

# Balancing customer service and technology

by **DON LAWBY**

Picture this: From the comfort of an armchair in your Realtor's office you take a "virtual reality" tour of a property that meets the criteria of the new home you want to buy. You check out the closet space, admire the view from the sun deck, and pace out the size of the dining room to see if your furniture will fit. It's the 10th house you've viewed in the past two hours from the data bank in the Realtor's computer and you decide it's worth a visit in person.

True to the detail on the virtual tour, it's your dream home. Sitting in the den, you e-mail a conditional offer using a cell phone and your Realtor's lap top. Acceptance comes back almost immediately. Then it's back to the real estate office armchair while your broker sits down at a computer to deal with the transaction.

An application for mortgage finance is fired off, following a quick on-line search for the day's best rates; lawyers are contacted to take care of the legal issues; a home inspection company is commissioned to check out the house; municipal records are accessed to review future development plans for the neighbourhood; a moving company is booked for the date of your move; orders are placed for phones, cable and utilities; painting contractors are e-mailed and asked for quotes on redecorating work you want done before the move; insurance is secured for the house and contents so that you are covered from the minute you move in. All the time-consuming chores of moving home are taken care of in one stop. You sign a package of papers and leave with nothing more on your mind than how best to configure the furniture in your new living room.

This scenario is not a far-fetched as it may seem. Much of the technology to make it possible is already available and being implemented by progressive real estate companies across

North America. How we cope with the demands of a technologically advanced, customer-driven market is the biggest challenge facing our industry. It will determine who succeeds and who fails.

In many cases customers who will transact the first deals of the 21st century are already investigating the market. By the time they decide what to buy or sell, they are likely to be better informed and more demanding than any clients in the history of our industry. This is due largely to the technology revolution that is providing people with rapid access to vast amounts of information about real estate.

Although I believe our success will ultimately be determined by nothing more complex than old-fashioned professionalism and dedication to providing top-quality customer service, we need to complement our service orientation with technology, education, skill and financial resources.

Technology allows real estate companies to put their customers at the cutting edge of the market, but those companies must be large enough to generate the economies of scale that make the investment in technology cost effective.

It is essential to keep ahead of our customers' demands for increasingly knowledgeable real estate professionals and excellent service. Time starved buyers will increasingly demand the convenience of one-stop-service.

They will want to access a full range of services related to their home purchase through one location—their Realtors' office. These are service areas where real estate companies will be able to recover revenue when, inevitably, there is a reduction in current levels of commissions.

But these are not the only challenges facing the Canadian real estate industry. The way we are organized and the technologies we share are crying out for change.

For a start, we need an MLS system that allows Realtors in any part of the country to provide their customers with the information they need on any region in Canada. Currently, there are a number of databases for listings in different regions.

This means, for example, a Realtor in Halifax cannot easily access the database of information on the Calgary market. This undermines our objective to provide the quick and efficient service that customers expect. We need a single MLS database providing quick and efficient access to information.

It's also time that organized real estate in Canada became truly organized and not split between rival associations, each fighting to protect its own territory. This duplication, coupled with an excess of real estate boards, contributes to a cost spiral that the industry simply cannot afford, and which contributes nothing to the quality of service we provide to our customers.

In summary, it's time for positive change. It's time to achieve the right balance between customer service and technology, and it's time to create the industry infrastructure that will allow us to flourish and prosper.

## Sponsors are desperately needed

By **Kirsten Nielsen**

(NC)—I'm at ground zero, capturing CCFC's first steps at two new development projects in Northern Ghana for the new CCFC television show. This is when the situation is most dire - before sponsorship makes a difference.

The poverty here is more oppressive than the heat. Many children are refugees from ethnic conflict. What school facilities they have are extremely primitive. There are no textbooks, pencils or books. At the first project, in Zogu, the school roof is collapsing. At the second project in Gumani, there is no roof. In fact, there is no latrine. (Children are forced to relieve themselves in an overgrown field infested with snakes. Many are bitten.)

For now there is no safe

drinking water anywhere in the village. At any one time up to a third of the children are infected with Guinea worm:

a parasite that lays eggs in the river. When a person drinks the water, the eggs hatch and the parasite grows inside the body for up to 9 months. Worms grow as long as 2 feet. Watching a worm exit the body is horrific. The parasite infestation is so great, many doctors and nurses refuse to work here. Exit wounds frequently go untreated and become infected.

