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07 A Brief History of M. S. Yearsley & Sons hardware store on E. Market Street in West Chester

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A Brief History of M. S. Yearsley & Sons hardware store on E. Market Street in West Chester

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In a town whose residents go to great lengths to preserve history, one of the most interesting examples of that history was once found on E. Market Street at the hardware and farm supply store of M. S. Yearsley & Sons. While offering the most up-to-date materials for home repairs and and gardening, much of the store remained unchanged for over sixty years. This is a brief history of the Yearsleys and their store, which is scheduled to close in 2007.

Morris S. Yearsley and his sons Maurice and Willis started their store at the corner of Matlack and Barnard Streets in 1917. Morris was the son of Thomas and Mary Ann (Lewis) Yearsley of Westtown. After his parents moved to Thornton in Delaware County, Morris married Mary Ella Cox. They had two sons, Maurice and Willis, plus a sister named Sara Ella who died in infancy in 1891.

After they grew up, the Yearsley brothers moved into West Chester by 1906 and lived at 133 E. Gay Street. Maurice worked as a carpenter and Willis was a machinist who also experimented with designs for potato planting machinery. Willis married Mabel R. Pyle of West Chester on April 26, 1911 and they bought a house at 349 E. Biddle Street. By 1915, they shared it with Willis' father Morris and another relative named Irvin (or possibly Irwin) who worked as a sash worker.



Before moving day ...

... and after

In 1917, the brothers Willis and Maurice began to sell farm equipment out of C. C. Hipple's warehouse on the southeast corner of Matlack and Barnard Streets (site of Apartments for Modern Living). The following year, Irwin T. Yearsley was killed in action while fighting in France on September 27, and the town held a memorial service in his honor at the First Baptist Church. After the war, the business prospered so that by the time Maurice married Mildred Cooper of 304 N. Darlington Street in 1926, the newspaper described him as a "rising young businessman of this borough."

In 1935, the boys' father Morris died. The brothers continued to operate the business and in 1937, they moved into the warehouse at 112-116 E. Market Street used by George B. Smith's trucking company. The brother's remained partners and they were physically close, with Maurice and his wife Erma living at 204 N. Penn Street, only a block away from Willis and Mabel, who lived at 213 N. Adams Street with their son J. Willis, a clerk at the store.



In 1940, J. Willis Yearsley married Grace R. Smith of Lionville. Their sons J. Willis Jr. and Maurice Irwin were born in early 1943 and 1945, respectively, and later, they added a daughter

Denise who currently lives in Florida. J. Willis and his family made their home on W. Miner Street just outside the Borough in E. Bradford Township.

The company continued to prosper after World War II, and in 1946, Warren Smith of Lionville began his long career as a clerk at M. S. Yearsley's store. That same year, another employee named Alonzo Harvey left Yearsley's to open a harness-making shop next to his house at 539 S. Franklin Street.

Some time before September 1948, the store suffered fire damage, but by September 20, they were open again for business. In December 1952, the Yearsley brothers bought the store and property from George B. Smith's heirs, and two years later, they were designated an official dealer for New Holland farm equipment.

Maurice H. Yearsley died on February 14, 1960 in his home on N. Penn Street following a long illness. His brother Willis J. Yearsley died on July 10, 1986 at the Cotter Home on E. Marshall Street. Willis J.'s daughter-in-law (J. Willis' wife) Mabel died in March 1962, a few months before her son Maurice Irwin started naval officer's training.

In 1966, J. Willis Jr. married Sandra K. Suzor in California, and they had a child named Sandra Jeanne in 1968. That year, he and his brother Maurice Irwin incorporated their company as "M. S. Yearsley & Sons," and bought a storage building on E. Union Street near the railroad tracks. They lost the building in 1969, however, when a fire destroyed and its contents, which included farm machinery belonging to the Yearsleys plus other goods belonging to Grocery Store Products. According to the newspaper report, the fire required three alarms and the heat from the flames was so intense that it melted insulation on the railroad wires as well as metal siding on a nearby building.

The company survived, however, and in 1981, they bought a barn at 302 E. Union Street from J. Leon Haggerty. In the 1980s, the company established a relationship with the Philadelphia Eagles professional football team when they began practicing at West Chester State College. As a result, the Yearsley logo was frequently seen on national television when Eagles employed a John Deere "Gator" driven by a Yearsley employee to haul injured players off of the field during regular season games. According to a Yearsley employee, that arrangement ended when John Deere refused to renew the annual contract, which required the Eagles organization to pay exactly one dollar for the service.

That was only the beginning of the end as the John Deere management, faced with stiff foreign competition, began to demand more from dealers like Yearsley. After Yearsley made the transition from farm dealer to lawn care in the 1960s, it remained one of John Deere's largest dealers in Pennsylvania, but a few years ago, the company announced its intention to shift its franchise to a suburban "big box store." That prompted the Yearsleys to start looking for buyers, and in the summer of 2005, they reached an agreement with a family of local real estate investors. As of spring 2006, the Yearsleys continued to sell tractors and other equipment from their store, but transferred their hardware business to the former Atlantic Bread Company building on E. Gay Street near Adams Street.