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Seeing the Light Into a New Era

Ty Lockhart takes a fourth-generation business into the new millennium.

BY ERIC GRANT

Back in 1905, F.M. Light and family came west from Ohio, journeyed into Colorado's high country, and found opportunity in the town of Steamboat Springs.

They set up shop on a cold morning in November, and sold shoes brought in by a freight wagon. They tallied a whopping \$2 in receipts their first day in business.

There was optimism in the air, however, and the Lights quickly diversified their merchandise. Their reputation spread among local ranchers and miners who needed sturdy, serviceable dry goods, including blue jeans, boots, coats, and coveralls. It wasn't long before the family's ingenuity made F.M. Light and Sons into the West's best-known retailers.

Today, the responsibility of continuing the family's retailing tradition falls squarely on the shoulders of Ty Lockhart and his brother Del. The great grandsons of F.M. Light, they are the fourth generation to operate the business.

Ty admits that for a time he wondered if he wanted to commit his life to retailing. When he was graduated from the University of Colorado with a degree in aerospace engineering, he took a job in Hartford, Conn. The high country beckoned, however, and he returned to the Yampa Valley in 1973.

At the time, Steamboat Springs was just beginning to undergo a massive cultural and economic shift. The nearby ski resort, which had opened in the late 1960s, had begun to bring in an enormous influx of newcomers, and many of the ranchers who had comprised the store's clientele for 50 years packed up, sold out, and moved on.

The changes have presented challenges to the store. Because the ranching community continues to shrink, Lockhart has had to dedicate a portion of his business to attracting a new type of western clientele. "It's come almost full circle," Ty recalls. "When the ski hill started and coal mining came to town they created economic opportunities for people to live



The Lockhart brothers, Ty (foreground) and Del, operate F.M. Light and Sons.

and work here. Now there's been an influx of people to town. There are more gentlemen ranchers, and there's greater demand for things like western tack, hunting gear, and more recreation-oriented merchandise."

The family continues to embrace the "cowboy way," by helping the community maintain its ranching roots and traditions. The store is one of several local sponsors for Steamboat Springs's summer PRCA rodeo series, which is the largest weekly rodeo in the country and a major attraction for people who visit the valley each year.

To promote their business, the Lockharts still advertise with 100 original road signs erected more than 60 years ago along the highways to and from Steamboat Springs. Most of them are the

The store is visible in this 1950s image, as Bud Woerner, later an Olympic Silver Medalist in downhill, gets "skijored" over a jump. Woerner died in the late '60s in an avalanche.

original signs put up by their grandfather. At one time, there were more than 250 of them.

Lockhart, who has two children of his own, has focused much of his energy on improving the cultural, spiritual, and educational opportunities for kids in the Steamboat area.

Several years ago, he and his wife Betty began work on the Christian Heritage School, which recently opened its doors to children ages 5 through 17. To fund its construction, the Lockharts bought a piece of land, subdivided it into an 80-lot subdivision, and donated all the profits to construct the 42,000-square-foot school, which is part of the subdivision.

Part of the project also was devoted to the construction of five soccer fields. Lockhart, who served as a volunteer soccer coach for 17 years, leases these to the city for \$1 a year. "We wanted to make sure local kids had a place to play," he says.

Dean Fogelaar, executive vice president of the Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association, says that Ty and his family represent "the very best of what Steamboat Springs is all about":

"Ty is one who has given much back to his community through the [school] he built, and the many... contributions to needy organizations and programs. He is a very strong individual who doesn't talk about it. He goes out and does it."

In the end, for the Lockharts, the store

LOCKHART (cont'd on page 23)

LOCKHART (cont'd from page 20)

is more than just another business, and Ty believes it's important that the legacy begun by his great grandfather continue into the coming years. "There aren't many stores that have been around this long and in the same family," he says. "It's a unique situation, and there's a duty, an obligation, and a sense of responsibility that we continue."