

Bullish market

Youth starts gum machine business

By CAROL HASKIN

Auto executives, construction magnates and other prominent businessmen who have lately seen the bubble of their success burst in their faces may look with envy upon a local tycoon whose bubble is bullish, despite the bear market.

Ron Miller, 12, of Beverly Hills has a corner on the antique bubble gum machine market, and he's selling the fixtures as fast as he can get his hands on them.

It began last spring when Ron found an old gumball machine at a flea market. He bought it and installed it in a barber shop, doing all the servicing and splitting the profits with the shop. By the end of summer he was ready to expand his operations. Through several contacts he was finally led to a vendor who, it turns out, supplied him with the first machine.

"It goes to prove there are not that many people actually in this business," Ron said. "People have to find you if they want to buy one."

RON PUT SEVERAL more machines in different stores and got himself a lawyer to register him with the county under his new title, the Dynamic Bubble Gum Company.

By autumn, due to the interest of his parents' friends, Ron went from selling gum to selling the entire machine. So far he has sold about 50 machines to customers from New York to Chicago.

"People buy them for their homes. It's becoming popular, but still it's different."

"Some people buy them with gum in them, some say they want peanuts, and some say they can get gum cheaper elsewhere," said Ron who claimed with a shrug, "there's nothing in it for me with the gum."

What is in it for him is about a 30 per cent profit on each machine. He handles real antiques with high price tags, such as a 1904 number which he sells for \$60, and a smaller 1919 machine which goes for \$45.

His most popular models, however, are the gumball machines from the 1950s and '60s. These sell for about \$28, including the stand. Gum runs \$5-10 extra.

MOST GUMBALL MACHINE customers are young, Ron estimates that "98 per cent" of them are in their 20s. He has found that not all prospective customers are reliable so he runs his operation with a firm hand.

All customers are invited to his basement showroom following a phone appointment only. Ron is impatient with no-shows and will be stood up a maximum of three times. Then he asks the unreliable party to find an antique bubble gum machine elsewhere.

Ron needn't kow-tow to any customer, because he has more than he knows what to do with. Many think it has something to do with his sales pitch, which is based on good business sense.

"This," Ron tells prospective buyers, "is the only piece of furniture you will ever buy that will bring you your money back."

Customers can even choose between models that work with pennies and those that work with nickels.

Part of Ron's success may be traced to his family. It seems that the bubble gum business runs in the family.

IN HIS YOUTH, Ron's father, Merrill Miller, went into the gum machine business in partnership with school chum Carl Levin (Detroit Common Council president and Sander's brother). Specializing in peanut machines, they became the Meca (the first two letters of each name) Peanut Company.

After the two went away to college, the machines were stored in the Levin basement until Mrs. Levin finally tossed them out. Ron shuddered to think of the loss of nine 1940s gumball machines and a candybar machine.

WSU grant gets renewal

The Matilda R. Wilson Clinical and Research Fund of Detroit has awarded a grant renewal of \$53,000 to the Wayne State University School of Medicine for expansion of a clinical and research program in disease of the colon and rectum.

Drs. Norman Nigro of Grosse Pointe, clinical professor of general surgery, and Alexander Walt of Huntington Woods, professor and chairman of WSU's department of surgery, will serve as principal investigators for the project.

Money management course scheduled

A course in personal money management will be offered by Oakland University's Division of Continuing Education, beginning March 4.

The five-session course will be held Tuesday evenings, 7:30-9:30 p.m. Telephone registration is acceptable.



Ron Miller, 12, has quickly become a bubble gum machine tycoon. (Staff photo by Lellani Hu)

He estimated their 1975 value at over \$200.

But even without the family machines, Ron can't complain about profits. With his he has begun saving for a car for when he turns 16. He also bought a stereo, owns a motorcycle, plans to get a motorbike and skis almost every week.

Despite these expenditures, he manages to reinvest 75 per cent of his profit in his growing business. He has decided against selling stock.

"I'm getting bigger all the time, but I'm not incorporating. I've thought about it and could do it, but I'd rather keep it for myself. I'd have to keep accurate records."

RON ENJOYS being a gum machine mogul and the monetary advantage the position entails.

"A kid my age can't get a job," he said, "except as a paperboy. They put in twice as much time as I do and make the amount of money — maybe 1/2."

Mrs. Miller said that, at first, her son's occupation was a source of amusement but "meanwhile, while everyone's laughing, he's going to the bank."

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