Everywhere I look I see suffering. But after overcoming the shock of such abject poverty, I soon begin to see something else too. Hope. Clean,




Christian Children's Fund of Canada

safe drinking water will end the Guinea worm infestation. A simple latrine will prevent snake bites. And children

are desperate to learn. When I asked 10 year old Rafiah why getting a proper school room with books and supplies was important to her, she replied, "So I can be somebody."

I know the children and their families will work hard to escape poverty. All they need is a few dollars a month to help them get some safe water, basic medical supplies, and the school materials they need to learn. Will you be the one to make a difference for them?

- News Canada









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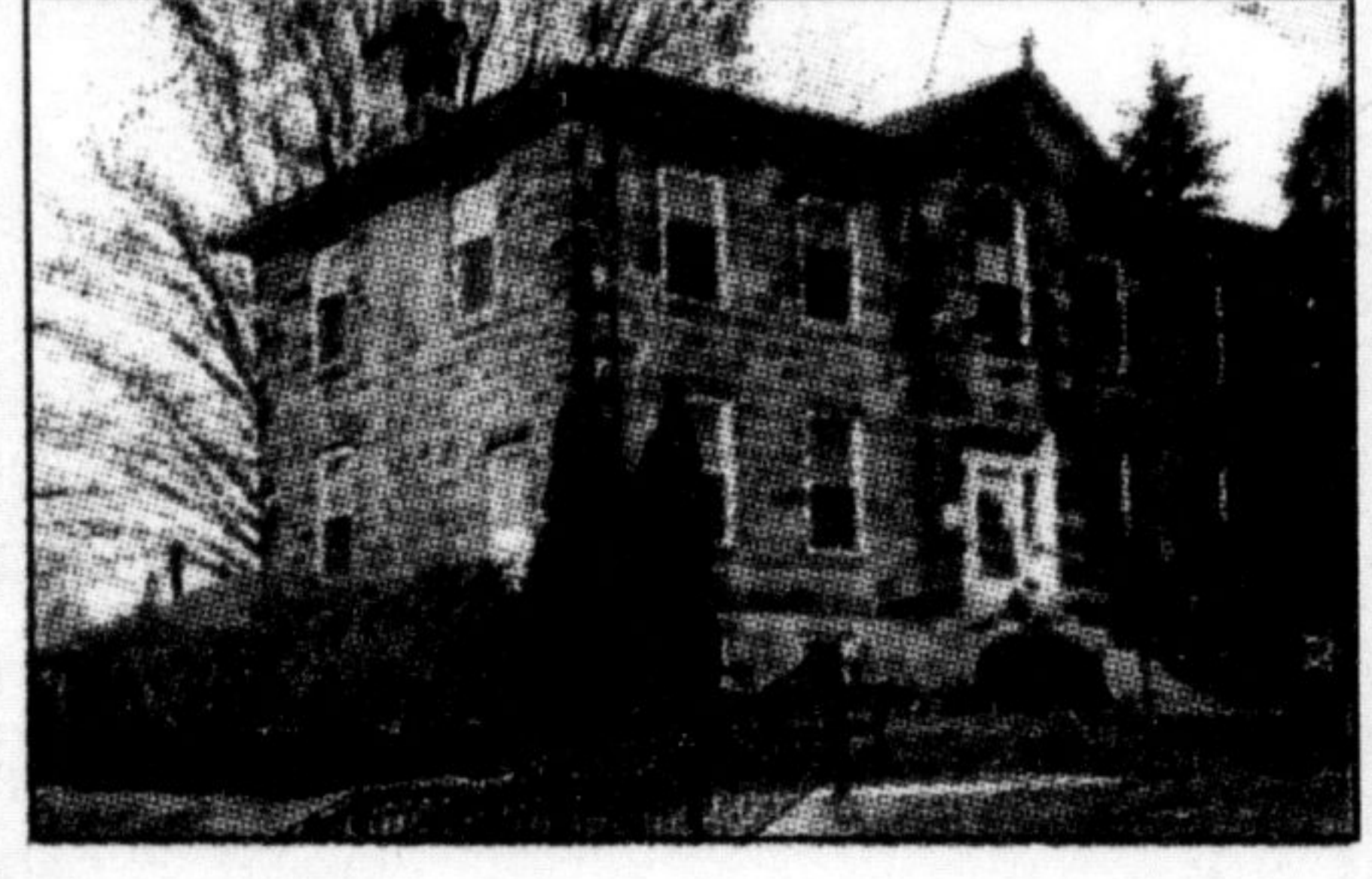
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**GREAT LOCATION**



This historic Georgian style home is located on a beautiful setting at the north side of the Mill Pond. It's solid stone construction, oak floors and antique fixtures must be seen to be appreciated. Call James or Tony for your private tour. \$289,900.


