

Downtown hardware store closes in Chelsea after decades of business

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Posted on Sat, Jan 12, 2013 : 5:58 a.m.



The Chelsea Village Hardware Store closed its doors on Jan. 5.

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When Lottie Martin opened up **Gambles** hardware store in downtown **Chelsea** with her husband Don Martin in 1940, she said it was a different time. Paying just \$25 a month to rent the store at 110 N. Main St. and the rooms above, Martin said she used to shuffle back and forth working in the shop downstairs and taking care of her young children upstairs. In the midst of World War II, Martin said she and her husband came up the hard way.

"Everything was rationed," she said. "You sold what you could get, and there was a lot of stuff you couldn't get."

Now, 73 years, four name changes and several owners later, the now Chelsea Village Hardware (<http://chelseahardware.doitbest.com/home.aspx>) store has closed its doors. In a letter to the Chelsea Update (<http://chelseaupdate.com/a-letter-from-tom-clemons-to-chelsea-about-the-closing-of-chelsea-village-hardware/>), current owners **Tom** and **Pattie Clemons** said it was a hard decision to make.

"I gave it my all and put everything I had into it," the letter, which included both of their names, said. "I hope that support for downtown businesses will grow and not let this happen to anyone else."

The Clemons, who could not be reached for comment, had owned the store since 2001 and were the last in a series of people who had called the downtown hardware store their own.

Martin said she and her husband sold the store in 1947 to brothers George and Carl Elkins and their sister and brother-in-law Ruby and Wes Howes to open what is now **Martin's Home Center** in Tecumseh.

Joyce Johnson said she and her husband Sam Johnson then bought out the Howes in 1968 to become partners with George Elkins and his wife Virginia Elkins. In the 1970s, the store changed its name to "Our Own Hardware" after changing from the Gambles supplier, she said, and again in the 1980s to "Johnson's How To" when the Elkins retired. The name changed once more in 2001 to "Chelsea Village Hardware" when the Clemons took ownership.

"It was a Chelsea institution, it's been there for many, many years," she said. "It was a small hardware store that performed lots of things that the big boxes no longer do. I'm sure the Chelsea residents are going to miss it."

Johnson's daughter, Chris Hawker, has spent much of her life at the store. Hawker worked at the shop for the past 20 years doing the store's bookkeeping and computer work but said she remembers sweeping floors at 5 years old and later wrapping presents and cleaning when she worked there during high school.

Hawker said her favorite memories were working with her parents, talking with the customers and visits from Santa at the store at Christmas.

"It makes me very sad," she said. "I know Chelsea enjoyed having that hardware store downtown, it's been there for so long. It's sad to see that institution go."

Chelsea Downtown Development Authority (http://www.city-chelsea.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=230&Itemid=73) **President Peter Flintoft**, 70, said the store was older than he is and was the last of three hardware stores in downtown Chelsea to close. He said, in addition to selling hardware, the store was also the downtown's only small machine repair shop.

"It was a great convenience to everybody," he said. "There are a lot of memories and a lot of people that worked there that we all knew."

Bob Pierce, executive director of the **Chelsea Area Chamber of Commerce** (<http://www.chelseamichamber.org/>), said the business had been a tremendous supporter of the community for years and he was sad to see it close. He said the closing should bring greater awareness to communities of the importance of supporting local economies.

"People don't realize and think about this, our local businesses pay an awful lot of taxes, and that translates from public safety to our streets," he said. "It's a multifaceted problem when we don't support our local businesses."

Owners of nearby shops said they too were saddened at the loss of a fellow downtown store.

Michael Jackson, owner of Vogel's and Foster's (<http://www.vogelsandfosterschelsea.com/>) clothing store, said it was great to have a downtown hardware store but competition was tough.

"That industry has changed tremendously in the last few years," he said. "I'm very sad. He is a very good person for the community. I'll miss him and his business. "

Jane Diesing, who co-owns the Village Shoppe of Chelsea (<http://villageshoppeofchelsea.com/>), said she was concerned the downtown was containing fewer "everyday-use" businesses and fewer people were shopping downtown. She said the hardware store had served the community well.

"[The Clemons] are very nice people and we enjoyed doing business there as a store," she said. "Personally, my husband used them for the go-to place for sales and services of small engine tractors and parts. They will be missed."

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