

The “Old Reliables” of 7th Street

By Anthony Petres

One Windy Afternoon in April

The sagging wooden timbers in the Sweeny building let out long, agonizing, groan. A raging fire was consuming the 111 year old landmark in downtown Rapid City, and what was left of the structures third floor broke loose and crashed into the burning remains of the second. Down on the ground floor, a popular firearms emporium, First Stop Gun was quickly being engulfed. It was April xx, 1997, and a crowd of onlookers who had gathered to watch the fire, let out a collective moan as the next act in the tragic drama played-out.

In the background amongst the roar of sounds that typically accompany a large building fire, the popping of a few individual rounds of ammunition stored in the structures basement, at first, went unnoticed. But soon the intermittent shots grew into a steady crescendo, as the many thousands of rounds of live rifle, pistol, and shotgun ammo, as well as kegs of gunpowder, began to “cook off” amidst the flames. As the realization of this fact spread through the crowd of the onlookers many began to look a bit uneasy. It seemed that no one in the group quite knew how much danger to associate with the popping, that was by now roaring like the opening night of the TET offensive. Some folks began to slowly step back from the cross-street vantage point to a somewhat safer environs behind a neighboring bank building, even as the air filled with the smell of burning gunpowder..

But the buildings owners, the Blote brothers, seemed oblivious to any immediate danger as they stood, along with with fellow employees and friends, damp eyed and transfixed by the orange flames; a large part of all their lives seemingly slipping away. The grim realization :was beginning to sink in. Only damage control to the surrounding downtown Rapid City buildings was being attempted by firemen. Because of the unusually high gusting northwest winds (which were creating a blast furnace effect in the brick structure) the Sweeny building, which had stood-tall in historic downtown RC since 1886, could not be saved. She was, to coin a phrase, just about history.

The brothers, Mark and Mike were devastated. Mark had started the business and in 1976 was joined by members of the family in the effort. (the family is an all South Dakota show-father Larry hails from DeSmet and mother Pat grew up on a ranch in the wilds of Meade County, near Red Owl). Together, the Blotes had worked in the building for some 21 years, growing the business they called “First Stop Gun”, and in the process succeeding to create a very unique business environment. Supported by a loyal West River (and eastern Wyoming), clientele, the First Stop had become to many a social gathering spot perhaps not unlike the barber shops of early 20th century Rapid City. To illustrate the point, consider that the Sweeny Building had always housed its’ own a barber shop (in addition to several other businesses); *its* proprietor Vern Larson, was also a regular in the gun shop, “hanging out” in between his barber customers.

Thomas Sweeny, the buildings namesake and colorful 19th century RC entrepreneurs, would have been proud, for the Blotes had apparently created a kind of business utopia : a store whose customers had adopted it as their own, and probably even more importantly, one they had had a hard time walking out of. Or abandoning. In the weeks following the destructive 1997 fire, a group of faithful customers, downtown business neighbors, and friends, assisted the brothers in salvaging an immense amount of fire (and water) damaged inventory. This occurred in an “assembly line” salvage operation, set up first in a vacant building across the street from the charred remains of the Sweeny Building, and later, in a nearby downtown garage. These volunteers, largely all shop customers, and virtually all non-gunsmiths, nonethe-

less worked literally hundreds of hours assisting the Blotes in their time of need. To simply stand-by unconcerned and allow the business to fail was not an option for these faithful. This amazing exhibition of customer devotion may have perhaps been a more common sight in the early, 19th century world of Tom Sweeny, but in 1997, well, suffice to say Sweeny's ghost would probably be jealous of the Blotes and their partisans.

Thomas Sweeny - A Hard Act to Follow...

But then, the brothers already had some catching-up to do in the legacy department. If there had ever been a tough business lineage to live up to, it was Sweeny's. In his heyday, decades before First Stop, and in the period of time that marked the founding and early growth of Rapid City (known originally and unceremoniously as "Hay Camp Station") Tom Sweeny had set standards to which shop keepers and entrepreneurs aspired.

