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B. J. Robinson

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HARRISON BROTHERS TRIVIA

A Photo Essay

by
B. J. Robinson

The volunteer's motto:

"If you can't find it at Harrison's, you probably didn't need it!"

Store Traditions:

- a. Brass numerals on the floor (1 to 16, some missing, attached in 1-yard increments, used for rope, chain, patio screening, etc. measurements). Lengths of chain, by the way, are cut with bolt cutters kept handy for the purpose. I've never had to cut chain, but I have stretched out about 40 yards of old metal window screening for someone's Florida room. The aisle on the hardware side is *almost* wide enough to lay it flat. And I cut it with tin snips.



- b. X-rated Frogs! Apparently a store tradition, and anatomically correct (if frogs were people). The manager found a supplier, and we keep them in stock at all times. Good sellers; dandy paperweights! Customers who ask about them are confirmed first to be over 21.

c. Memorabilia:

1. Restoring old advertising signs and prints; protecting them under glass with acid free backing. Displayed on the gifts side and at the back of the store.



2. Small paper sack half-filled, rolled, tied with string and carefully labeled "SAWDUST." A prized discovery by the Memorabilia Committee.



3. Carefully airbrushed nudie mags from the 30's (such naughty men!).

4. Every insurance policy, utility/telephone bill, invoice, trade journal, bill of sale, etc. since FOREVER.



5. Whiskey bottles stashed here and there. Empty and not. The boys tipped a bit, and probably during store hours!

- d. Clock over the old desk: 1910 Ingraham 35" time-only wall clock restored/cleaned and now wound regularly; a Coca-Cola advertiser model and a valuable addition to the store. Keeps great time, if I do say so myself. But then I'm the one who restored it ...





- e. Coal-burning stove, still used in the winter with donated fuel. If a volunteer can light the thing and keep it going, he/she has arrived!

f. Muscle-powered elevator, still utile, although repairs were necessary this spring after inadvertent damage by another organization. I won't go near the thing, myself.



- g. Parcels wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. Another popular tradition we still observe, at customer request.



1. Requires derring-do to replace the roll of string used to tie packages. A balancing act on the high, wobbly ladder just to reach the holder on the ceiling, then to thread the end through a series of screw eyes and down to the brown paper roll had customers holding their collective breath. Me, too. (Been there, done that.)



2. The day we wrapped a garden rake as a surprise gift. It left looking like a baby elephant. Volunteers can be as creative as anything. Then there was the time we sold 3 washtubs for an old-timey Baptist foot-washing, and let's not forget the thunder jug episode, shall we? I hesitate to describe the details of that sale; suffice to say the customer was lucid, completely serious and very graphic about her requirements. Luckily, we had a suitable item in stock. And made a customer for life.
- h. Newer volunteers often ask "Do we have a nail to put up a new display? Do we have a hammer?" Are we a hardware store? We, *of course* we do ... we just forget it from time to time.
- i. 1907 NCR Cash Register:
1. Requires upper body strength and the need to hold your mouth just right, and twiddle the mechanism just so for the crank to turn, the bell to ring, and the proper drawer to open. Sometimes the thing swallows unanchored bills and checks. They have to be fished out from the back of the machine. Not an easy operation.



2. There is no drawer C ... How come? They run A-B-D-E. Haven't been able to get a knowledgeable answer from anybody, and we still don't know.
3. Marble plate (if a dropped coin rang clear and true, it was silver and therefore good, if it thudded dully, it was a lead slug and therefore counterfeit).

4. Unused drawers chock-a-block with interesting things like a 1946 car sales receipt showing as a trade-in a '25 Model T, broken glasses, stray keys, chestnuts, a lace from John's shoe.



- j. The tale of Lynn's ailing maple tree (dragging 3 connected hoses from the sink back in the office through the store and out the front doors for watering). No ready access to water for either the tree or the front planter makes keeping green things alive a true challenge. Lynn's been up to that challenge so far, but I suspect the City may step in at any time and remove the offender. And also the brickwork to give whatever's there some room to thrive. Lynn Jones is bound and determined to keep the existing tree alive. (As are we all.)
- k. 1918 Huntsville High School graduating class photo: (Featuring John Harrison) Older customers come in, casually examine the photo, then recognition dawns, and they exclaim, "Why, there's *Mother!*" This has happened more than once. I love it!



Other Stuff:

1. After 5 years of volunteering, I finally realized (in an idle moment) that what I had assumed to be simple display window sashes were in fact sliding framed glass covers for the lower hardware display shelves, nailed up out of the way.

