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Owners of Five & Dime plan 10th store

Couple to open latest
branch in rival 'oldest
city' in September 2014

By Tom Sharpe
The New Mexican

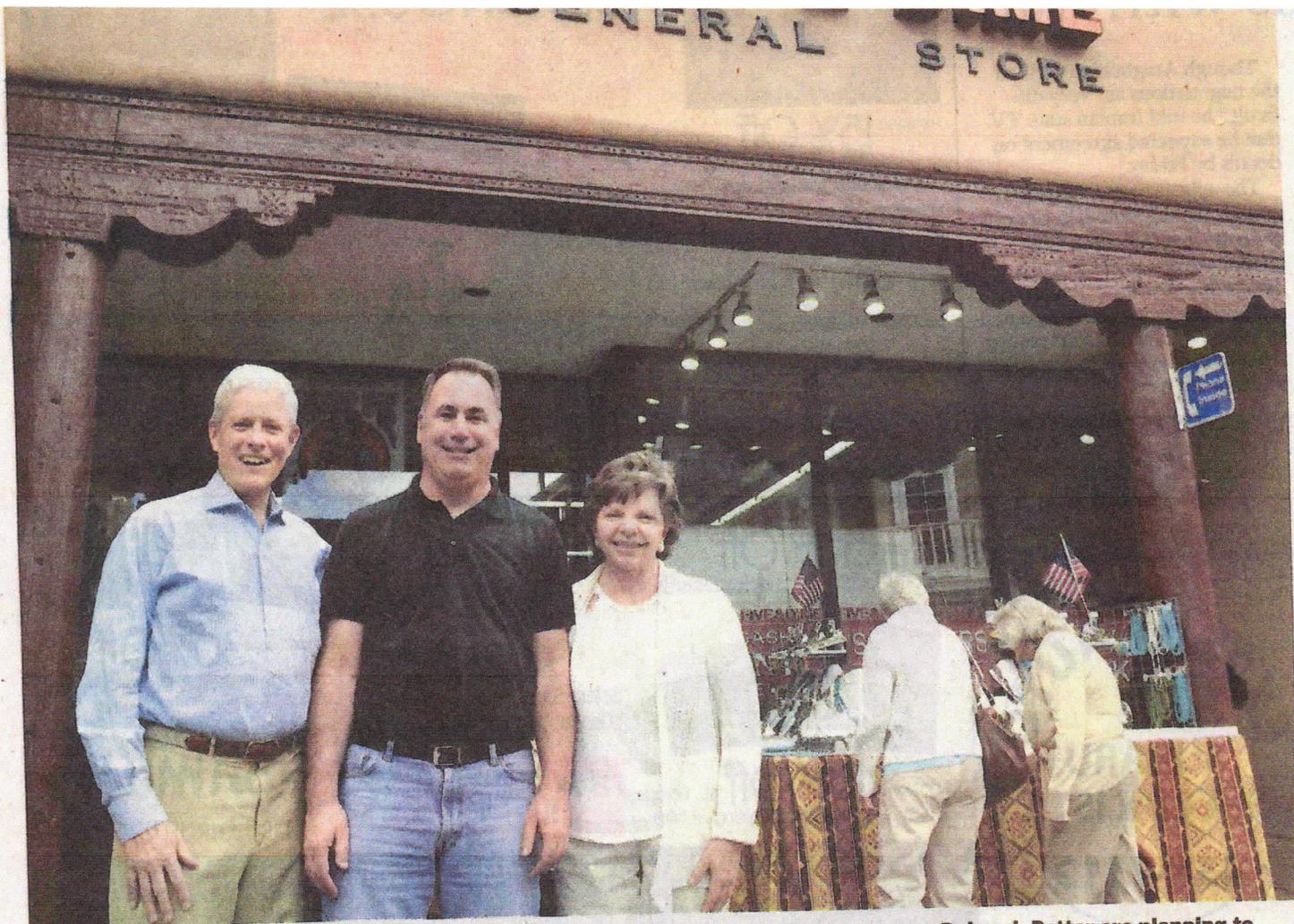
A small general store that opened on the Santa Fe Plaza 15 years ago has turned out to be the nucleus of a growing chain of such businesses in well-trafficked tourist areas around the country.

The owners of the Five & Dime General Store at 58 E. San Francisco St. aim to open their 10th store in St. Augustine, Fla., a tourist destination that has vied with Santa Fe for the title of oldest continually occupied city in the United States.

Like the Santa Fe store, the other outlets sell souvenirs, postcards, snacks and soft drinks, as well as everyday items like paper towels, extension cords, light bulbs, office supplies, makeup and toiletries that help travelers "feel at home," Five & Dime CEO Mike Collins said this week.

In 1998, Earl and Deborah Potter of Santa Fe and a group of local investors opened the Santa Fe Plaza store in a space that had been leased

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From left, Five & Dime General Store co-owner Earl Potter, CEO Mike Collins and co-owner Deborah Potter are planning to open their 10th store in St. Augustine, Fla. NEW MEXICAN FILE PHOTO

Store: Couple opened 1st branch in 2003

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as part of the site for a Woolworth's store since 1935.

In 2003, they opened their first branch on the River Walk in San Antonio, Texas. That led to a second store in San Antonio, near the Alamo, then others in Branson, Mo.; San Diego; Monterey, Calif.; and Charleston, S.C. Last March, stores opened in Savannah, Ga., and in Kansas City, Mo., at the Legends Center — which includes a NASCAR track and minor-league baseball park.

This week, the company announced it has signed a lease for its 10th store, 1078 St. George St. in San Augustine, a town of 13,000 people on the Atlantic Coast about 40 miles south of Jacksonville, Fla. A September 2014 opening is planned.

"It's right in the heart of their historic district, so we're very excited about getting it," Earl Potter said. "It took us three years of negotiations to get that spot."

Potter, a lawyer, said he's not sure if the St. Augustine store will carry the Santa Fe store's "world famous" Frito pies, which have been sold here since the 1960s. The initial effort to sell them at the first San Antonio store failed because there was so much food offered on the River Walk, he said.

But October's round of publicity — when food critic Anthony Bourdain claimed on his CNN show that the Santa Fe Frito pie was made with canned chile and then had to acknowledge that it is actually hand-made in the store's snack bar — has Potter thinking about trying the corn chip-chile-and-cheese dish in Florida.

For much of the 20th century, promoters of Santa Fe and St. Augustine carried on a friendly debate about which town is older and which has the older landmarks.

A Spanish admiral founded St. Augustine in 1565 — decades before Santa Fe's founding between 1607 and 1610, depending on your source. But Santa Fe's provenance as a Tewa settlement began centuries earlier,

as evidenced by buildings, artifacts and bodies uncovered in various excavations around town.

St. Augustine's oldest dwelling, the González-Alvarez House, is believed to date from the 1600s, easily predating Santa Fe's oldest house at 215 E. De Vargas St., believed to date from the 1700s. But the official history of Santa Fe's oldest house claims it was built on the ruins of an 800-year-old Indian dwelling — again trumping the Florida city.

Santa Fe clearly wins the oldest church contest. St. Augustine's oldest church, the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine, built in 1797, is 87 years younger than even the most recent incarnation of Santa Fe's oldest church, San Miguel Mission, first built in 1610, destroyed in 1640, rebuilt in 1645, destroyed again in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and rebuilt yet again in 1710.

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