

The Ypsilanti Thrift Shop's Early History

BY NANCY HAMILTON

A Community in Need

When World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, the United States was in an isolationist mood. But President Franklin Roosevelt could read the tea leaves, and he wanted to prepare the country for what he believed was an inevitable war. With the importance of airpower in mind, he tapped the Ford Motor Company to begin production of the B-24 bomber. The site chosen was Willow Run, named after the small creek, that ran through the huge tract of land Henry Ford owned near Ypsilanti.

Construction of the plant began in 1941, and by 1942, it was turning out aircraft. Workers arrived from all over the country. Many of those newcomers came with few possessions, and they were unprepared for Michigan winters.

In April 1942, a group of Ypsilanti women, determined to do what they could to aid in the war effort, met at a local hotel for the purpose of establishing what was to become the Ypsilanti Thrift Shop Association. They adopted by-laws with a goal of founding “an independent organization for the purpose of conducting a permanent rummage sale, the proceeds from which, over and above operating expenses, shall be used for charity.” To this day, this remains the operating principle of the Ypsilanti Thrift Shop.

Finding a Home

The store initially occupied a tin shop in Depot Town, at 35 Cross Street. This was working out well until the female volunteers began noticing that the owner of the building and his friends were hanging around playing cards and staring at them as they worked. This scrutiny didn't sit well with the ladies, so they decided to relocate.

The shop now moved to 510 West Cross Street, but that was too far from the business district to attract customers. Next, they packed up and moved to the old bus station, at 2 South Adams Street, which was much more conducive to business success. The shop

relocated a few more times, until they finally bought their own building, putting an end to renting and its attendant problems.

A former warehouse at 14 South Washington Street became the Thrift Shop Association's new home in 1974. The ladies paid \$16,000 to Atwood McAndrew, who owned the building. His wife, Mary, suggested and facilitated the sale. (I learned this from the Atwood's son when he brought in several suits and coats to donate.)

The building had been used strictly for storage, and it wasn't ready for occupancy. It had no heat or running water, no paint or obvious retail space, no permanent interior walls, and no carpeting. A tremendous amount of work was going to be needed to make the place habitable. Paint, electrical materials, a gas furnace, and ductwork were donated, and much of the work was done by volunteers and their husbands.

On April 2, 1974, the Ypsilanti Thrift Shop opened for business with a celebratory tea and a ceremony attended by volunteers, community members, and well-wishers. Helen Milliken, wife of then-governor William Milliken, was guest of honor, and she cut the ceremonial ribbon.



Ypsilanti Thrift Shop, 14 South Washington

Good Working Order

Over the years, the Ypsilanti Thrift Shop has had some expensive maintenance problems. By 2016, the hundred-year-old roof was leaking, causing damage to wood and masonry. Under President June Gordon, we undertook an extensive campaign to raise the money

for a new roof and interior repairs. The campaign was supported by many local businesses and benefactors, and the work was completed.

In 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we installed an ionizer to remove dust particles as well as viruses from the air. In the summer, the air conditioner broke down and had to be replaced. Also in that summer, a lift was installed to carry items between the attic and the main floor, so volunteers would no longer have to navigate the twenty scary stairs. The following winter, the furnace died.

The expenses involved in these necessary repairs and improvements would have been crippling if it hadn't been for the foresight and wisdom of the board of directors, who had prudently set aside a goodly sum of money in an emergency fund. These updates were carried out without detracting from our mission of supporting local charities.

A wonderful thing happened, in 2021, when we received word of a \$250,000 bequest from late community member Joe Lawrence in honor of his mother, Christine S. Lawrence, who had been an active Thrift Shop volunteer. We invested the money and will use only the interest that accrues for "the preservation, maintenance and refurbishment" of our building. Our first expenditure from the endowment allowed us to paint the shop's front room. Painting our other rooms will proceed as our interest accumulates.

Serving Those in Need

For the first several years of its existence, the Thrift Shop board of directors met monthly, typically at McKenny Hall on the Eastern Michigan University campus. Minutes were kept in small spiral notebooks, which are preserved at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library.

The first board meeting was held on May 7, 1942, presided over by Mrs. Daniel Quirk, wife of the president of the First National Bank of Ypsilanti. Committee chairs reported the names of their members and Mrs. Quirk read summaries of the duties of each committee. The board decided not to sell on commission. If they had, donors would have received a portion of each sale.