A native of up-state New York, Sweeny headed west, eventually landing in Ft. Pierre in mid 1870's and reportedly earned income as a barber. It was in Ft. Pierre that he was hired by bull team magnet Fred Evans as a drover, and first saw the Rapid Valley on the first of many trips upon the Ft Pierre-Hay Camp Station route. Evan's teams were hauling tons of freight into the Black Hills area during this period before the railroads had crossed the vast expanse between the Missouri and the Black Hills (trains would finally begin arriving in Rapid City in the summer of 1886).

In 1878, he settled in the "Hay Camp Station" the shanty and tent camp town which was about to spring to life as a living, breathing city. As a place trying to establish a foothold of permanence amid the many temporary communities that had sprung up in the Hills after gold was discovered by Custer in 1874, Sweeney was definitely the right man at the right place. He dedicated himself to building the city along Rapid (Minnelusa) Creek, which some businessmen had nicknamed "little Denver" and quickly settled into the retail world providing dry goods and sundry items for a growing region. His association with bull team freighting had undoubtedly acquainted and connected Sweeny in the regional freight transportation world, an advantage he would use to stock his store with sundry items (hardware and dry goods undoubtedly in short supply in western Dakota). Among these were firearms, and Sweeny stocked rifles, pistols and early shotguns, in numbers and varieties that his competitors could only envy. These guns included Winchester Repeaters, the guns that "won the west", although in those days were showing up in Native American hands as frequently as they did among white Americans. As a fact, General Custer, who had succeeded in "opening" the Black Hills in '74, was to see a foe well armed with Winchesters at his famous defeat on the Little Big Horn river in southeastern Montana two years later.

Sweeny built at least two substantial buildings in the course of his life in RC. The first, in the middle of what would become the 500 block of Main St. was rather quickly outgrown and subsequently became the home of Rapid's fledgling newspaper, the RC Journal. The second, was a two, then three story brick monolith which became known as the Sweeny building, and which would stand until the aforementioned breezy spring afternoon in 1997. The store interior was brightly decorated with shelved goods of the day and signage advertising those goods. Sweeny was an early proponent of visual advertising and pre-dated later forms of the genera (such as world famous Wall Drug) by decades. "Tom Sweeny Wants to See You" was his well known advertising billboard slogan, and his customers came in droves. Tom

Sweeny, (or “Old Reliable”) borrowed some from PT Barnum, and prospered. By the turn of the 20th century, had become one of Rapid’s wealthiest businessmen, a enthusiastic promoter of virtually everything RC and the Black Hills had to offer the nation and world..

As a virtual one man “chamber of commerce” Sweeny’s promotions included participation in a scheme to “discover” placer gold reserves in Rapid Creek (to attract miners from the northern Hills who had begun to leave the area as the early “easy” deposits played-out, locals including Sweeny had “faked” a placer discovery!), to his attempt to become perhaps the first person in the state to fly in an early bi-plane in still another attempt to generate recognition and free advertising. In retrospect, one has to admire his zeal (or foolhardiness) as aviation in those early days of the 20th century was at best, a risky endeavor. However an endeavor deemed worth the risk to advance his reputation and that of Rapid City. He welcomed all people to “his” town., and played a lead role in organizing the “Stockmen’s Days” celebration; the seminal business and cultural event of early Rapid City, which brought together thousands of Indians and whites in the tense period immediately following the close of the Indian Wars.

Sweeny was clearly the type of individual with the tools to prosper in the new 20th Century.

But Sweeny’s plans for Rapid were cut short when the Model T he was a passenger in was struck by a freight train at a Rapid City crossing in October of xxx in . The accident, which took place on the way to a Rapid Valley war bounds rally, proved a sad and ironic end to man who had continued to dedicated much of his life to expanding opportunities in the Black Hills region what was then the new 20th century. He had worked hard to promote his town to railroad officials who were looking for new routes and markets. Undoubtedly, he supported continued development of Rapid City’s fledgling street system to accommodate the growing automobile culture. The irony lie in the fact that these two powerful vestiges of the new century, then seemingly combined to do him in. In an instant, the “Old Reliable” one the original builders of the town some of the day were hoping would become the “new” Denver, was gone.

