

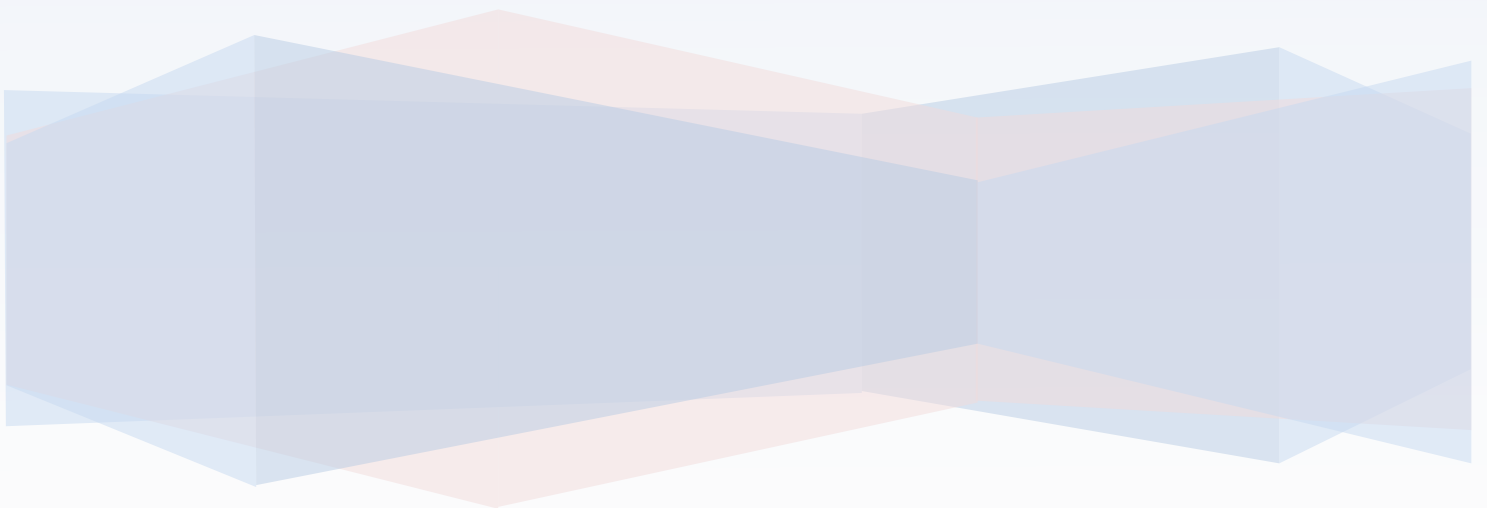
# **HISTORY of MOCHEL'S HARDWARE**

**1884 - 1984**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To Johnny, with love; a great dad:  
It's turned out to be interesting as hell to be a Mochel.

## HISTORY OF MOCHEL'S HARDWARE



Charles Mochel (1860-1946)

On a humid June 25th in 1884 there was excitement among the townfolk of Downers Grove, Illinois. The normal bustle of shoppers along the wooden sidewalks was brightened by their anticipation of that day's opening of a new general store, Mertz & Mochel. Now the local residents, mostly farmers could visit the shop in "Central Block" of town to conveniently fill their needs for hardware, coal stoves, farming implements, paint, flour and salt. Shoppers flocked into the new brick building to the aroma of feed and the bang of the screen doors.

The partners, Levi Mertz and Charles Mochel, provided a life line between their customers and daily necessities, most of which were delivered by the Burlington Northern Railroad. Mertz and Mochel leased a "right-of-way and spur tracks" (best described as an unloading dock) just west of Foote (now Forest) Avenue for \$30.00 per year. Coal was in great demand so that a delivery of 40 tons was not uncommon. All handling of the coal was by man and shovel: from freight car to shed near the right-of-way. Then the fuel was hauled in wagons pulled by horse to the scale in the alley south of the store so that it could be

weighed and distributed to customers. Considering the great effort needed just to assemble merchandise to sell, it is understandable why the employees worked from 7 to 6 daily without coffee breaks; and probably accurate to assume that those employees were predominantly strong young men. Although the retailers worked like dogs in the early years, they earned a fair amount of status in town.

