

# C.B. Thomas' Ben Franklin Store

By Betty McCabe, 2018

In 1934 Mr. and Mrs. C.B. Thomas arrived in Pipestone from St. Paul, MN to open and operate a Ben Franklin Store. It was the ambition of C.B. Thomas to create the finest Ben Franklin Store in this part of the country. He leased 123 W. Olive (now Main St.) which had just been remodeled with a 25'x75' selling space by the owner, Mrs. Rose Dingler.<sup>1</sup> The store was opened on July 28, 1934. In 1940 Mr. Thomas removed a partition at the rear to add another 18' to main room. [This building had been formerly occupied by the Saratoga Café and Hotel and was one of the buildings torn down in 2017.]

Ben Franklin is a chain of five and dime and arts and crafts stores found in small towns throughout the United States. They are organized using a franchise system, with individual stores owned by independent proprietors. The chain originated in 1877 as Butler Brothers, a mail-order wholesaler, and they founded the chain in 1927 as Ben Franklin Retail Stores Inc. Mr. Thomas held the Ben Franklin store franchise in Pipestone. The stores were named after Benjamin Franklin and their merchandise offerings from his saying, "A penny saved is a penny earned." The company logo, a key giving off a spark, refers to Franklin's experiment to prove that lightning was a form of electricity using a key suspended from a kite.<sup>2</sup>

Ten years after the original store opened, Mr. Thomas negotiated a lease with the Odd Fellows' Lodge located at 115-117 West Main Street to move the store there.<sup>3</sup> J.E. Briggs of Chicago, in charge of locations for Ben Franklin stores, and T.E. Skinner of Minneapolis, location manager for Butler Brothers, were in Pipestone to survey the situation and the lease for the new quarters was signed. Extensive improvements were planned for early the following year including a 30'x40' addition at the rear, more basement room, a new modern front, new fixtures and modernization throughout. The new store had a 50' front and a depth of 110' The grand opening was set for November 16, 1945.

In the late 1940s, C.B. Thomas spent considerable time while on vacation on the West Coast in studying a new "self-serve" merchandising method in operation in variety stores in that part of the country, and he was convinced it was more efficient.<sup>4</sup> By March 1950, he converted the Ben Franklin store in Pipestone into a self-serve operation and had another grand opening celebrating this new system. The store had been completely redecorated and remodeled during a ten-day closed period. A mural was painted across the entire front of the store depicting Indian scenes in keeping with the history of the area.<sup>5</sup> Customers were able to select the items themselves and bring them to cashiers in front of the store to purchase. Thomas estimated that about 12,000 people passed through the store during the three days the re-opening celebration was in progress.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Ben Franklin Store Will Observe 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" *Pipestone County Star*, 25 June 1959, p. 1, c. 8, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Wikipedia* (<http://www.wikipedia.org>), "Ben Franklin (company)," 3 January 2018, at 01:57.

<sup>3</sup> "To Enlarge Ben Franklin Store," *Pipestone County Star*, 14 September 1944, p.1, c. 6, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Ben Franklin to Use Self Service," *Pipestone County Star*, 29 December 1949, p. 1, c. 7, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> "Ben Franklin to Open with Big Sale," *Pipestone County Star*, 27 February 1950, p.1, c.2, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> "Ben Franklin Store Opening Successful," *Pipestone County Star*, 6 March 1950, p. 1, c. 3, p. 5.

Managers of some of the largest chain stores in the country visited the Pipestone store to check on this method of operation before making their own changes to self-serve.<sup>7</sup> “Self-serving” was a concept patented by Clarence Saunders in 1917.<sup>8</sup> He licensed the business method to independent grocery stores; these operated under the name “Piggly Wiggly.” One of C.B. Thomas’ family said that even Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, came to the store to check on the process and implemented self-serve in his first Walmart. According to Sam Walton’s book “Made in America,”<sup>9</sup> one of Walton’s first jobs in retail was running a franchise for Ben Franklin. It was called Walton’s Five and Dime and he was obsessive about staying on top of every new idea in retail. Walton writes, “I read an article about these two Ben Franklin stores up in Minnesota that had gone to self-service – a brand-new concept at the time. I rode the bus all night long to two little towns up there – Pipestone and Worthington. They had shelves on the side and two island counters all the way back. No clerks with cash registers around the store. Just checkout registers up front. I liked it. So I did that too.”

Pipestone’s Ben Franklin started with 2 clerks and by 1959 had 15 people on the payroll. In 1954, Richard “Mac” McMullen, a Woolworth employee for 19 years, became associated with the store in the capacity of manager.<sup>10</sup> “Mac” retired from Ben Franklin’s in 1976.

