

New Venture Easy as Frito Pie



JANE BERNARD/JOURNAL

BACK ON THE MENU: Bernice Stout, a Woolworth's employee, dishes up chile for a Frito pie Thursday afternoon.

Five & Dime Taking Woolworth's Space

BY LORI PUGH

Journal Staff Writer

Get out your plastic spoon — Frito Pies are coming back to the Plaza.

Locals and tourists alike again will be able to order the red chile, meat, Frito and cheese concoction that became synonymous with the Plaza and the soon-to-close Woolworth's five-and-dime store.

Local attorney Earl Potter, his wife Deborah, and several partners including Teresa Hernandez, who is credited with perfecting the Frito Pies, and Woolworth's manager Michael Collins said their new company — UTBW for Used To Be Woolworth's — will open the Five & Dime General Store in part of the Woolworth's building.

Thursday's announcement — made under crisp fall skies to the strains of mariachi music and next to a 20-foot-tall Frito bag full of air — was greeted with enthusiasm by Santa Feans and nearby Plaza merchants.

"I think it's a wonderful thing," said Charlie Griego, who used to eat at Woolworth's almost every day before the lunch counter closed in July. "It's a good they're doing something for the people here who don't have much money."

Griego was in line Thursday waiting for a free Frito Pie provided by the new company.

"I'm going to try to come every day I can," he said of the Five & Dime General Store, which will open in February.

The Potters and partners said their new company had signed a lease to use one-third of the Woolworth's building. The new area will have a take-out counter for ordering the famous pies.

Collins, who will manage the new store, said patrons will have to stand in line to order — there will be no wait staff.

Earl Potter said the new limited liability company plans to keep everything the same, down to the 1960s Woolworth's fixtures.

"The store will have the same fixtures ... the same lights and the

same line of products," Potter said. "We're not going to change a thing."

But Potter said the store will add two more public restrooms that will be open to everybody.

Collins and Hernandez will work in the new store.

"It's really important to have people important to the business participate in the profits," Earl Potter said.

The store plans to hire only former Woolworth's employees, Potter said. Collins said they probably will need about a dozen employees.

In July, Woolworth Corp. announced it was closing its 400 five-and-dime stores across the country. The Plaza store is expected to close in mid-October, Collins said.

That announcement sparked nostalgia attacks among Santa Feans, many of whom view Woolworth's as a symbol of the way the Plaza used to be before tourism pushed out businesses used by locals in favor of higher rent galleries and chains.

Potter said locals' patronage will play a large role in the store's success or demise.

"If the store isn't supported by everyone here, it won't stay open," he said.

Mayor Debbie Jaramillo, who used to eat at Woolworth's about once a week, said the 62-year-old store means a lot to Santa Fe.

"It's an institution," said Jaramillo, standing in front of the store. "That is a reminder of the good old days and a reminder we haven't lost everything on the Plaza."

UTBW signed a lease with Arizona resident Winifred Braden, who owns about 4,400 square feet of the building adjacent to the Plaza Bakery.

"It's wonderful they're interested in carrying on the tradition of a five-and-dime," said Braden, as she

sampled her first Frito Pie after Thursday's announcement.

The rest of the building is co-owned by art dealer and real estate investor Gerald Peters and his wife, Katie. Peters has pledged to find a tenant that would serve locals. Peters has leased the building to Woolworth's since the early 1980s for \$1,500 a year.

Peters' spokeswoman Denise Hill said she told Peters about the Potters' plans on the phone because he was out of town.

"He thought it was wonderful," Hill said.

Hill said Peters is still committed to not putting in a gallery or similar type business in the space he owns.

"We're in the midst of making very, very preliminary plans," Hill said. "Obviously, this will be a consideration that this kind of thing is being done."

Potter, who said he didn't approach Peters about cooperating on a larger five-and-dime, said he had read about some of Peters' ideas for use of his part of the building in the newspaper. He said he believes it makes sense to shrink the size of the five-and-dime store.

"I'm sure he's going to do a great job with his part of it," Potter said.

He would not release details of the 35-year lease with Braden other than to say it gives the company a break at the beginning so the store can get going.

The Potters and Collins are listed in a news release as principal owners, and additional investors are listed as Cody Potter, Teresa Hernandez, Ron and Barbara Balzer, Rick Brenner, Mary Lee and Justin Colin and Rob Higgins.