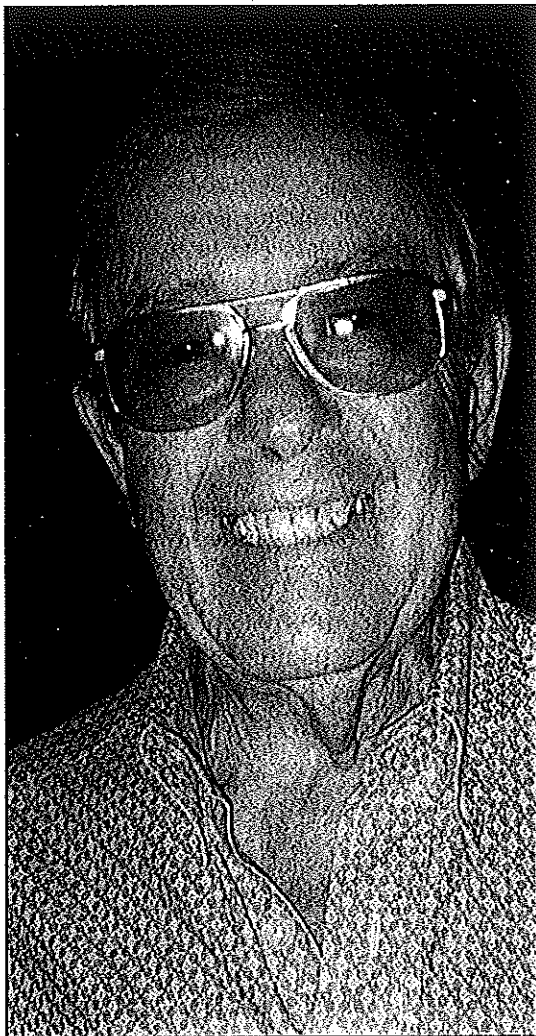


THUMBNAIL

S K E T C H

Mr. Fix-It

So. Cal. route operator Frank Rizzo got his start fixing games in hometown Chicago



Franks Rizzo moved to Carlsbad, Calif., in 1979 to retire, only to find himself operating a large street route within a few years that rivaled the one he left back in Indiana and Illinois under the guidance of his son. Moving to California had always been part of the plan, and running a successful amusement game operation had become part and parcel of his life along the way. Today, at 78, he is semi-retired, and three of his four children now help run the operation that encompasses San Diego and some of Riverside County, California.

Frank grew up in Chicago, the son of immigrant parents from Sicily. His mother died when he was young, and his dad, a railroad night watchman, raised him, along with Frank's sister and a female cousin, who is now 90 years old and still lives in Chicago. Frank got his start

in the coin-op industry by chance. He was working for a radio and appliance repair shop when the owner of a bar he frequented asked him to repair a bowling machine. "I told him I didn't know how to work on that kind of equipment, but he insisted and said, 'If you can fix radios, you can definitely fix these games,'"

Frank recalls. Before he knew, Frank was in a partnership with the bar owner and another friend fixing games and running bowling machines in bars across the West Side of Chicago. At the time, they were operating bowling machines made by companies like Chicago Coin and United Manufacturing. However, the games were later outlawed by the city of Chicago, and Frank's partners exited the business leaving him with the route.

In the early 1950s Frank moved his base of operation from Chicago to nearby Indiana, where he continued to grow his route in both Indiana and Illinois. "I remember having 215 locations in a 15 mile radius in Indiana; you could park your car and collect at a dozen stops," said Frank. "Heck, in California you're lucky to get three in a 15 mile radius. We operated a little bit of everything back then - cigarette machines, bowling games, pinballs, videos. It was lucrative." Frank's company also used to test machines for Bally, thanks in part to his old Chicago friend Stan Levin. He remembers one night in particular when a new talking game out on test began mistakenly broadcasting a local radio station through the speakers. "We called Bally right away and they came out fast - that area of Indiana is not too far from downtown Chicago," Frank laughed in recalling the incident. "They didn't want to get in trouble with the FCC for illegal broadcasting."

Before his days as an operator, Frank traveled to southern California looking for work. He didn't find any at the time, but the experience left an indelible impression on his young mind. "When I got married, I told my wife Joanne, 'One of these days I am moving to California so if you don't want to go you better not marry me,'" remembers Frank. "She

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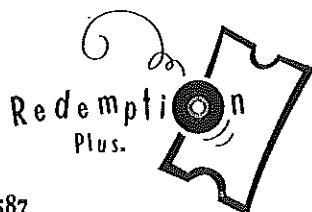
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Frank & Joanne Rizzo in a great photo snapped by Randy Fromm.

laughed and said, 'Don't worry. I will be right with you when you get ready to go.'" And go they did, more than 20 years later, ostensibly to retire. Even before he left, Frank started two arcades, one in Indio and the other in Barstow, and partnered with several industry veterans on a third in Escondido. However, a reference from industry friends Stan Levin and Ken Anderson put Frank in contact with Pizza Hut in 1979, which led to the founding of his San Marcos, Calif.-based Area Amusements. The pizza chain was looking to replace its current operator and wanted newer video equipment for its locations. "Within a few years, I wound up with 98 Pizza Huts so I brought my son out from Indiana to help run them," explains Frank, whose operation came to include stops all over southern California at one time. "We had great years when we first came out here; it was when the video was first starting to make its mark. We had a whole route of cocktail tables at the time. We did very well with them at the time." Today, Area Amusements is run by Frank along with his sons Mark and Earl and daughter Lynn. The operations employ 10 additional people and handles traditional street accounts.

Frank says the coin-op business, which he describes as "very personalized," is still little changed from when he first got his start. "The cost of machines is higher and you take less money, but you are able to nurse your machines along for a longer period of time," he says. "But there is still competition and you still have to cater to locations. It's a stable type of business that will not go away overnight. We had a fire at our office once, but we were still able to make money because our machines were out there on the route. You couldn't say the same for any kind of store or many other businesses. But this business is also too personalized and requires too much service to get too big. People have tried it and failed because it's just a nightmare to control. We had our own problems at one time with games all over, stretching all the way up to Los Angeles."

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These days, Frank comes to the office every day, and says his fun is still in working, although he doesn't recommend it to everyone. "Too much of one thing is not always good," he jokes. "I tell my kids to get out and have fun when they are done working. In my own spare time, I still pick up something that's been lying around for years and should have been thrown away and try to fix it. That's how I got started in this whole business in the first place.

People always ask, 'When are you going to retire?' When the day comes and I don't want to go to the office anymore, I won't! But I don't really see that happening any-

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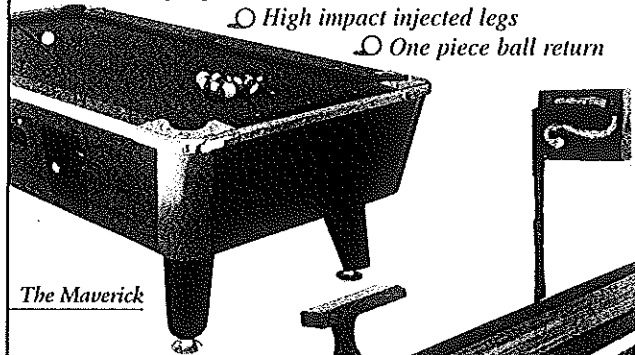
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