

150 and counting...Billy Martin's Store

Written by

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Picture, if you will, life in a small rural Southern Indiana community back prior to the Civil War. A more simple time—arguable—a more difficult time—without a doubt. A time when the modern day dichotomy of being either independent and self-sufficient or being an involved, contributing member of a community was not a contradiction at all; that is where this story begins. A time when the values of honesty, hard work and treating your neighbors fairly were not just tag lines on a sign somewhere but a way of life and a way of doing business for many people.

Now imagine a dark, frosty morning as a man named Ezra Martin hitches up this team to a wagon in preparation for a two day journey to Louisville. This man is on a mission; a mission that that he hopes will not only bring him financial reward but provide needed supplies for his friends and neighbors. Those simply business traits of long ago have obviously be lost on many businesses today, not the least of which are those whining for government bailouts.

Fast forward to Spring, 2009 and the great-great-grandson of that 19th century entrepreneur sits behind a desk in a modest office talking about how he grew up in the business known to most Washington County residents simply as Billy Martin's. Craig Martin and his wife, Janice, run the Martinsburg, IN appliance, carpet and home furnishing store in such a relaxed, friendly manner that you would swear you stepped back in time; back to the time when running a successful business had more to do with building long term relationships than making the quick dollar.

In response to the question of how he has been able to keep the family business running when competitors like Walmart, H.H. Gregg, and Best Buys are drawing thousands of people to the shopping centers in cities throughout Southern Indiana, Craig chuckles. "Yeah, Martinsburg is a little out of the way. Folks purchase from us because their parents and their grandparents did. It's not unusual at all for us to get a call and ask us to bring out a new refrigerator or a new couch and the customer doesn't even ask the price. They will either write us a check after it's delivered and installed or we bill them. That is just the way we do business. People seem to like it that way—we do too."

When asked what business lessons he learned from his father, Billy, Craig is quick to say that treating people in a kind and friendly manner was always his dad's way of doing business. Craig reflects back to a time when he just worked in the store for his dad as a teenager.

"An out-of- town couple were driving through Martinsburg on their way to see some relatives and decided to stop by and browse through the store. Apparently, Highway 335 had just been painted and the couple's nice, new car had yellow paint all along the rocker panel. Dad saw it as the people were leaving and insisted that they drive around the back of the store and allow him to help them get the paint off. He had never met the people before—they weren't going to buy anything, but he still helped. That really made an impression on me" said Craig.

As Craig approaches is own half century mark in life, he realizes that he might well be the last generation to do business in Martinsburg. "Our daughters have both talked about taking over the business when Janice and I retire but they both have their own lives and the reality of the situation is that it just may not work out." reflects Martin, "If that's the way it is, then I'm okay with that."

"I have always had an idea in the back of my mind of restoring the old original grocery store but every time I do, it dawns on me that as much as I would like to see that happen, it just may not be practical." quips Martin. "Doing something like that would tie us down long past the time that we would be capable of taking care of the business the way it should be taken care of."

When asked how he would like the Billy Martin Store to be remembered if his is the last

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generation to run it, Craig thought for a moment and then said, “ As a place that people could count on always being there—regardless if their needs were business, personal or community-based.” As if on cue, a woman came into the store while the interview for this story was being conducted inquiring about burial plots at the local cemetery. Craig excused himself and took the lady over to a diagram of the cemetery hanging in a corner of the carpet display area. Once he had answered her questions, he returned to his office and continued the interview.

Throughout the entire process of multiple interviews with the Martins, the word “institution” kept coming to mind. The Martin family business has been there long before any living person can remember. Imagine opening up a local newspaper, a school athletic program or a yearbook without an advertisement from the store. One characteristic that makes good things so good is that people can depend on them being there. No matter how much or how little you consciously are aware of their existence, the good things usually are not truly appreciated until they are no long a part of the fabric that makes up a community and its culture. Thankfully, at least for the foreseeable future, The Billy Martin Store will continue to be the hub of Martinsburg as well as a vital and crucial thread in the cultural fabric of Washington County and Southern Indiana. Join St. Mary of the Knobs to celebrate St. Patrick's Day in style! Their 4th Annual Reverse Raffle is set for Friday, March 13 at 7:30 p.m. Only 100 tickets sold in increments of \$100, \$50, and \$25. Total cash prizes of \$5,500 – even losers have a second chance to win!