

Duffens Optical closes shop

1/29/2010

Workers took apart shelves and boxed up equipment Thursday at Duffens Optical, 919 E. Prescott, in Salina, marking the end of a business with ties to Salina that date back to the early 1900s.

Duplication of services by other, larger optical laboratories capable of finishing eyeglass lenses made today the final day of work for the Salina lab's seven workers, most of whom have been working for the company for 35 to 40 years. One of those employees will go to work for a Salina optometrist.

"It was a shock to us. We didn't think they'd close," said Salina optometrist Kenton Driver. "Downsize, yes, and doing more with courier stuff. But it was shocking they would close."

"They could provide work in a timely manner, and they really put quality into the work they did," added optometrist Lewis LaPierre.

Duffens, 9191 E. Prescott, processed eyeglass lenses, cutting them to fit and then inserting them into frames. Duffens also has processing labs in Kansas in Wichita, Topeka and Lenexa.

In 1996, Duffens was acquired by the corporation Essilor of America. Essilor, a French-based company, is the world's leading supplier of optical products.

Duffens had family-run roots. Jack Quinton and R.F. Duffens purchased Morgan Optical Co. of Salina in 1919, and renamed it Quinton-Duffens Optical Co.

In 1922, the Quinton-Duffens Optical Co. sold both its Salina and Pittsburgh offices to Riggs Optical Co. In 1934, they repurchased the Salina office to go with offices in Topeka and Hutchinson.

Growing the company

J.T. Quinton retired in the late 1940s and the company was renamed Duffens Optical Co. R.F. Duffens died in 1965; his sons Robert and Roy developed the business from \$3 million to \$50 million in sales through acquisitions of optical labs in Indiana, Kansas, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana.

Gene Thomas, area manager for Essilor, explained that the volume of orders to the lab had dropped. That's partly because the company's facilities in larger cities have more optometrists to draw orders from but also because the Salina lab lacked some of the expensive equipment and capabilities its larger sister labs have.

The Salina lab didn't coat or surface the polycarbonate material from which lenses today are made.

"And they have seven employees compared to our other operations where you have 40 to 50 employees," Thomas said. "But these were very good people and a very good lab."

Last Tuesday was the last day the Salina lab received orders. The last pair of eyeglasses shipped out Thursday.

Now, rely on FedEx

Driver, LaPierre, and their fellow optometrist colleagues and staff from their practices had an after-hours reception for Duffens workers this week.

"It's just a way for us to show our gratitude to them and thank them for their service for many years," LaPierre said.

Having Duffens in town was a convenience, as it enabled optometrists to get a pair of glasses fixed quickly in an emergency, he said. Now, added Driver, it's going to mean depending on FedEx and other couriers for service.

"We could provide great service to our patients because we had them here. We'll lose that ability a little bit," LaPierre said.

n Reporter David Clouston can be reached at 822-1403 or by e-mail at dclouston@salina.com.

©Salina Journal