By June, they were already discussing the need for a better location, dues were set at \$1 per year for all volunteers, and they talked about being open in the evenings. The need for furniture and dishes was apparent, because workers at the bomber plant were arriving in town with nothing. There was \$295.22 in the treasury and membership in the Thrift Shop Association was closed with eighty-two members even though there was a waiting list of prospective members eager to join.

Looking through the minutes, we learn about the needy cases that benefited from the Thrift Shop's generosity. For example, in July 1942, "refractions" (a.k.a., eye exams and glasses) for children, costing \$125, were paid for. The Thrift Shop sometimes even financed children's tonsillectomies. That August, \$11 was enough to cover a boy's two-week stay at the Cedar Lake Camp. Later that year, \$25 financed Red Cross kits and

another \$25 a blood donor program. A boy received \$25 to go to Starr Commonwealth, a nearby organization that “aims to heal trauma and build resilience in all children,” and an additional \$25 paid for clothes and other needed articles. In November 1942, five children received money for eye exams and glasses.

In other years, the Thrift Shop paid to furnish a room at Beyer Hospital for parents visiting their sick children, and they donated funds for the hospital care of “an indigent child.” Money was provided for the room and board of a fifteen-year-old girl whose mother was having an operation. The shop was called on most frequently to help children who needed glasses and for donations to local charities such as the Carver Community Center, Gilbert House, and Beyer Hospital. From the start, the Social Services Committee received monthly sums to deal with needy cases.

The annual meeting held in January 1943 reported on the Thrift Shop's activities from May to December 1942. The shop had earned \$1620.03 in daily sales and \$52 in dues (apparently, not everyone paid up). New board members were chosen by drawing names from a hat!

In 1945, the Thrift Shop did some very interesting fund-raising. Mrs. Cleary wrote to Hedda Hopper, the famous Hollywood gossip columnist, telling her about the shop and asking for one of her well-known hats, to be used for a special project. Mrs. Hopper wrote back, saying the hat was on its way! The minutes fail to report on the eventual fate of the hat.

Reading the minutes of board meetings for the first fifteen years or so of the Thrift Shop's existence, it is clear they had difficulty collecting enough donations. People didn't have the surplus money many of us have today. To supply the need for more saleable items, Mrs. Quirk held a “Bundle tea,” which became an annual event for several years. The tea was held at the Quirk mansion, at 304 North Huron Street. Elegant tea sandwiches and petit fours were served, along with tea and coffee. The entrance fee was a bundle of saleable clothing for the shop. According to the newspaper clipping, this event was hugely popular.

The Thrift Shop Today

Today, the Ypsilanti Thrift Shop has a Board of Directors, which is made up of a president, vice president, treasurer, disbursing treasurer, recording secretary, and corresponding secretary. In addition, there are ten committee chairs who oversee and carry out the tasks that need to be done in the day to day running of the shop. These are scheduling, membership, social service, housekeeping, pricing/merchandising, building, donations, telephone/email, publicity, and historian. The board meets six times a year. During the pandemic, meetings were held via Zoom. With email and phone calls, we were able to consult on issues that cropped up between meetings, such as emergency closures.

We currently have around sixty active members. Volunteers usually work one three-



Kyle Sutherland and Evelyn Miller assist a customer

and-a-half-hour shift per month. Since the start of the pandemic, we've had to cut back on the number of hours we're open, but we are open Monday to Saturday for three to six hours per day, depending on the day of the week.

Volunteers receive an orientation where they're shown around the shop, so they know what we have to sell and where everything is. They learn our procedures for selling and what to do with the cash and how to handle the vouchers.

We receive vouchers from several charitable organizations that serve the Ypsilanti community. These are issued by social workers on behalf of their clients. Vouchers entitle the recipient to select goods from the shop for free, usually in the amount of \$15 per person in the household.

The list of good works and charitable donations made by the Thrift Shop is much longer than this paper can report. Through the years the shop has helped fill the needs of those unprovided for by other agencies and organizations, stepping in to help where help was badly needed. We have a legacy to be proud of.

A Note on Sources

Information for this essay comes from Ypsilanti Thrift Shop records and the author's personal experiences. The images were provided by the author.

About the Author

Nancy Hamilton has been president of the Ypsilanti Thrift Shop since January 2021. She has been an active member since 2011, and she previously served on the board of directors as vice president and corresponding secretary.