

The Gossett Company

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The Gossett Company: 156 years of community service

By Ron Coffey

After 156 years, the saga of Highland County's oldest continuously operating business came to an end in the spring of 1997.

Following a close-out sale that began April 3 and attracted huge crowds interested in bargains and hard-to-find items, the inventory of the Gossett Company dwindled to almost nothing. The Greenfield business, which was born in 1841 and maintained an excellent reputation for service over all those years, finally closed its doors on June 7, 1997.

The people of Greenfield and surrounding area depended on Gossett's for their business and book needs through major wars, the Great Depression and countless changes in American lifestyles. Whether they needed religious materials for Vacation Bible School, an emergency repair of a typewriter, or just a pencil and some Post-It Notes, Gossett's was there to meet the need. Many a faithful reader of the *Highland County Magazine* has purchased his copy in the friendly environment of the Gossett Company.

Gossett's always seemed to have that hard-to-find item. For example, in April, Judge Robert J. Judkins of the Highland County Court needed a gavel for his courtroom. Where do you look for a gavel in Greenfield? Fortunately, Gossett's was still open for business. In a few minutes the judge had a new gavel!

In recent decades, shopping patterns have changed and many people go out of town to make their purchases from big discount stores. Increasingly unrealistic demands from suppliers, coupled with the fact that he had been running the business for the past 42 years, finally caused owner Thad Gossett to arrive at the fateful decision to close the business.

The store may be gone, but the memories remain. The Gossett Company is a part of Highland County history, and the *Highland County Magazine* is proud to recount the story of this Methuselah of county businesses.

The company founder

The story of the Gossett Company dates back to 1840, when Nathaniel M. Pike, a native of Litchfield, Maine, set forth to make his mark in the world. Pike had apprenticed as a hatter and furrier. He traveled to New York City and found work, but after just a few weeks decided to travel on to the Philadelphia area, where he worked at a hat shop in Chester. After several months, Pike traveled westward by stagecoach to Parkersburg, West Virginia and secured passage on an

Ohio River boat bound for Ripley, Ohio. Pike found his way to New Petersburg and began working at a hat shop owned by Squire Stevenson.

Apparently eager to own his own business, Pike moved to Greenfield in 1841 and erected a building at 207 Jefferson Street. In those days much of the city's business district was located on the east end of town close to Paint Creek. The young businessman made men's hats in the frame structure on the rear of the property.

Not needing all the space in the front store room, Pike rented a portion of the building to David Bonner, who operated a book store there. Bonner sold books and stationery for 43 years, until he decided to move West in 1884. At that time Pike purchased Bonner's inventory and continued the business of selling books and related items.

Pike eventually stopped making hats, preferring to sell models made by larger firms. He continued to handle the line of books, news and stationery items, and moved the business "up the hill" to 305 Jefferson Street on March 4, 1884, where it remained until this year. Pike soon closed out his stock of hats and began selling wallpaper and other merchandise.

As Greenfield grew and prospered, so did the Book Store. In 1884 Pike's son Stanley became associated with the business and continued with the business for 32 years.

Harley Gossett enters the picture

Around 1905, a young man named Harley Gossett was hired as a clerk for the Book Store and spent eight years there before leaving in 1913 to operate a shoe store at 329 Jefferson Street. Gossett returned to the book business in 1916 when he purchased the Book Store from the Pike family. The name of the business was changed to the Gossett Book Store, and the energetic and enthusiastic Gossett found great success as he promoted the business.

Gossett had a Model-A Ford with a sign on the back which said "Driven By A Blind Man." Folks who didn't know he was in the wallpaper and blind business probably steered clear of the driver!

As a charter member and former president of the Greenfield Chamber of Commerce, Harley Gossett worked to improve the business climate in Greenfield. His business thrived in the boom times of the 1920s, and survived the bleakness of the Great Depression.

The 1940s saw the coming of World War II, and more tough times with shortages of many supplies, ceiling prices, rationing. Through it all, Harley

Gossett continued to run a successful business and at the same time raise a family that included sons Thad and Wallace and daughter Wilma.

For a time the Gossett family operated a book store in Hillsboro. Gossett purchased the Bowles Book Store in 1948. The store, which had been established in 1852, was operated by the Gossett family until 1951 when they sold it.

