated with Henry Robert.

V.Y. Dahlman would write in 1951 about Henry Robert: “The nobility of purpose in his life which he always expressed was a joy and inspiration... He spoke of honor among men, integrity in public as well a private business, and fundamental righteousness... Few men whom I have met in the many years of my newspaper career have impressed me with their consistent virtues as did Henry Robert. There was warmth in his friendship, joy in his companionship, inspiration in his unswerving faith in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.”
The Evolution and Innovation of Seafood Transportation

Henry Robert Fish Company had steadily grown their retail seafood business in the Springfield area over the past twenty years. Henry moved the business to its final location in his lifetime, 701 E. Washington (currently the southwest corner of the Horace Mann property). In the 1930’s and 1940’s the business took a large leap forward as Henry invested in a relatively new and risky opportunity. He heard that Birds Eye Foods, a producer of frozen foods on the east coast, was looking for a business to distribute and house their products in Central Illinois. It was at this time that Henry made the decision to invest in new refrigeration units that could accommodate this venture.

Henry would need additional equipment and employees to accomplish the goal of distributing Birds Eye products. He added the newest, state-of-the-art refrigerated trucks that could carry up to 10,000 pounds of frozen or refrigerated product. He had now created a new way to house more seafood products in his retail store, as well as a way to distribute it to many locations in Central Illinois. Business dramatically grew during this timeframe. Post-War America was also experiencing a boom in family growth, new home refrigeration units, and disposable income. With advancements in transportation and quality storage, seafood was also now more available to more people than ever. Henry Robert was on top of this business curve.

Henry Robert had come to the United States in 1906 looking for an opportunity to succeed in his own business. He fulfilled that goal over the next forty years. When he passed away on September 11, 1951, Henry’s business was delivering to grocery chains throughout Central Illinois, he had a thriving local retail seafood store, and was able to bring the freshest seafood to his customers. He invested in Springfield and they returned the favor.

In the 1940’s a friend suggested Henry was putting “too much money into the business”. Robert replied “I came from Switzerland to America a poor immigrant boy. Thanks to the people of Springfield, I have been able to develop a business here. I am indebted to the people her for what they have done for me. My money is their money, so why shouldn’t I put that money into a business in a way that will provide for the people of Springfield something better than the people of other cities have?”

Henry Roberts’ two young sons would now guide the company into the second half of the 20th century. Henry, Jr. “Hank” was only 31 years old when his father died, and Dean was only 29. In the short time they were able to work with their father, Henry Sr. taught them the key virtues that would make them successful.

The Next Generation

A Robert's Fish Co. delivery truck (c. 1950). Photo courtesy of Robert's Seafood Market

The main entrance to Robert's Fish Co. located at 701 E. Washington St. in Springfield. At night you could see the neon light lit up on the billboard with a fish jumping. Photo courtesy of Robert's Seafood Market

The Next Generation

The main entrance to Robert's Fish Co. located at 701 S. Jefferson St. in Springfield (current site of the southwest corner of the Horace Mann headquarters). From left to right: unknown employee, unknown employee, Henry "Hank" Robert, Jr., Dean Robert, Sr., and Henry Robert, Sr. Photo courtesy of Robert's Seafood Market
Robert’s Fish Company 1951 – 1977

Hank and Dean, Sr. became equal partners after their father, Henry, Sr. passed away in 1955. Hank was primarily responsible for the sales and finance departments and Dean, Sr. oversaw the purchasing, operations and retail seafood departments for the company. At this time, most of the business was still primarily retail. Robert’s Fish Co. was supplying most of the local grocery stores in Central Illinois, including such memorable, but forgotten stores as Avenue Foods, Piggly Wiggly, Castors, as well as Tolly’s in Decatur and many more. They also served most of the small retail markets in the rural areas of Central Illinois.

Robert’s Fish Co. kept adapting to an ever changing economy and the buying habits of the consumer. During the 1960’s and after college he joined the company. Hank and Dean, Sr. kept providing the highest quality seafood to Springfield and Central communities for over a quarter century. Hank and Dean, Sr. kept adapting to an ever changing economy and the buying habits of the consumer. During the 1960’s and after college he joined the company.

As the last quarter of the 20th century started Robert’s Fish Co. continued to adapt to the ever changing national and local food service/seafood business and stay ahead of the curve. In 1977, Robert’s Fish Co. officially became incorporated and renamed Robert’s Foods, Inc. As Robbie Robert stated “the name more clearly defined the business the Robert’s family had evolved into”. In 1988, Robbie Robert became President of Robert’s Foods, Inc. Between 1970 and 1990, the wholesale growth at Robert’s Foods necessitated adding more space to the existing building that more than doubled the original 14,000 square feet of space. The retail market remained in the front of the original building.

This by time grocery store sales had all but completely disappeared and the trend was moving more toward selling to more restaurant, food chains, and institutions, such as hospitals. You had to be able to sell more than just food items to be competitive in the market. Customers were looking for someone to tell them all their needs at a competitive price and value. Also, more national food service companies were becoming more dominant, while local and regional wholesale were consolidating.

By the time the new millennium started, almost $50.50 of every $1.00 a consumer spent on food was for “food away from home”, according to Robbie Robert. The social and economic changes dictated how often families were now eating a meal at home together. Disposable income was up for many Americans allowing them to select their favorite local restaurants more often, as many choices were now available. Also, in many households both parents were now working, compounded by kids’ sports schedules, and more activities outside of work. People just were not eating meals at home as often.

