

## SOLID GOLDMANN'S

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**For more than 100 years, Goldman's has been a familiar, friendly haven for shoppers as they make their way down Mitchell Street. And despite predictions that independently owned stores are a thing of the past, Wisconsin's oldest department store continues to defy the odds, remaining as strong as ever.**

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Wal-Mart may have Dr. Thunder soda, and K-Mart's got the Martha Stewart line of housewares, but just try and find a friendly face to sell them to you. Goldman's department store, at 10<sup>th</sup> and Mitchell Street, isn't around after 110 years by accident. Ten years ago, there were about 200 independently owned department stores left in the United States. Today, there are less than 40. Goldman's annual sales are just over \$4 million, while a chain like Wal-Mart collects more than \$600 million each day.

Owner Milt Pivar will tell you exactly what keeps the store's doors open in the face of increasing competition from national retail chains. In a word, service. "We can't compete with the big-box stores on price," he says. "But we do business the old-fashioned way. We have salespeople who know the products, and who personally work with the customers." He says if they store doesn't have what a customer wants, they'll get it. "Our buyers have relationships with manufacturers all over the country, and we will always special order something," Pivar says. The salesclerks even maintain "want lists" for their regular customers. "If we can't get for you, you don't need it," Pivar says, grinning.

When Pivar says the store does business the old fashioned way, he isn't kidding. Until a few years ago, the store's accounting was kept in huge, leather-bound ledgers that look positively 19<sup>th</sup> century. "We just got a computer," Pivar says, gesturing to the lone PC sitting on a desk. "Now we're working on getting a web site."

Pivar says Goldman's also carries things you can't find anywhere else in town. Like size-70 belts, and 10X shirts, and bras that run to 52FF. "I call those the dome-coverers," Pivar laughs. These, and other items like them, are the things no other store wants to carry, says Pivar. "Other stores cater to the youth market. But people my age need a place to shop too," he says.

Pivar should know. He's been associated with Goldman's since 1941, when he worked for his father in the store's men's department. "My father leased the menswear operation from the Goldman family," he says. "And I learned the business from him." In 1988, Pivar and a partner bought the store outright from the Goldman heirs. And even though Pivar has a whopping 65 years under his belt, he's not the only one with a long track record. Kim, the store manager, is in her 26<sup>th</sup> year. Mary Ann and Rose both have 25 years. Don in menswear has been there 40 years. "Our customers know they're going to see a familiar face when they come in," says Pivar. "And our people know them too."

Goldman's opened on Saturday morning, March 28, 1896. Proprietor Isaac Goldman faced stiff competition from existing department stores that included Gimbels's, Chapman's, Morgan's, T.L. Kelly's, Barrett's, Espenhain's, Streissguth's, Skidmore, Browning King, The Columbia and The Hub. These were the days when a pair of lace curtains sold for \$1.50, and a room carpet for 79 cents.



Men's undershirts were a quarter, as were boys' extra-heavy school pants, women's corsets and 2 pairs of ladies' wool hose. A flower vase was 8 cents, the same price as a yard of flannel. A pair of ladies' high-button shoes went for \$1.69, and men's all-wool suits were a little pricier, at \$5.00. Fedoras, however, were a bargain at \$1.50. Pretty incredible prices, until you consider the fact that the average workingman's salary was \$1,100 a year. Yet Goldmann's establishment flourished, and how many of the competitors are still around today?

So they sell giant bras and the biggest sweatsuits you ever saw. What else is propping Goldmann's up after all these years? Candy raisins, for one thing. Pivar says the store sells tons of them, literally. "Who else has 'em?" And cherries on a wire. If you're old enough to remember that Christmas favorite, you'll be happy to know that Goldmann's keeps those on hand as well as angel food, chocolate-covered nuts, and countless other old fashioned candies you thought were gone forever. "We have a bulk candy division that's second to none," Pivar says. "We do a lot of mail order on our candy, all across the country."



In addition, there are lottery tickets on sale in the basement, along with housewares, rugs, souvenirs, gifts and other knick-knacks. The mezzanine houses an electrical department where the most obscure part can usually be found. They also repair lamps, light fixtures and other things up there. And then there's the lunch counter. The world-famous lunch counter, Pivar contends. After all, it was featured in the movie *Milwaukee, Minnesota*. Homemade breakfasts and classic diner-style meals are served across the vintage U-shaped counters to regular customers who have one, or even two meals a day there. "We do a phenomenal breakfast and lunch business," Pivar says. Weary shoppers also pop in for a Coke, milkshake or some other pick-me-up before returning to the merchandise aisles.

Pivar, who just turned 77, says Mitchell Street wouldn't be Mitchell Street without Goldmann's, and vice versa. He says the memories and nostalgia are what sets it apart from the clinical, modern outlets. "I'm in love with this store," he says. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't be here."