In 1953, Gossett built a building behind the store to connect a warehouse and the building at 112 N. Washington Street.

Second generation of Gossetts

By 1955, Harley Gossett had spent 47 years with the book store as owner or clerk, and he decided it was time to slow down a little. That year his sons Thad and Wallace bought out the shares of their father Harley and their sister Wilma. Harley continued some activity in the business until his death in 1971 and Wilma served as an employee until the business closed in 1997.

In 1956 Thad took over the business when his brother Wallace accepted a position as director of the Greene Vocational School near Xenia.

A new line of religious books and supplies was added in 1962 when Gossett bought a religious book store from James Shady.

The business continued to expand in the 1960s. The front of the store was remodeled in 1964, and two years later Gossett purchased the building at 116 N. Washington Street. At that time Gossett's moved out of a smaller property at 112 N. Washington.

Expansion continued in the 1970s. The building at 305 Jefferson Street was purchased in 1975, and a year later the company acquired 118 and 120 N. Washington.

In 1991, the Gossett Company celebrated 150 years in business in Greenfield. "I have seen the store grow to over twice the floor space," Thad Gossett commented at the time. "Inventory has increased several times over, and the taxes have increased more than several times over." Gossett attributed the success of the business to hard work and the support of community, school and church projects. Much of the credit has been due to the service orientation of the employees. "Gossett's has been blessed with great employees, both past and present. Many have stayed on for several years of service and contributed greatly to the business."

Finally, Gossett expressed his thanks to the community for its support these past 156 years. "You are what has made it possible for the Pike-Gossett store to stay in operation for all these years."

Farewell Gossett Company

County's oldest business to close after 156 years

By KRIS CROSS
Times-Gazette Greenfield Editor

The chime of bells above the door offers a cheery welcome; the smell inside is musty and familiar: the rows of cards and books and pencils are lined up like well-behaved schoolchildren. Walking into Gossett's Book Store is like coming home.

For years, Gossett's has been a Greenfield institution, as much a part of the town as the courthouse or the school or the churches. In fact, it precedes most of them: As a continuously operating business, Gossett's maintains the distinction of being the oldest in Highland County.

And now, after 156 years of business, the store is closing its doors.

"It's just not going to be Greenfield without Gossett's," many customers have lamented to co-owners Thad Gossett and Wilma

Gossett Everhart.

Thad and Wilma have been overseeing the store's operation since their father, Harley Gossett, retired in 1955. They, along with their brother Wallace, grew up in the atmosphere of the small-town

bookstore. Times were much different than they are now.

Thad recalls a time when the store stayed open until 11 p.m. on Saturdays, which was the shopping day for the town and surrounding communities. The main core of shoppers would arrive at about 9 p.m., shopping and visiting until the store's closing time.

"We had to lock the door at 11 p.m. and let the customers out one by one," Thad remembers. "Half the week's shopping was done on Saturday."

But times have changed and people are more likely to travel to bigger cities for their shopping.

Thad is quick to point out, however, that the lack of customers didn't close Gossett's; it was more the



W/S Cross/Times-Gazette

Thad Gossett and Wilma Gossett Everhart have operated The Gossett Company Book Store since their father, Harley Gossett, retired in 1955. The storefront was remodeled (photos at left) in 1964 after the plate glass window had been shattered.

demands placed on his store by suppliers.

After deciding to close the business, Thad and Wilma brought in outside help to sell the remaining inventory. On April 3, the first day of the store's "Going out of Business" sale, 625 customers walked through Gossett's doors to shop, to visit, to wish the Gossett family well. Nearly a month has

passed and Thad still counts between 100 to 150 customers per day.

Although Thad and Wilma had decided on a closing date of May 24, they have chosen to extend that date by two weeks. The store officially will close June 7.

Both say they look forward to getting some rest after the closing; the past few weeks have been quite busy. Camping, traveling and work-

ing around the house also are listed on the siblings' retirement agendas.

Just what does it take for a business to remain open for as long as Gossett's? Thad attributes that success to "the personal service we tried to extend to our customers." And, of course, the customers. "We sure appreciate the people of this

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town; they've been very good to us," says Thad. "We wouldn't have been here this long without them."