The Sweeny business continued without him for a period, but he had left no heirs. The building which bore his name would see heavy usage over the years, as numerous business and ventures were housed at the 7th and Main Street address. Apartments, xxxx, and xxxx were just some of the occupants. Without any significant attempts at remodeling by subsequent owners, decay inevitably set in. By the 1960’s the upper floors, primarily office space and apartments, were condemned by the city for any occupancy or usage. The ground floors however, continued to prosper and by 1976 when the Blotes had begun trading in the building, the ground floor was home to a movie theater (later turned into a dance club), a barber shop, and a long established western-wear store.

The Brothers as “Keepers of a Legacy”

Its certain that when Mark opened First Stop in the Sweeney Building in 1976, he did so largely unaware of the structures history and connection to early downtown Rapid City. His motivation was (and still is) to satisfy his love of collecting and trading sporting firearms. But a gun collector is also, unavoidably, a collector of history. The Black Hills (and the greater West River area) of course, have a well known history in which firearms played a significant role.

From military rifles and hand guns of the frontier, to the quick-draw revolvers of the gold camps and Deadwood, to the repeating Winchesters carried by the Lakota and Cheyenne, the region was “built” with guns of all types. The areas rich firearms culture, had also captured the attention of younger brother Mike, who eventually returned to the business after earning a mining engineering degree from SD Tech and following a stint underground in the copper mines of western Montana. However, as elder brother Mark had already discovered, selling firearms in the Sweeny building had an irresistible appeal, and one that meshed perfectly with its past. In fact, there had never been a period in the building's long history when law-abiding citizens could not purchase a elk or deer hunting rifle or bird hunting shotgun. The building was itself a historical landmark, and from the brothers point-of-view, it became obvious they were continuing a historical tradition.

Of the two, thirty nine-year old Mike Blote, then as today, is the “in-house” historian-archivist (by devotion if not professional training). His large collection of Black Hills and Dakota memorabilia is an on-going labor of love. Long forgotten and out-of-print publications of all kinds as well as a large collection of photographs spanning the time of white settlement to present adorn his collections. As a trained miner, Mike also has an impressive knowledge of Black Hills mining history and the locations of several extinct mining projects in the Hills. Each spring, he also guides non-resident “guests” of the business, turkey hunting in the nearby Black Hills national forest. An accomplished caller, he seldom carries a shotgun when accompanying clients (nationally known turkey gurus Nick Sisley and the late Ben Lee have been guests) but instead, concentrates on locating and drawing into range prized Black Hills gobblers for his hunters. As Mike would say “tough work but somebody’s got to do it”. But as any Hills guide worth his salt would tell you, sometimes, when weather and turkeys seemingly combine to stifle good calling, very tough work indeed.

Elder brother Mark is the nucleolus of First Stop. The affable 44 year old makes no bones about the fact that his work is his life's love. As a salesman, he is par excellence; an observation confirmed when noticing his association with another South Dakota success story, Dakota Arms in Sturgis. As their top independent representative, Mark is a direct connection with the Sturgis sporting rifle maker and makes weekly trips to the Sturgis factory to inspect and select high-grade walnut to be used in Dakota Rifles stock making. He can offer telephone clients personal descriptions and suggestions of choice woods for their hand-made rifles stocks, something of great importance to customers seeking these high-end beauties.

He has advised and outfitted hunting expeditions to destinations around the world. Some of the animals collected on these expeditions now adorn the walls of the store; another tradition in keeping with Tom Sweeny, who encouraged his customers to bring examples of Dakota wildlife to decorate the walls and halls of Sweeny Hardware. As avid hunters, Mark and Mike are both active in local chapters of national conservation organizations such as the Elk Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, and Turkey Federation. However, a day-off may find Mark at home quietly fishing a back Black Hills beaver dam for Brook Trout, or perhaps doing some weekday downhill skiing in the northern hills. This to “counterbalance” the busy world at the store, for as just about any customer can affirm, First Stop is a place where the telephone is rarely quite and customer questions seemingly endless.