In 1973, C. B. Thomas went from just leasing the building to purchasing it from the Hope Lodge. He then included the property as part of the C.B. Thomas Trust in 1978.<sup>11</sup>

In April 1976 C.B. Thomas sold the Ben Franklin store to Willis & Ruth Dawson. Clarence Benedict Thomas (C.B.) moved to California with his wife around 1977 and passed away there on August 18, 1980.<sup>12</sup> After his death, the trust was transferred to his wife. In 1982, the Dawsons sold the business to John and Pat Seaborn. Three years later, in 1985, the Thomas Family financed a remodeling project for the store. It included painting and laying of new carpet. John and Pat Seaborn added new merchandise.<sup>13</sup>

When Mark and Shelly Wiese purchased the business in 1990 from the Seaborns,<sup>14</sup> they also bought the building from the Mildred Thomas Trust.<sup>15</sup>

In the years 1996-1997, Ben Franklin Retail Stores Inc. developed financial problems and declared bankruptcy. Promotions Unlimited, of Mount Pleasant, Wisconsin, acquired the name of the chain in 1997. It was then that the Wieses dropped out of the franchise and changed the store’s name to the Downtown Hobby Shoppe. After 20 years in this location, Mark and Shelly

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<sup>7</sup> “Ben Franklin Store Will Observe 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary” *Pipestone County Star*, 25 June 1959, p. 1, c. 8, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Wikipedia* (<http://www.wikipedia.org>), “Self-service,” 3 January 2018. Self-serving store Patent US1242872 (<https://www.google.com/patents>).

<sup>9</sup> Sam Walton with John Huey. *Bouncing Back. Sam Walton, Made in America, My Story*. New York: Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., P. 62, 1992 Large Print Edition.

<sup>10</sup> “Ben Franklin Store Will Observe 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary” *Pipestone County Star*, 25 June 1959, p. 1, c. 8, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Records at Pipestone County Recorder’s Office.

<sup>12</sup> “Clarence Thomas” *Pipestone County Star* 28 August 1980, p. 2 (Section 2), c. 5, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> “Remodeling Project” *Pipestone County Star* 3 October 1985 p.14. c 2-6, p.1

<sup>14</sup> Records at Pipestone County Recorder’s office.

<sup>15</sup> Records at Pipestone County Recorder’s office.

Wiese decided to sell the property to Sandy Swanson, owner of So-Jo's Sportswear and Embroidery. This occurred in November 2010. As of 2018, So-Jo's is still at this location.

## An Earlier Ben Franklin Store

*By Betty McCabe, 2018*

The Fair Store was located in the Syndicate Block in 1904. The manager of the store in 1914 was C.C. Buell. According to the 1984 Pipestone County History, C.C. Buell became owner of the store but no definite date was found and in 1920 he made an announcement that he was going to change the format to a 5 and 10 Store. The history continues "All of the stock went on sale and the balance was sold to the Barron store from Jasper." In September 1927, The Fair Store was sold to A.G. Westensee and A.R. Sosinski of Lewisville, MN.<sup>16</sup>

In March of 1928 it was announced that the firm of Westensee & Sosinski leased the West half of the I.O.O.F. building and they moved the Fair Store stock and fixtures into the building about May 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>17</sup> A formal opening of the new Ben Franklin Chain Store, succeeding the Fair Store, was held on June 15, 1928 at their new location in the Odd Fellows building.<sup>18</sup> In April 1930, A. Sosinski bought out the interest of H.G. Westensee, his brother-in-law.<sup>19</sup> No definite date was found when this Ben Franklin store closed.

In August 1932, Grove's Variety Store of Pipestone moved their stock into the building formerly occupied by the Ben Franklin Store. The stock and fixtures belonging to the Ben Franklin Store were removed and stored at another location.<sup>20</sup>

In September 1944 Harvey Grove of Grove's Variety announced he would move out of the West room of the I.O.O.F. building to the Keyes building on the south side of West Main Street. The move was completed by the end of 1944.<sup>21</sup>

C.B. Thomas' Ben Franklin Store then took over both the West and the East sides of the I.O.O.F. building to create his new store.

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<sup>16</sup> The Fair Store. A History of Pipestone County. Pipestone, Minnesota: Pipestone County Historical Society, p. 121, 1984

<sup>17</sup> "Fair Store to Move" *Pipestone County Star* 23 March 1928, p.1,c.3,p.3.

<sup>18</sup> "New Store Opened" *Pipestone County Star* 19 June 1928.

<sup>19</sup> "Buys Partner's Interest" *Pipestone County Star* 4 April 1930.

<sup>20</sup> "Moving to New Quarters" *Pipestone County Star* 16 August 1932 p.1,c.4,p.4.

<sup>21</sup> "Grove's Variety in New Location" *Pipestone County Star* 4 January 1945.