**WHY RENT**

**SOLD For 98%**

**\$139,900**

Stunning 3 bdrm townhouse in one of Milton's finest complexes. Converted to gas heating system, loaded with upgrades, see it to believe it!! Call Mickey for more info!!

**\$219,000**



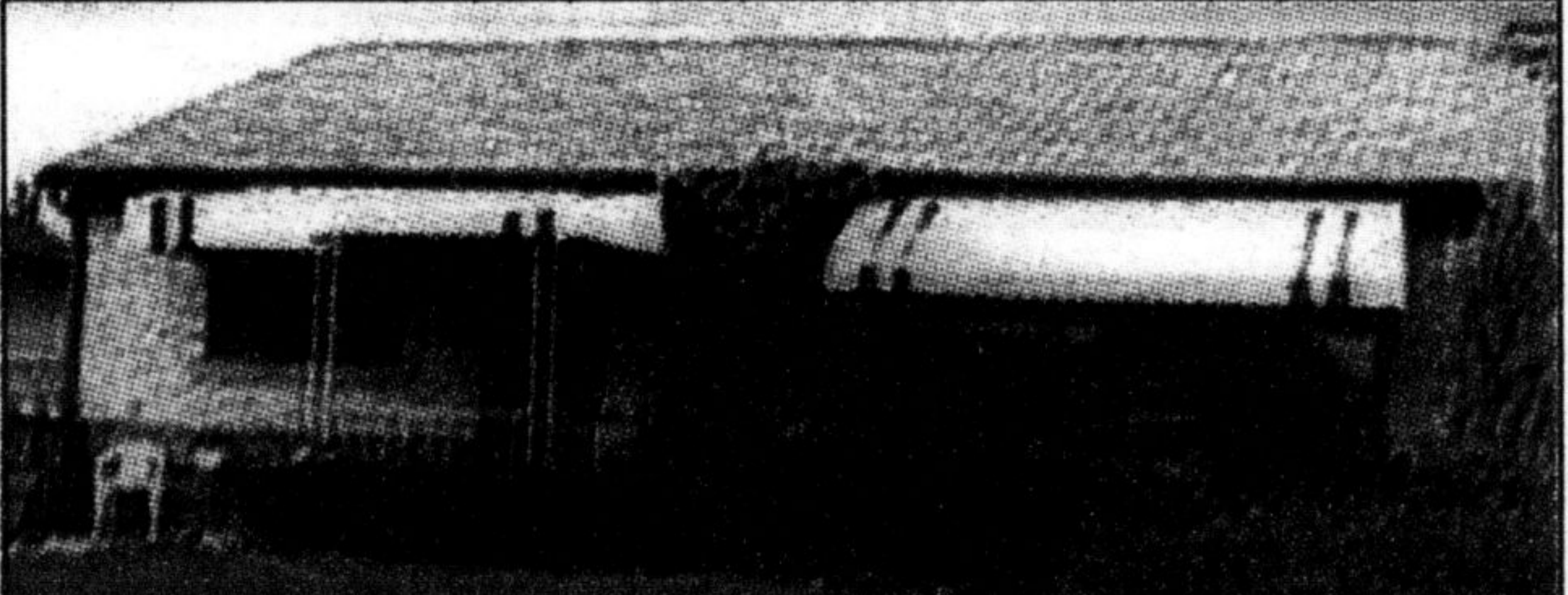
Four bedroom split level, features equipped pool, eat-in kitchen, oak kitchen cabinetry, and main floor family room. This lovely home has new carpeting and separate entrance. Call Joe for more details.

**ELEGANT VICTORIAN**



At an excellent location in town, this .52 acre estate could be your dream home. You will love the grand design, huge principal rooms and beautiful front foyer. This property also offers nanny/maid quarters and a triple car garage. Call James. \$379,000


**WHY RENT**



Great home at a great price. Features full in-law 1 bedroom suite self-contained in basement, main floor has 3 bedrooms, new windows, new side door, eat-in kitchen. 10++, must be seen. Call Tony Vidiri. \$175,900.