As the wholesale food service business continued to grow taking on new locally started businesses’ like Jimmy John’s, Charles “Mainstreet” American was slowly disappearing. Many factors contributed to this trend — convenience, location, availability, “low” pricing, etc. Some industries were hit harder than others and simply could not compete, but most local businesses were able to resonate with the customer and survive.

Returning to the Roots 2005 – 2016

In 2004, an opportunity came about. The decision was made to sell the wholesale portion of the business. As Robbie Robert officially stepped down to the national chain, Sysco. In an ever changing food service business this was the right strategic decision. Sysco originally wanted to relocate the business to Bloomington, Illinois and be more centrally located to its customer base, as well as the busy I-55 / I-74 corridor. Preference was to keep the business in Springfield to maintain all the local jobs. In the end, the new facility was built in Lincoln, which helped keep over 97% of the employee’s secure in their job. Many Rob- bert’s Fish Co. and Robert’s Foods, Inc. employees were able to remain employed and retire with their new company. This left one unknown question, what would happen to Robert’s Seafood Market, which stayed in Springfield and remained a locally owned and operated business (not sold to Sysco)? The seafood market represented less than 10% of the total Robert’s Foods, Inc. sales volume, so operationally this would be a challenge to the now stand alone business. Again, what had kept the seafood market going for 90 years was the consistency in the quality, customer service, and ability to bring the best seafood anywhere to Central Illinois. These core components that Henry Robert started in 1916 would help Rob- bert’s Seafood Market survive and grow even stronger.

The seafood market had gone full circle since 1916. Starting out as a seafood market and grocery store to a wholesale company and seafood market, and then back to a seafood market in 2005. Like Henry Robert, his grand- father, Robbie Robert chose to reinvest in the seafood market on Jefferson St and therefore in the local community.

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Foods, Inc. 1977 – 2004

By the 1990’s, many local owned grocery businesses were consolidating. At this time, most of the business was still primarily retail. Robert’s Fish Co. continued to adapt to the ever growing service/seafood business and stay ahead of the curve. In 1977, Robert’s Fish Co. officially became incorporated and renamed Robert’s Foods, Inc. As Robbie Robert stated “the name more clearly defined the business the Robert’s family had evolved into”. In 1988, Robbie Robert became President of Robert’s Foods, Inc. Between 1970 and 1990, the wholesale growth at Robert’s Foods necessitated adding more space to the existing building that more than doubled the original 14,000 square feet of space. The retail market remained in the front of the original building.

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The Future

Although there were many negatives to Robert Foods, Inc. moving away, in a way it was a blessing, as it allowed the Seafood Market to reinvent itself and come out of the shadows of the bigger wholesale business. Over the years the staff at Robert's Seafood had always had a great connection with their customer’s. It was very personalized, knowing most customers by names and what they liked. The customer was provided cooking techniques, recipes, health benefit tips, quality product at a fair price and sincere conversation. There was a genuine bond. This was the spark that helped grow the business the last ten years. As simple as it sounds, the current store has basically been rebuilt by the customer – or more accurately, what they want – be it a product, a service, a value, and quality.

Between 2006-2016, Robert’s Seafood Market has expanded its seafood selection, by adding complimentary products that allow a customer to make a complete, healthy meal for their family at a great value. The store has remodeled three times in the last 8 years as it has grown around the customers' needs and wants. With the seafood industry changing and an ever growing human population consuming more fish, Robert’s Seafood is committed to being responsible and making sure they purchase from only vendors that value sustainability, ethical seafood practices, and quality product.

On November 30th, 2016, it was announced, by the current President of the company, Robbie Robert that a new store would be built from ground up to replace the existing building. It will be built on the adjacent property to the west, already owned by Robert’s. It will incorporate all the things the customer loves about the current store and incorporate many new products and venues that will enhance the customer's shopping experience for generations to come. The Robert family, as it adds a fourth generation of family to the company, is committed to reinvesting in the Jefferson St. corridor and neighborhood, as well as the Springfield community. More details to come…
Many people have asked recently, “How does a local business survive 100 years and into its 4th generation”? It’s not a simple answer, but many positive factors must be contributed to make this possible.

**A Vision**
This was created almost without flaw by Henry Robert. He took an idea and developed it into something greater and sustainable with purpose that has been carried on through changing times by leadership of the Robert family.

**Quality Product & Vendors**
From the beginning, Robert’s Seafood has always sought to provide the best quality products, provided by ethical and trusted vendors. Satisfying the customer with a large breadth of assortment and building the store around their needs.

**Value**
Always being able to offer the highest quality at the most fair price.

**A Loyal & Knowledgeable Staff**
Robert’s Seafood/Fish Co./Robert’s Foods has been blessed to have had so many incredible employees over the last century – too many to list, but never forgotten. From selection of product to cooking preparations, the salespeople and management have always been able to personalize and instill trust to the customers’ experience.

**Most Importantly, the Customer & the Community**
Without the community of Springfield and the loyal customer base, Robert’s Seafood Market would never have achieved 100 years in business. Henry Robert built a relationship with his customers and fellow local businesses from the beginning, recognizing they were the most important component of success. Robert’s has been truly blessed by the patronage of the local community and strives each day to earn their business.

THANK YOU!

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**Henry Robert’s Legacy**

Celebrating 100 years. 1916-2016

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Henry Robert (c. 1948) on board a fishing vessel while visiting a vendor in Boston. Photos courtesy of Robert’s Seafood Market.

Dean Robert, Sr. and Robbie Robert. Photos courtesy of Robert’s Seafood Market.