

Strains' Merchandising Enterprise Started In Great Falls With Small Warehouse

When Strain Bros. department store terminates its business here April 30, the end will be marked for a business that started in 1887 with a small one-room warehouse and developed into one of the largest enterprises in Montana.

Herbert Strain started the store in 1887, renting a small warehouse at the rear of the Murphy-Maclay hardware store. Strain came from Minot where he was a partner in a store with an older brother, J. H. Strain. The latter opened a store in Anaconda later.

After the store was started here, another brother, W. J. Strain, who had been associated with a North Dakota bank, joined the staff. Herbert Strain remained principal owner and active manager of the organization until his death in 1913.

Incorporated

The firm was incorporated in 1914 with W. J. Strain as president. He held that position until his retirement in 1920 when he sold his stock to Mrs. Herbert Strain and her sons, W. R. Strain and A. W. Strain.

Since Herbert Strain became a factor in the business life of this community, the institution he founded has undergone an expansion more than keeping pace with the industrial and agricultural development of the state.

Rapid growth of the store necessitated several moves from the first location. In 1890 a move was made to the Dunn block on Central avenue between Second and Third streets. In 1891, the grocery section of the store was moved to the McKnight building where the Liberty theater now stands.

Need for additional floor space forced a move in 1895 to the Phelps block where the Steel building now stands on Third street.

In 1901, the W. G. Conrad building, site of the present store, was purchased to house the drygoods section. The grocery and hardware departments continued operation in the Third street location.

In 1937 the firm, which also operated stores in Billings and Helena,

boasted almost 200 employes on the payroll. The Helena store, carrying drygoods, opened in 1926. The Billings store, opened in 1935, carried Sears Roebuck lines only.

The store here became state selling agent in 1934 for the Sears Roebuck firm. Strain Bros. was one of only five companies in the nation to hold sales franchises for the Sears company. Sears Roebuck goods were carried in the Strain Bros. basement.

Grocery Closed

For a time a grocery store was operated in a building at the rear of the main store, and a warehouse and service station operated across the alley from the main building. The grocery was closed later.

Expansion of the firm to include Butte and Lewistown stores was announced in March, 1941. The new stores carried complete stocks of the Sears Roebuck "hard" line of merchandise.

W. R. Strain is president of the

firm; Mrs. Herbert Strain, vice president, and A. W. Strain, secretary-treasurer. F. U. Arthur is general manager.

Strain Bros. recently sold its Sears agency stores at Billings, Butte and Lewistown, in addition to its agency operation in the basement here to Sears Roebuck which began operating the four units Feb. 1. Herbert T. Gustafson, representative of Sears Roebuck Montana interests, was promoted to manager of the four stores in the state with headquarters in Great Falls.

Dress Rehearsal For 'Penny Wise' Set for Tonight

Dress rehearsal for "Penny Wise," Great Falls Theater guild cancer benefit, which will be presented to the public Thursday night at the Civic Center, will be held tonight.

The fast-moving comedy by Jean Ferguson Black has Walter Jensen Jr. and Pat Owen in the leading roles. The guild players have been rehearsing about five weeks for the benefit performances.

Others in the cast are Harriet Moore, Alycon Carlson, Harvey Palmer, Ellie Rogers and Clarence Kommers. Helen Murphy is directing the production.

All proceeds of the play will be donated to the Cascade county cancer drive. An advance ticket sale is under way.

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