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Society honors Amiton

▼ *Gresham Historical Society names downtown furniture store Pioneer Business of Year*

BY SHARON NESBIT
of The Outlook staff

Bill Amiton was 24 and scouting for a place to start a business when he showed up in Gresham in July 1941.

"There were a lot of people moving around here," he said. "I'd looked in Beaverton, Tigard and in Vancouver, and there was way more activity here. This looked more prosperous."

So Amiton, equipped with little more than a Pontiac and a trailer, opened a small used furniture business in a building about the size of a double garage on the south side of Powell Boulevard in what is now Main City Park. His rent was \$25 a month.

"And then all of a sudden, it went dead," he says of his chosen town. The activity and prosperity Amiton had witnessed was the product of crowds drawn to the Multnomah County Fair, then a late summer event on Main Avenue. Once the fair closed, everyone left town.

Amiton was likely not the first newcomer gulled by the county fair, but unlike most, he stuck around.

The Gresham Historical Society on Saturday honored Amiton Furniture, 202 N. Main Ave., as Pioneer Business of the Year and a friend of the historical society.

Now 81, Amiton's memory was triggered by the award, bringing back recollections of former business neighbors, nickel coffee at the drug store and a Gresham alive on Saturdays with farmers coming to town to do their shopping.

The furniture business, he says, was mingled in the early days with the funeral business, because you could always make a few coffins between customers.

TURN TO AMITON,
Page 3A



SHARON NESBIT / THE OUTLOOK

Bill Amiton, right, talks about his nearly 57 years in the furniture business with co-owners Bob Matulef and Karrie Amiton.

Amiton

CONTINUED FROM Page 1A

By the time Amiton entered the field, people were buying linoleum to cover bare wood floors. Such pieces now are collector's items.

Gradually, he says, people began to develop pride in their homes in the same way they might drive a nice car.

"Back in the beginning, you didn't dress too nice because you sold stoves and got kind of dirty," he said. "When I moved to the store on Main Avenue (for a time, he and his wife, Florence, lived above the store), I decided to dress up because I was selling more furniture.

"A guy came in, saw me in a suit and asked me if I was going to a funeral," he said with a smile.

During World War II, Amiton was drafted and served in what is now Korea. His father, Abraham, ran the store. A brother, Jim, was a partner until he retired in 1980.

Amiton, daughter-in-law Karrie Amiton and son-in-law Bob Matulef, who has been with the store since 1971, do just about everything in the business, including worrying about where to put the next load of furniture.

Rummaging in a drawer, Amiton produced an Outlook item printed in

1973 noting that Amiton, to please a customer, delivered a lounge chair to her home at 6 a.m., setting it up as a surprise for the woman's sleeping husband.

"That was when I could still carry things," he mused.

But Karrie Amiton notes that not long ago, she caught her father-in-law totting a table down the stairs.

The business moved to its present location in 1958 in a building once called the Regner Opera House.

W.R. Hicks & Co., then Gresham's largest department store, had moved to a new building on the next corner, and Amiton moved into the former Hicks' store.

Amiton is proud that customers span three generations. They remember The Outlook editor and staff, whose building was just up the street. And Amiton can recite nearly every location that the former Gresham Drug used for its soda fountain, where most local business owners gathered for coffee.

"People always paid," he says. "Sometimes I didn't know who it was who wanted to charge an item, but if they said they'd pay you, they'd pay you."