A Near Fatal Blow Gives Rise To A Black Hills “Phoenix”

The devastating 1997 fire, the official cause of which was never ascertained (although a stage fan in the dance club was suspected by officials) came very close to ending the dream for the Blotes, not to mention creating a very large hole in the structural fabric of downtown Rapid City. After the embers finally cooled, the first of several meetings between the family, insurance companies, city, state, and federal officials, a decision was made to rebuild. Senator Tom Daschle was instrumental in making Federal rebuilding funds available. Low-interest loans for the building reconstruction were made possible by earmarking funds from legislation then being drafted to rebuild the damage caused by the Red River floods in North Dakota, which had also occurred the spring of '97. But even with funding available, and the strong moral support of friends, the decision to rebuild was a difficult one. For a short time, the brothers debated folding up the business to cut losses.

More meetings were held. But at each decision point, the two men felt the urge to rebuild taking on its own life. The dedication to loyal customers, to Rapid, and even the memory of Tom Sweeny, propelled events forward. The decision was made to try again.

The show would continue. And like a phoenix, beauty would rise from the ashes. The “Old Reliable”, Sweeny’s old nickname (and ad moniker) from the late 19th century, had found new heirs.

Within a year, work was begun on a new building at the site. It would be a two-story structure (as in keeping with the original plans for the Sweeny Building, until a last minute change by Sweeny himself had made it three), and also in keeping with the historical architectural standards of the downtown area. The result was a modern brick structure with a definite 19th century flair, inside and out. First Stop today rests on wooden, in-laid flooring, and is covered by a traditional tin ceiling, not unlike the original 19th century Sweeny Hardware and other buildings of the era.

On Valentines Day, 1999, the new building, the Blote Building, opened for business. Housing government offices in the upstairs, the ground floor is home to shops as varied as hair styling to internet providers. The sporting outdoors world is well represented with a fly-fishing outfitter, and of course, the gun shop.

Vern the barber, displaced by the '97 Sweeny fire, subsequently set up shop in the nearby Rapid City bus terminal, and although no longer shares a building with the boys, still finds time to drop in, cajole, and converse. And to the platoon of loyal customers who helped rescue and restore the Blotes smokey inventory after the fire, a common goal was successfully obtained. A Rapid City landmark of special importance was successfully preserved.

One Final Comparison

Researching the life of Thomas Sweeny leaves one with an inescapable conclusion that he was a man driven with a great spirit for life and living, and whose personality expressed his love and allegiance to Rapid City, the Black Hills, and South Dakota. He was apparently somewhat adrift in life until his arrival at Black Hills Hay Camp on the Bull Teams of the 1870's. From that point, history shows that he found his place in life, and then dedicated all of his

remaining years to the betterment of his new world. This he did in ways that were sometimes unusual, to say the least, but certainly good in intent, and more importantly, always delivered with a trademark sense of humor.

The Blotes, particularly Mark and Mike carry on similarly. They painstakingly built a business worthy of envy, and when catastrophic events challenged them, they came through for Rapid City downtown, in spades. Unlike Sweeny, who was guilty of occasional lapses of judgement (for instance, the working of non-existent gold strikes, in the name of civic betterment) the Blotes brothers stay true to their trade, and in doing so, bring a dependable level of honesty and professionalism to the downtown business environment. And like Tom Sweeny, the work is most always conducted with a keen sense of wit and enjoyment. Vern, the former Sweeny building barbershop proprietor, and frequenter of First Stop, would certainly agree.

Although much is known about Mr. Sweeney and the early days of Rapid City, some of his legacy is open to speculation. For instance, one can wonder, if Sweeny, the entrepreneur, whose life spanned two very different centuries in Dakota, perhaps unwittingly contributed Winchesters that armed of the Lakota who danced the ghost dance in the late 1890's, and who fought the last battles Indian Wars. It is certainly possible. What is beyond doubt, however, is that his successors, the Blotes brothers, supply sporting firearms to South Dakotans (including many agency Lakota, who are some of the their best customers) and Americans, and even to those beyond our borders. Men and women whose love of the outdoors, the shooting sports, and the collecting of fine firearms, can find pieces of the last two centuries preserved in simple elegance on a street corner in downtown RC.

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