**Great detached raised bungalow in high demand area, 4 bedrooms, 2 fireplaces, must be seen. Call Domenic Manchisi for an appointment. \$299,900.00.**

**COUNTRY BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY**



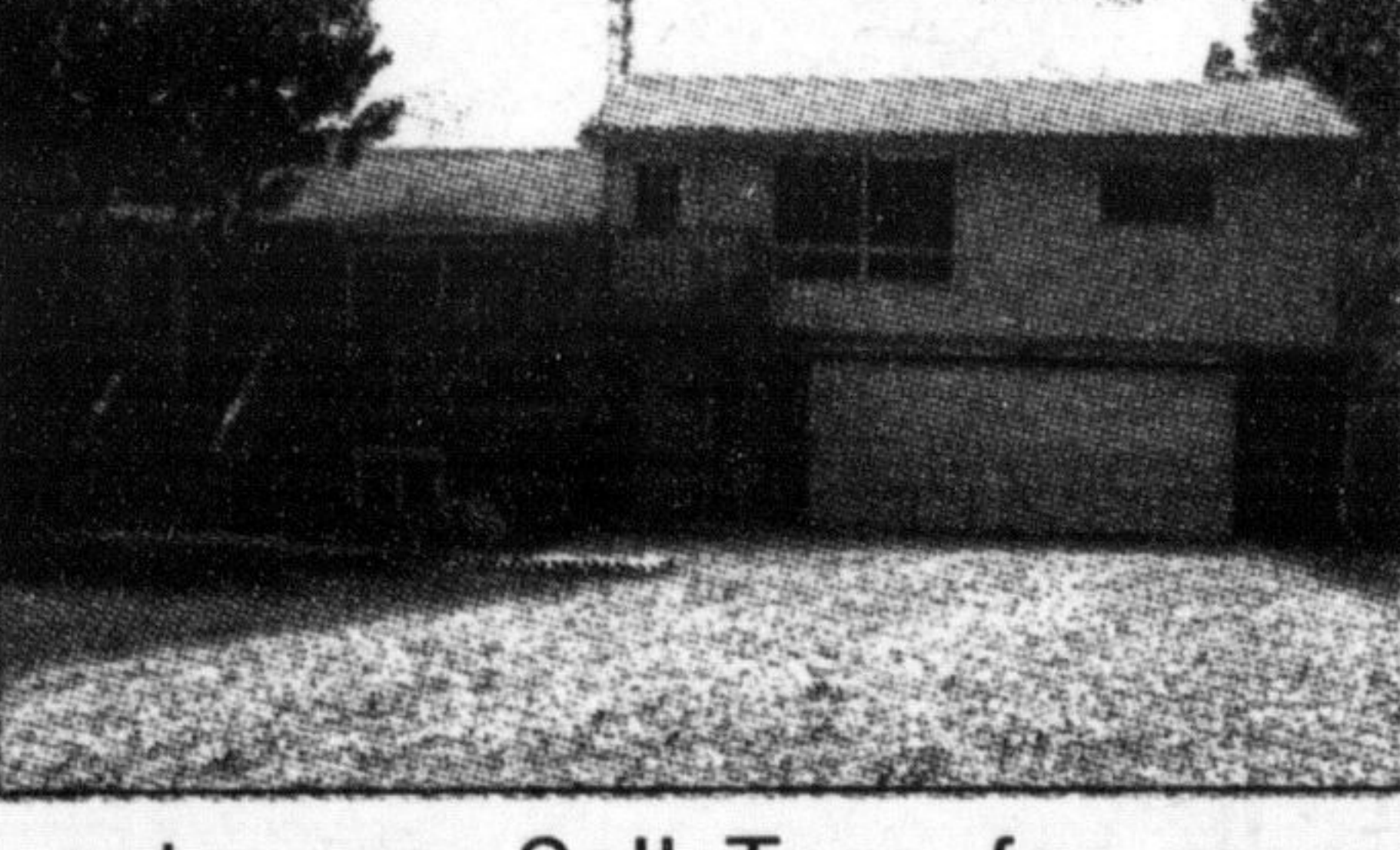
Store with apartment on second floor. Retail area is equipped with walk-in freezer, commercial sink and shelving in kitchen area, 200 amp upgrade, alarm system, 1 pc. washroom in shop area. Well has been upgraded. Three bedroom apartment features 5 pc. bath, family room and more. Call Domenic or Joe for more info. \$199,900.

**INDUSTRIAL UNITS FOR SALE**




Main Street location, grade level door, \$79,900 Call James Snow or Joe Manchisi.

**INCOME POTENTIAL**



Rural property on one acre of land. Finished basement with separate entrance. Call Tony for more details. \$279,900

**WHY RENT**



No down payment, no problem! Call Tony Vidiri for more details. 3 bedroom townhouse in a nice complex. \$125,900.