

# The History of Holcomb Hardware Store In Mount Airy, North Carolina





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Hardware is defined as tools, machinery, durable equipment, implements and various items used in home life and activities such as gardening. Holcomb Hardware has evolved over its history to meet the needs of the community of Mount Airy, NC.

Fletcher Deams Holcomb bought the F.L. Smith Hardware located in the current Main-Oak Building on the corner of Main and Oak streets in downtown Mount Airy, NC in April 1914. It then became Holcomb Hardware.

After Fletcher's death in 1921, William Hugh Holcomb, his sister Minnie Ruth Holcomb and half-brother Hurley Holcomb inherited the business. Later, John Midkiff bought half of the business and Hugh owned the other half. It was called Holcomb and Midkiff until 1936 when Hugh sold his half to John Midkiff and it became Midkiff Hardware. Hugh continued to work there. Holcomb and Midkiff Hardware sold Nissen Wagons, which were wooden, horse-drawn, open and covered wagons made in Winston-Salem, as well as tobacco and farming supplies.

In January 1946, Holcomb Hardware opened in its present location at 226 North Main Street. The granite-faced two-story building was constructed around 1891 and had been the home of Hale Dry Goods for many years. Located in the current office is a safe that came with the building and has "SM Hale" painted on the door.





A cast iron marker attached to the front of the building on the lower left side indicates the steel front of the building was a “pre-manufactured bought front” from Geo. L Mesker & Co Architectural Iron Works in Evansville, IND. There are five rosettes on the front of the building. Originally, there was a balcony off the second floor, a great viewing area for parades down Main Street.

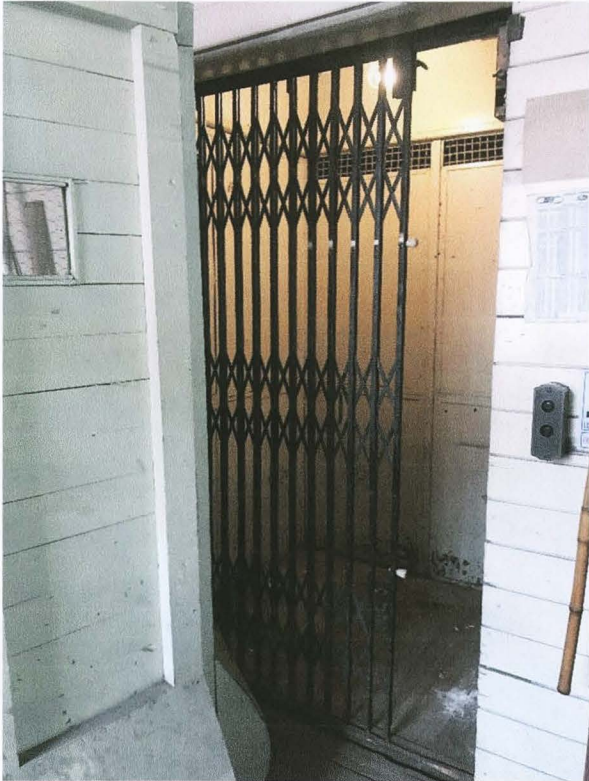


In 1946, Holcomb Hardware was owned for the most part by Hugh Holcomb, with a small portion owned by Willie Carpenter. When Hugh passed away in 1960 the family bought the entire business and continued to operate it as Holcomb Hardware, with Hugh’s son, William (Bill) Luckenbach Holcomb, as operator and partial owner through inheritance. Over the years he bought the remainder from his sister Patti Holcomb Haynes.

By this time, motorized vehicles had replaced most wagons, but horse-drawn plows remained popular in the community for gardening and raising tobacco. Harnesses, saddles, coppers, skeleton harnesses, yokes, plow points and tobacco curers were sold into the early 1970’s. In the 1940’s, Holcomb also sold general hardware (nails, screws, bolts, nuts and hammers), wood and coal heaters, oil space heaters and appliances (hand crank clothes washers).



Near the back of the store, there is an elevator that was built by Emmitt Miller and Son and was in an Ivey's Department Store in Winston-Salem, NC. Ivey's was going to junk it but Hugh offered to buy it. Reinstalled in the hardware store it was a big help hauling heavy items to different floors and fun for children to ride!



The motor failed on the old-fashioned cash register years ago. Then Bill put some WD-40 on it and it continues to work with a hand crank today. There is a modern adding machine and credit card reader beside it.

During the 1950's, a tobacco market opened on Oak Street and three tobacco warehouses were close to Main Street. Farmers and their families would come to town to sell their tobacco and purchase needed items. Hugh and his staff would be sure to get to bed early the night before a market day since they knew they would be busy the next day.

