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Down At The Store

by
Diane Ellis

For a good part of my first visit to Huntsville as a prospective future resident, I traveled back and forth between motel and conference center and all I saw was University Drive—lots of motels, an excess of fast food restaurants, awful traffic. It didn't look good. I began to worry about the soul of the place. Eventually someone offered to show me more of Huntsville, and so we headed downtown. We wound around the courthouse, parked near the square, and went into Harrison Brothers. By the time I walked to the back of the hardware side, I felt a wonderful sense of relief as I thought, "Everything's going to be all right."

If you've spent any time at Harrison Brothers, you know what I mean. Without getting mystical about it, I think most people who know the store would agree that a lot more goes on there than the sale of goods. There's the fellowship of the volunteers and the special sense of community shared by everyone who's worked in some way to make the store a success. There's the pleasure of keeping alive and useful, something that is old and meaningful. And, there's the enjoyment of meeting people from all over the world who visit the store and are glad they did.

As Pat Ryan, a store volunteer, says, "It's different from anything." The polite but *pro forma* "How are you doing today?" exchanged with sales people at big stores becomes, at Harrison Brothers, a genuine desire to connect with another person in a different time frame at a different speed.

The store has been owned and operated by Historic Huntsville Foundation for ten years and is currently co-managed by Aggie Carter and Wanda Carlen, with assistance from Jean Wasson (B.J. says she's the "right-hand man") and

Stephanie Williamson, a high school student who just came aboard in September. Volunteers staff the store.

Aggie was the store's first manager when it reopened, and she managed it by herself for three years. The Foundation had only \$3,000 to start the business. Since Aggie still had accounts with vendors from her days as owner of the general store in Mooresville and later Huntsville, she did some ordering from her old sources. Stock on hand included granite wear, cast-iron cookware, horse shoes, stove pipe, lamp parts, coal buckets, nails, knives, and some kitchen gadgets. The store still sells many of these items.

As news about plans to reopen the store got around, volunteers signed on to clean up and decide exactly what to save and what to sell. Since Aggie knew something about antiques, she knew what to keep. The clean-up crew dusted off the treasures and put them up high for safe display. The Harrison brother's idiosyncratic merchandising habits were evident: "On the hardware side of the store," Aggie remembers, "the lower shelves were full of old newspapers. When the Harrison brothers finished their newspapers they just shoved 'em in the shelves. But if you wanted, say, a toilet plunger, you had to get the ladder—all the merchandise was on the hard-to-get-to upper levels."

Day in and day out for a full six weeks, volunteers cleaned, sorted, dusted, and arranged while new inventory was coming in. A new layer of store lore and legend began to accumulate.

Charlotte Wallace was an early volunteer who came in to help with inventory and clean up. At some point, she was asked to clean the restroom. The place was a mess—corroded pipes, filthy baseboard, dirty everything. Charlotte tied up her hair, grabbed something sharp and proceeded to spend hours chipping away at the dirt ("I love a challenge"). After a day or more of working away on the toilet bowl, she had the room in pretty good shape.

There was a door on the other side of the little room that everyone thought led to a staircase to the balcony. Charlotte says that when she opened that door, “my feathers fell.” It was another bathroom, as dirty as the first one. “I drew the line! We never used that room and eventually they took out the toilet.” (Charlotte’s indomitable spirit earned her a special Survivor of the Decade award at the Volunteers’ Picnic last summer.)

Many volunteers and staff knew the store from the old days when the Harrison brothers operated it. Co-manager Wanda Carlen was the store’s first volunteer when it reopened in 1984. She had an interest in the store from visits there with her father and grandfather. She remembers a hot summer day when a friend of hers was about to leave town on vacation and had to have a last-minute item for Harrison Brothers. The woman drove downtown, finally found a place to park, and ran up to the store only to find the door closed and locked and bearing a sign that said simply “Too hot.”

One of the brothers once took Wanda’s husband to the back of the store to see those infamous X-rated frogs. The frogs were a novelty item in a shipment of cast-iron cookware, and the brothers called them “our little paperweights.” The store continues to carry these “novelties.” “People do buy them,” says Wanda, “sometimes in pairs ”

Volunteer Wally Reynolds shopped at the store in the Harrison brothers era and liked to check out the store windows regularly to see what new merchandise was in. Wally and a friend, John Cotten, were acolyte masters at the Episcopal Church of the Nativity and were in the habit of getting the servers started at the first service every Sunday, then slipping out of the church. After this happened several times, Fr. Joffrion decided to follow them to see where they went. He found them down at Harrison Brothers, checking out new goods in the storefront windows.

