

Celebrating One Hundred Years



That same year, the Ford Motor Company introduced the first Model T. The 20th century was on its way.

Their business prospered until 1913 when fire struck the restaurant next door. Despite the Wellsboro Fire Department's best efforts, Dunham's grocery store was badly damaged. The determined young couple operated from a temporary location on East Avenue, tore down the damaged structure and rebuilt.

The area was rich with dairy products, so Roy created an outlet for local eggs and poultry. He soon became one of the largest shippers of live and dress poultry and fresh eggs, much of it through barter.

Energized with business success and a vision to provide even more services, Roy and Fannie built a food store across the alley, connecting it to the main store with an overhead walkway.

During World War I, Roy took advantage of the train service through town. "Grandpa D packed hay and eggs in the boxcars and sent them to New York City," explained grandson John Dunham. "He supplied restaurants with eggs and the NY Police Department with hay for their horses. He also supplied maple syrup to several New York restaurants, including the Algonquin Hotel."

Today, the former feed store houses Dunham's Do-It Center and Dunham's Furniture.

It was March 1905

He was a farmer. She was a teacher.

Less than two weeks after President Theodore Roosevelt was inaugurated for his second term as president, Roy J. and Fannie Treat Dunham rode into Wellsboro in a horse and buggy. They wanted to try their hand at business and bought a half interest in a grocery store owned by Roy's uncle, W. A. Hammond.

The Wellsboro streets were dirt and most of the transportation was still horse-drawn. The Fall Brook Railway ran through town, taking residents to Elmira, Williamsport and New York City.

Three successful years after their arrival, the young Dunham couple bought Hammond's interest and became sole owners. They expanded the grocery store to include farm supplies, crockery, lamps and tobacco.

Six years after the fire, the June 1919 flood devastated Wellsboro and the store suffered major water damage. Undaunted, Roy and Fannie purchased a building where the coffee shop is now located, and expanded the dry goods and clothing departments. They named the entire operation Dunham's Ready Pay Store.

After the 1919 flood, the basement of the grocery store was used mainly for grocery storage, sorting potatoes and compressors to cool the refrigerated cases in the grocery upstairs.

Having overcome fire and rain, the Dunhams were not about to let the Great Depression stop them. In 1929 the couple added the hardware store on Main Street. Roy loved hardware.



the hardware store and the farm supply business.

During the Depression Roy and Frank also created the innovative

"Rolling Store," a modified truck that carried groceries, dry goods, hardware and candy. "A lot of farmers and other families in the area had no way of getting to town," John said. "So Grandpa D and Dad took Dunham's to them!"

Their son, Frank, joined them in 1929, and Roy devoted most of his time to operating

The truck traveled around the county until World War II when gasoline and tire rationing put the brakes on the rolling store.

In 1932, Roy and Frank took on the huge task of building the present three story department store. To many it seemed like a risky venture. It was at the height of the Depression. "Everyone said Grandpa was foolish to build it during the Depression," Nancy Dunham said. "But he said that's when people need jobs the most."

The Dunhams' business sense did not let them down, nor did their unwavering commitment to the Wellsboro community. In 1938, the first Laurel Festival was held. It grew every year and continues to grow. Drawing visitors from across the county, the Laurel Festival celebrates

Tioga County's natural beauty.

The Laurel Festival became the anchor for year-around tourism trade.

And Dunham's Department Store was Wellsboro's anchor retail outlet.

Each year the Wellsboro area draws tens of thousands of visitors to see the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon and the fall foliage. They come to boat, bike, hunt, ski, raft and fish - and shop at Dunham's!

"And," John said, "the tourists are treated like everyone else - like family."

When Roy died in 1937, his son, Frank, took over the hardware, milling operation and farm supply departments. Fannie continued to operate the office.

Roy loved working with hardware. His son Frank loved food. "Dad loved the process of making food," John explained. "During his career he made buckwheat pancake flour, donuts, potato chips, mayonnaise, peanut butter, roasted peanuts and coffee." The Dunhams still have some of the equipment Frank used in these processes. The coffee grinder, from Roy's era, is on display in the coffee shop. The peanut roaster is used every year during Dickens of a Christmas.

