

A Martin County Entrepreneur – R. J. “Bob” Wallace

Martin County has witnessed many entrepreneurs throughout the course of its vibrant history. One such individual was R. J. “Bob” Wallace. Born in New London, Illinois, in 1885, he came to Minnesota with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Wallace. They settled in North Star, Minnesota, located between Fairmont and Sherburn. Thomas Wallace was a butter maker in a small creamery in North Star, one of Martin County’s “Lost Towns” that was dedicated with a historical marker in 2001 by the Martin County Historical Society.

Bob attended school in Fairmont through 7th grade. He also worked evenings and weekends at the Wolf Habein store, later working full time in the dry goods department. While working at Wolf Habein he met his future wife, Edna Colton, a bookkeeper for the company. They were married in 1908 and had two children, Gloria Margaret and Bruce Robert.

In 1915, Bob opened a dry goods and grocery store in the Masonic building in Fairmont with a partner, Ed Keyes, of Lakefield. Within two months of opening, however, Keyes asked to leave the partnership and Wallace continued the operation independently. At that time, grocery and sewing needs were the largest departments. Saturday was the major day in trade and retail as customers first attended movies and then did their shopping. The store would stay open until 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. in order to accommodate their customers. Eventually, the grocery and dry goods departments were replaced with children and infants ready to wear as being the largest departments.

Wallace eventually expanded his business by purchasing grocery stores in Sherburn and Ceylon, and general stores in Granada, Winnebago, and Spencer, Iowa. However, in 1931 his Spencer store was destroyed by fire and it was never reopened. In 1932, Wallace decided to eliminate his small businesses in the surrounding Fairmont area. Shortly thereafter, in 1933, he opened a dry goods and ready to wear store in Albert Lea. His son, Bruce, joined him in the business in 1935, and then, in 1936, they opened another store in Austin.

Wallace’s business motto, “The Customer is Always Right,” served him well as loyal customers continued to patronize his businesses throughout the depression era of the 1930s. During that period, Bob would drive to Chicago loading his car with fabric, discontinued patterns in sewing fabric, and other merchandise that he purchased from the Marshall Field Wholesale Division. He would then make the fifteen to eighteen hour drive, nonstop, back to Fairmont with his merchandise.

R. J. "Bob" Wallace, active in many organizations including being a charter member of the Fairmont Rotary Club and a school board member, passed away in 1957 at the age of 72. His son, Bruce, then took over the business and his grandson, R. J. "Bob" Wallace joined the company in 1967. His grandson operated the last Wallace's store in Fairmont until it closed in 1996 after 81 years of business. He is currently very active in the community as the Fairmont Area Chamber of Commerce President, and has served in that role for a number of years.

Entrepreneurial ventures by individuals such as R. J. "Bob" Wallace have proven significant in the economic development and well being of our nation, our state, as well as our local region. The efforts of these creative and industrious individuals have provided goods, services, and jobs throughout our history and helped to provide a better way of life for everyone throughout our society.

For more information on this topic or to become a member of the MCHS, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



Bob Wallace Mercantile Co.

CASH - AM'T REC'D

DATE

22

11-24

194

Name

C. Menke

Address

SOLD BY

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AMOUNT CASH

CHARGE

16

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Fairmont's NEW STORE

Bob Wallace Mercantile Co.

Located in the double-front store rooms of the Masonic Temple building. Devoted to

Groceries, Dry Goods and General Merchandise

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 20

You are cordially invited to attend this opening of our new store. We want every man, woman and child to feel at home. We want you to feel that this is your store. We want you to know that we appreciate your trading here and that it isn't necessary for you to buy every time you come in.

Our aim will be to sell dry goods and groceries of the highest quality. Every sale made at our store will have back of it an unrestricted guarantee of positive satisfaction or money refunded at once without argument or question. We count your good will worth far more than the profit on any sale.

Our idea of service includes the attention to detail that will enable you to get merchandise at the price you want to pay—to wait on the children with the same attention as we would if the parents were with them. No sale at our store will be considered to our advantage unless it means also your permanent satisfaction.

DON'T FORGET TO COME IN OPENING DAY, NOV. 20

Bob. Wallace Merc. Co.

Telephone 117

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