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BUSINESS AS USUAL

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ANDY JONES/STAFF

Employee Rigoberto Lopez wheels in several bags of grass fertilizer at Shell's Feed & Garden Supply recently.

A family-owned feed store founded 52 years ago thrives as second-generation management tweaks operations to capitalize on trends from organic gardening to the backyard chicken movement. Still, many Shell's Feed & Garden Supply customers savor the uniqueness of the store's sights, sounds and even smells that trigger memories of a bygone era. Since its 1961 opening, Shell's has survived sagging economies, North Tampa's urbanization and the dwindling presence of agricultural land. Greg Shell, 40, who began working at the family business at age 8, took over in 2007 as his father, Charles Shell, readied for retirement. "I spent six months talking to customers, being a floor person and clerk, re-familiarizing myself with the business," he said. "I realized the gardening department needed work" to adapt to "a whole new breed and style of gardening." A wall display that once held farming merchandise is now an array of dog products, from collars and leashes to sweaters. Shell's stocks familiar and unusual brands. And to serve gardeners who long have bought ingredients to concoct organic fertilizers, Shell last fall developed a formula now sold as a store brand. "It keeps it affordable and in one bag," he said. Other modernization is less noticeable, such as a computerized cash register and inventory system. The business Greg's father launched was a cigar-box

operation early on, lacking a cash register to hold money. Despite changes, then and now, chicken feed remains a big seller, propelled today by the growing popularity of backyard egg production. Three laying hens can produce enough eggs for a family of four, Shell points out. And chicken manure has value as fertilizer, said the Lutz resident, an avid gardener. Shell's even sells chicks and \$10 rabbits. The store regularly hires members of Chamberlain High School's Future Farmers of America, which recently honored the store for 50 years of support. Today, most of Shell's customers own dogs rather than horses. "We asked people, and they all recommended coming here," said Mechelle Oliver, 33, as she and Ian Abbott, 28, picked up a 20-pound bag of puppy feed for Abbott's 8-month-old pit bull terrier. Philip Bowers, 59, also relies on Shell's for dog supplies and appreciates "the service, the smiles. A family business is usually one of the best businesses to go to," he said. Selecting a rawhide bone, he points to the label that also scores big with him: "Made in USA." Armand Quintero, who has 4 acres with "chickens and all kinds of animals," has been a customer since Greg Shell was a child. Driving to Shell's, 9513 N. Nebraska Ave., from his Lutz farm, he passes three feed stores. "For me, it's the best. They have everything," he said. Shell said customers' unique comments about the store include one who remarked about the smell, adding, "I miss stores like this." Another man said he "always felt the store was misplaced," and a female customer called it "a time capsule." Sums up Shell: "We try to stay true to what we are. Even though we've made some changes due to necessity, we're still the same Shell's Feed, stuck in the '60s."