In 1952 the food store was expanded to Pearl Street, adding a line of building materials along with the farm supplies.

During this period, the third generation of Dunhams began taking over the family business. In 1955, Frank's oldest son Jim assumed management of the department store operations. Jim's brother John joined in 1961. Youngest brother Bob joined in 1966 and has operated Dunham's Furniture ever since.

In 1968 the food store was converted to house the present furniture store.



In May 1970, while working in the office, Fannie Dunham became ill and died the next day, just a month before her 90th birthday.

In 1973 Frank closed the grocery store operation. Following his love of people and food, he used his business talents across Main Street where he operated the Arcadia Theatre and Penn Wells Hotel until his death in 1975.

Jim and John expanded the department store into the grocery building to include a larger area for greeting cards and shoes. In 1974 the basement was remodeled to create the Junior Department.

Always looking for ways to expand the business and better serve their growing clientele, in 1985 John and Jim oversaw the construction of the building that now holds the men's and shoe departments and the coffee shop. This allowed for the expansion of the greeting cards and the addition of gifts.

"We've always had projects going to keep up-to-date," John said.

In July 2000, John and Nancy purchased the store from Jim. Their daughter Ann joined the operation, becoming the fourth generation to continue the Dunham family legacy.

In 2003 the Dunhams redesigned the children's and lingerie departments on the second floor. They also updated the display windows.

While they are continually updating and refurbishing, the important things remain unchanged.

Dunham's Department store, in design and atmosphere, evokes the slower pace and personalized service of the mid 20th century department stores. Shoppers automatically slow down when they enter the store and move through the men's and shoe store, into the bright greeting card and gift area, then onto the women's department. Some go up a flight of stairs to the children's clothing and toys, or down a flight to the Junior department. When they get tired, they take a seat in the coffee shop for a sandwich, homemade soup, coffee, and watch the passing traffic on Main St.

Where Roy and Fannie Dunham battled fire, water and the economy, the current generations have prevailed against a larger force - the changing retail scene away from downtown and its main streets. Dunham's is one of the last independently owned department stores in the U.S. It is not only surviving but thriving. Much of it is because the Dunhams insistence on personalized merchandising. On buying trips to New York City and other markets, they choose fashions based on the tastes of their customers and offer quality merchandise at fair prices.

Over the years, everyone in the family has worked in the store at some time. Frank's wife, Mercedes, bought women's fashions for more than 25 years. Jim's wife, Miriam, managed the children's department for more than 15 years. Jim's children, Jim, Peter, Bruce and Judy, and John's daughters, Ellen and Ann, all wrapped gifts at Christmas, as well as working after school or summers.

The Dunham's "extended family" is one of its most important assets. Many associates have worked at Dunham's for more than 25 years. Three associates gave more than 50 years of service.



Celebrating

"A lot has changed in 100 years," John said. "The one thing that hasn't changed over the century is our operating philosophy - it's our family serving your family."

Dunham's department store

Our parents chose to live in this town and they did everything they could do to make this a pleasant place to live. We feel the same today. Our family has been part of the community for a century. I think that says a lot about how much we care for it."

Of course, planned to be farmers and the beginning of the idea of having a store was during Institute Weeks of 1904. I attended Institute and Tuesday Roy came to take me home after attending the show at the Auditorium. Before supper, we stopped at the store to call on his uncle, W.A. Hammond, and during the night he suggested to Roy that he come up here and buy his farm which was next above the County Farm. Roy told him if he were to buy anything, he would rather buy the store. That took favorably with W.A. and before many weeks, the deal was made. Go and Roy were to be partners beginning March 1, 1905. Roy was to work without pay during February in order to learn what he could. He had delivered for him during the winter he was 18, so he felt he knew quite a little about it but had no training in the business and. By the time my school closed, I had five hundred dollars saved from seven years of teaching after saving for the one year I was at Mansfield and Roy had an equal amount which together paid for our interest in the store. The store was at the same location as the present grocery - the same frontage but barely half as deep. There were two rear doors, one topped with a canopy and the other with a small porch.

Letter from Fannie Dunham's Memoirs (circa 1960)