HISTORY OF THE GOSSETT COMPANY BOOK STORE

In 1841, Nathaniel M. Pike established a hat-making shop in a building he erected at 207 Jefferson St. in Greenfield. Within a short time, he bought out a news and stationery store operated by David Bonner in the same location.

Pike conducted the two businesses for a number of years. He gradually devoted more time and attention to the book shop, which eventually superseded his hat-making and took its place among the leading retail establishments of the growing village.

PIKE ARRIVES IN OHIO

Pike was a native of Litchfield, Maine, a small town near Augusta. As a lad, he was apprenticed to a hatter and furrier. After serving his apprenticeship, he went to New York City to work, but after only a few weeks there, he went on to Philadelphia and secured work in a hat shop at Chester. He remained there for several months.

He then traveled westward to Ohio by stage coach over the mountains to Parkersburg on the Ohio River. He then took passage on a boat and disembarked at Ripley, Ohio. From there, he went to New Petersburg and obtained employment in a hat shop owned by Squire Stevenson. He always referred to Stevenson as "a very estimable man."

HAT-MAKING SHOP OPENS IN GREENFIELD

A few months later, Pike came to Greenfield and established his own hat-making shop in 1841. He erected the building at 207 Jefferson St., now occupied by —. Pike carried on the business of making men's hats in the frame structure in the rear.

Not needing all the space in the front store room, Pike rented a portion of it to David Bonner for selling newspapers, books and stationery. Bonner operated the book store for 43 years.

When Bonner decided to go west in 1884, Pike purchased his stock and continued that business in conjunction with making hats.

As the large hat manufacturer gradually superseded the small local shop, Pike discontinued that endeavor and bought his men's hats from factories. He continued to handle the line of books, news



John Wend/Times-Gazette

□ A crowd gathered outside Gossett's on the first day of its "Going out of Business" sale. More than 655 customers visited the store that day.

and stationery in the same location.

Pike maintained his business at the same location for four decades, a period during which Greenfield enjoyed a considerable growth.

GOSSETT BUYS STORE IN 1916

With the business district gradually moving "up the hill" and centering around the public square, Pike rented the room at 305 Jefferson St. from Mrs. I.T. Robinson, who had moved her dry goods business into the newly-built storeroom on the northwest corner of Jefferson and Washington streets. Pike's stock was moved into the new location on March 4, 1884. Soon the stock of hats was closed out; wallpaper and other merchandise was added to the inventory. That same year, Pike's son Stanley became associated with the business, which he continued for 32 years.

In 1916, Pike sold the business to Harley Gossett, a former clerk who had been employed with the business for eight years. Gossett had operated a shoe store at 329 Jefferson St. until that time. He changed the name of the business from the Book Store to Gossett Book Store. A charter member and former president of the Greenfield Chamber of Commerce, he continued to operate the business for the next 39 years. Gossett was familiar with the stationery business; his mother, Letitia Bryan Gossett, ran a stationery store in conjunction with her millinery shop in Rainsboro.

The business continued to grow;

it survived the Great Depression and World War II's rationing, ceiling prices and shortages.

In 1948, the Gossett family purchased the Bowles Book Store in Hillsboro, a store that had been established in 1852. In 1951, the Gossetts sold the store.

A building was constructed behind 305 Jefferson St. in 1953 to connect a warehouse and the building at 112 North Washington St.

SECOND GENERATION RUNS BUSINESS

Gossett received valuable help from his children: Thad, Wallace and Wilma. In 1955, Thad and Wallace bought out Harvey and Wilma. That same year, Harvey retired, but he continued some activity in the business until his death in 1971.

Thad and Wilma (Gossett) Everhart have run the business up to the present. Wallace worked as director of the Greene Vocational School near Xenia.

Several expansions and relocations were to follow. In 1964, the front of the building was remodeled after the glass had been kicked out. Two years later, the Gossett family purchased 116 North Washington St. and moved their inventory out of 112 North Washington St. The new location was larger and allowed access to the alley. In 1975, the Gossetts bought the 305 Jefferson St. building from the Pike estate. The following year, 118 and 120 North Washington St. were purchased from Leesburg Federal after the bank moved to the corner lot.