During World War II, Victory Gardens were encouraged. Most Main Street stores closed at 1 pm on Thursdays to allow time for everyone to work in their gardens. In the spring, the large wooden bins in the store would be full of various seeds, some coated with a purple powder that was poisonous. Scales and scoops were used to measure the amount of seed requested.



Gardening tools, shovels, and hoes lined one long wall. The hardware store sold canners and tested and replaced gaskets on pressure canners. Some pots and pans, colanders, food mills, can openers, etc. were bought by wives accompanying their husbands to the store.

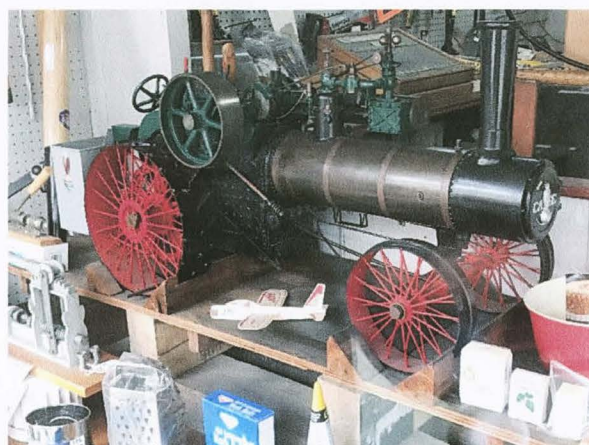
Display cases with pocketknives, hatchets, and axe blades were located near the front of the store. Balsam wood motorized model plane and glider kits were popular with teen boys. On sunny Sunday afternoons the buzzing of motorized model planes could be heard as boys flew their new creations, with strings attached, in circles at Veteran's Park. Hugh would smile and say Monday afternoon would be busy with the boys purchasing replacement parts!

Around this time, Holcomb Hardware began making duplicate keys for doors and installing floor furnaces and ductwork. Paint and painting supplies were sold also. There was a machine to shake the paint to mix it well when it was sold. One day paint flew everywhere when a full can was shaken and the lid was not tightened. The paint splatters remained for years as evidence of the calamity.





Hugh Holcomb and his father, Fletcher, shared a fascination with steam engines. The steam engine displayed in the front window of the store was purchased as a kit to build a 1" scale of the original Case Traction Engine. Hugh paid \$500 to D. Arnold in Corvallis, Oregon to build the engine because he didn't have the time. Hugh and his wife, Rachel, went out West in 1955. They were able to tour Disneyland before its official opening and have a picture made of them standing with Walt Disney. They traveled up the coast to inspect the building of the engine. Mr. Arnold sent pictures to Hugh to show the progress as the engine was being built. It was shipped by railroad express in a wooden crate and delivered to the hardware store. When Hugh's grandchildren were young, he would attach a wagon to the steam engine and pull them around his yard to their great delight!



Flexible Flyer snow sleds, Radio Flyer wagons, bicycles and tricycles were also sold over the years. Esther Williams Swimming Pools and supplies became a new part of the business in the 1960's as did landscape design and nursery stock (shrubs, plants, and pine needles). Plastic car model kits and tiny model paint bottles were a hit with young boys. Fishing poles and supplies were sold as well as rifles, guns and ammunition until the paperwork became too involved.





On a winter afternoon in 1968, Harrison's Clothing Store, located to the left of the hardware store, caught fire. Men fought the fire for hours in the bitter cold and came into the hardware store to warm by the pot belly stove. At one time, oil was cheaper than coal and a counterflow oil furnace was installed in the hardware store. The pot belly stove was put in the basement and almost sold. Later the price of oil increased and the pot belly stove was put back into service. Even today, coal is delivered and shoveled into the chute in the sidewalk in front of the store and folks gather around the stove and share stories of occurrences in Mount Airy and beyond.



To further meet the needs of the community, Holcomb's began selling and installing central air conditioning in homes in 1968, with Pete Powell as the first buyer. He and Bill installed a unit one summer in Pete's home. Air conditioning was installed in the hardware store around 1969.

In January 1997, Bill's son, Richard Benbow Holcomb, became the sole owner. Over the years the hardware store and its merchandise and services offered have evolved as times have changed. Today, they specialize in lock work, safe opening and swimming pool supplies, in addition to a full line of hardware supplies. Richard, a master locksmith, travels across North Carolina and Virginia opening safes, ATMs and bank vaults.

From 1914 until the present, Holcomb Hardware has endeavored to meet the changing hardware needs of the citizens of Mount Airy and surrounding areas by offering quality products and excellent service.