Cyrial Breece has volunteered at the store for 10 years. She’d been with the B. F. Goodrich store in Florence and

moved to Huntsville years ago with the Goodrich store. She had retail experience—"Grew up in merchandising"—and used to bring a sack lunch to Harrison's and eat by the coal burning stove (still there) and chat with the brothers.

Libby Brown once met a woman who had lived next door to a man whose job it was to take a boat and paddle about through the springs underneath the courthouse to see if everything was okay.

Pat Ryan remembers the brothers' insistence on wrapping and carrying purchases out the door and to the cars of customers, no matter how able the customers were to do this themselves. Pat bought clay pots at the store, and as a girl in her 20's, she felt silly having a 70-year old man carrying pots to her car parked in a garage blocks away. "At lease let me carry the drain," she remembers saying. "No, ma'am," was the reply.

Connections with people and the past are part of every store volunteer's experience. Jewell and Wally Reynolds' most heard comment is "Oh, I haven't seen one of these since ..." Wally remembers a man coming in to buy a doorbell. The customer told Wally that "This is probably where the one I'm replacing came from." Wally says people come back to Huntsville, visit the store and "provide answers to what went on here." "We're constantly hearing new tales," adds Jewell.

Bob Dobbins, who enjoys working at the store in part because "It's a lesson in history," had a customer tell him he'd last been in the store 40 years earlier. (He told Bob the store "seems to be cleaner than it was.")

Doris Robinson met a woman from her hometown in Pennsylvania who knew her family. Cliff Brantner met a customer from Hawaii who knew someone Cliff had been in the army with. When Janie Tanton's son married an English girl, Janie wanted to take a special gift to the girl's mother. She chose those musical cotton bales that play "Dixie." Her son's new mother-in-law loved them, and now winds one up

and lets it play for telephone callers if she has to leave the telephone for a moment.

Wanda remembers a volunteer waiting on customers from Georgia who mentioned having a dog that just outgrew them. The conversation continued and the volunteer ended up arranging a meeting and adopting the dog. The dog's name was changed to "Harrison."

The "spiritual" connections with other people and another time that are so rewarding for the volunteers and staff, take place in a very material setting, an old building chock full of aging artifacts and unique new items that are hard to resist. Harrison Brothers preserves the past, but the store is a modern business. Joanne Burchfield says the best part of working at Harrison Brothers is "shopping there." Jewell Reynolds says people come to the store because "we have things you can't find other places." Billie Moak calls it "one of the most unusual shopping places in Huntsville." Carlene Elod offers "a big salute to the co-managers who get great merchandise and do great window displays."

The "most unusual" category of items in the store includes the bored-well bucket, which few people are able to identify, and a special post hole digger. Aggie says people love the nostalgia items—cast-iron kettles, farm bells, popcorn poppers. The store does a lot of special orders through "want cards." B. J. Robinson, head of the store's Management Committee and a regular volunteer on Saturdays, gets many requests to buy items that aren't for sale. "Oh, I've got to have that to complete my ..." is a common appeal. Cliff Brantner (who claims he started volunteering because he wanted to look in all the drawers) sees a fellow who comes in regularly to try to buy the Coca-Cola clock. Jean Wasson remembers a woman coming in the store on Trade Day, seeing a new ice cream freezer on the floor and saying it "looks like it's hardly been used."

The 1903 cash register always delights customers. Bob Dobbins: "A lot of people look at the cash register and say,

‘Well, I’ve never seen anything like that before,’ and I say, ‘That’s right, and if you buy something I’ll show you how it works!’”

Not long ago, a navy admiral passed by the store late one afternoon and spotted the apple press in the window. He returned the next day, keeping his plane waiting two hours, and while his driver chatted with the staff, the admiral bought the apple press for his wife to use in their small orchard.

When I was last in the store, I saw a gentleman and his wife come around the corner from the hardware side to the gift side. They looked at the hat on the Harrison brothers’ desk, and I heard the man say, “That old black hat there looks like Granddaddy Whiteside.” There’s a line waiting for a story.

Harrison Brothers’ success is a triumph of imagination, determination, and work, a real preservation coup. Aggie said when the Foundation bought the store, they were told it was “the first nationwide preservation effort to run as a business.” It is thrilling now to be honored by the National Trust as one of only a few recognized successful preservation projects undertaken since 1980—up there with the big boys like the Biltmore Estate and San Francisco’s Palace Hotel.

If you want to join this wonderful family and be a little part of history, call the store and sign up. You don’t have to have lived a lot of history to love Harrison Brothers. Our newest staff person, Stephanie Williamson (“Old stuff fascinates me”) is only sixteen. Stephanie likes “the fact that it’s cluttered.” Me too.