2. The mysterious old paper bag tied shut and hung from the shelves 9 feet overhead (next to the 1945 car tag) is full of dirty rags. Nothing else. Somehow that was felt worth keeping.



3. The drawer stuffed with bits and ends of unused brown paper tape we found during initial inventory 10 years ago (used to seal boxes in the old days). No one piece big enough for diddly, but apparently all too good to throw away.



4. Nails by the pounds at the old price ... *still* one of Huntsville's best-kept secrets!

5. One of my own early Huntsville memories is of coming into the store as a 10-year-

old with Dad to buy nails, and getting to watch John shave in the rear view mirror attached to the scale near the cash register.



6. The old safe still locks, and we know the combination, and we also know (once the combination's been dialed in) the exact spot to smack the door with a hammer to get the tumblers to fall.

7. There's an envelope full of old, well-filled teeth in one of the display cases ... probably Daniel's. There are a number of old dental bills for him upstairs; not so many for John.



8. Rumor has it that on cold winter days, when business was slow, the brothers would actually put chairs on top of the counter, and sit there enjoying the blast of hot air from the ceiling heater.

Accomplishments:

While it is not widely known, the store is financially independent of the Foundation. And NO, we are NOT owned and operated by the City of Huntsville. Lots of customers seem to assume that's so. We've managed to turn a modest profit most years; however, 1993 was an exception. While our financial loss was bad (we accepted it as a result of concerted effort to move old merchandise), it may have served to reinforce the Foundation's non-profit status, and that's good. What follows

is a recap of some things the Foundation has accomplished since taking over the store 10 years ago, as well as plans for the future.

1. Ceiling fans were installed on both sides of the store, avoiding (yet retaining) the old gas jets. Customers and volunteers who assume they were there from the start are wrong. (This was an immediate improvement accomplished by an early Management Committee).

2. The warehouse in the cellar was established to support folks restoring old homes in Twickenham or Old Town (or an old home anywhere in Madison County, for that matter). Exactly how this was done is unknown to me, but the Foundation must have been the driving force.



3. Replaced the existing roof with a copper equivalent (1987). This was a major monetary investment and it was accomplished in keeping with the style of the time. Over the years, the new roof has spring some elusive leaks that the roofers are still chasing. This is an on-going problem, but we hope to have the roof properly sealed before long.
4. Retired the mortgage and burned it at a special ceremony (1990). We used the old coal stove to do in the deed. (*See From the Editor for further information.*)
5. Improved the amenities in the office area to include a new sink, and added an area for a coffee maker and donated microwave, as well as a newer donated refrigerator. The 50's era Coke machine (6 oz. bottles) had to be replaced for canned products, yet drinks for volunteers are still only 35 cents.

6. Installed insurance-demanded items like smoke detectors, improved wiring, better locks, stairwell lighting, window guards, etc. We're working this year toward completion of planning and installation of an electronic security system, funds for which have been donated by the Gothic Guild.
7. Installed/incorporated display cases/stands (acquired from various sources, and most with historical significance in their own right) to augment visibility of new merchandise and highlight older goods to strengthen sales.
8. Installed a donated central air conditioner that cools the office and the loft. Those areas are a respite for hot, sweaty volunteers and the management team as well. We're also using a 30's era washing machine as the core of window dressing on the hardware side.
9. This summer we made a superb 30-second TV commercial with Comcast Cable's support. It's got 72 plays on 5 (our choice) cable channels during August. This was the first time Harrison's has been on the air in a solicitous way. We will do a similar ad for the '94 Christmas season. That commercial's been a real identifier for us and (we feel) a terrific investment of available funds.
10. The inventory is fully computerized, as well as all major bookkeeping operations. We've even added one of those fancy electronic charge card reader/printers. Wow!
11. Early this summer someone took down and burned the U.S. flag we've flown for years on major holidays, and which this time we'd put out to mark the passing of former President Nixon. The flag burning was incorrigible, stupid, and indefensible. Newspaper articles at the time pointed out that the flag was of commercial and historic significance, and already a store supporter has donated another flag of similar importance to take its place. We intend to be extremely careful with this one.

Long-range plans:

- 1994 – Installation of security system
- 1995 – Redo the bathroom facilities
- 1996 – Stabilize/restore the existing floors and plaster
(This may include repairing water damage from many years of neglect on the upper floors.)
- 1997 – Install a sprinkler system
- 1998 – Install adequate roof insulation (there is none now).
- ???? – Bring some order out of magnificent disorder.