Other than receiving merchandise by freight, a suburban business could send a representative to Chicago to purchase goods. Charley Mochel would journey to the city several times a year via Old Plank-Road, the wooden forerunner of Ogden Avenue, for a two or three day stay. Aside from these twenty-mile trips to Chicago, horses and wagons were needed for local delivery so that a barn was built behind the hardware store in 1890 when Charley bought that property. He owned a great deal of the land which has since become the business district of Downers Grove.

However, it is known that Charley's father, John Mochel, purchased 80 acres of unimproved prairie land for \$10.00 in 1854 when he and his

wife, Catherine Bohner Mochel immigrated to this country from Alsace-Lorraine. (It is theorized that because this northeastern region of France is so close to Germany, the name Mochel was pronounced (mo'kal) instead of (ma shel'). John and Catherine Mochel erected buildings, accumulated additional area, and worked the prairie into a successful 160 acre crop farm located where 63rd street intersects with Cass Avenue in Westmont today. Charley Mochel, the fourth child, was born Christmas Eve, 1860 on this farm. Amazingly enough, his two brothers and he all lived long prolific lives so that in the late 1950's, Downers Grove seemed speckled with family entrepreneurs: Mochel's Barber Shop, Mochel's Insurance, Mochel the Electrician, Mochel's Real Estate as well as Mochel's Hardware. Charley's two sisters were Mary Mochel Bohlander and Katherine Mochel Wolf. Other prominent Downers Grove names branching off the Mochel Family Tree are Leibundguth and Klein.

As Charley Mochel's mother and father died when he was a child, his older brother, Valentine, took over the parenting chores. Charley attended school in the already established district. Later, he rode the train to Naperville to take night courses in business management and bookkeeping at what was then Northwestern College. Charley apparently attended college after opening the hardware store because of a textbook still in the family's possession published in 1889. Also after starting his hardware business, Charley married Caroline Wohlhuter, younger sister of Valentine Mochel's wife, Salome. The Wohlhuters came to Downers Grove from an area known as Gower, southwest of modern Hinsdale.

Charley and Caroline began their family in a house on Curtiss Street between Main and Washington just west of the present post office. There were two sons, Ebner and Delbert who died in infancy. Daughter Bertha was born in 1888; son John William in 1898. The hardware business went well and Charley could afford to move his family into a home still standing at 811 Maple Avenue. In about 1908, he built the brick house, the first in town to have a central vacuum system. Shortly afterward, Charley purchased the white frame house next door where Bertha

Mochel and husband Burr Downs lived. Charley Mochel was admired and respected by townsfolk and customers alike. Supposedly anyone who knew him an hour called him "Charley" and great-grandchildren still refer to him as "Grandpa Charley." He was considered a pioneering merchant, always advocating the growth of Downers Grove. As early as 1892, Charley helped organize the Farmers and Merchants Bank and acted as a director. In 1895, he became Fire Captain which meant he was responsible for the "hose cart"; the following year, he joined the town's governing board as village trustee. No doubt due to his popularity and obvious concern for the town, Charley Mochel was elected Village President for two non-consecutive two year terms in 1901 and 1905.

The hardware store and Downers Grove seemed to grow simultaneously. In 1900, electric lamps were installed in the store, just a year before bids were let for sewer construction in the village. Charley Mochel was instrumental in bringing about this progress; in addition he recommended pavements, sidewalks and phones be installed. Another change occurred when the town assigned numbered addresses so that Mertz & Mochel became 36 S. Main Street.

Apparently quite a reasonable man, Charley allowed customers to barter for their hardware with cherries, a pig, hay or straw according to old ledgers. Prior to 1900, there are receipts indicating Mertz & Mochel purchased Quail Brand Oats and salt from Joy Morton and Company through their agent, Argo Starch. (These were antecedents to Quaker Oats and Morton Salt). Another well-known firm whose products were advertised by Mertz & Mochel in a 1901 newspaper is (Martin) Senour's Paints. "Rubber paint" was available at the hardware store in "all shades" at "prices that will appeal to you."

The ever-innovative Mertz & Mochel did it again in 1912 when they began to use a solid bronze cash register. The ornately designed machine with marble coin slab was purchased from National Cash Register Corporation (established 1884) for a substantial \$125.00.

On May 2, 1922, Levi Mertz sold his interest in the hardware store to Charles Mochel for \$10.00 and "other valuable considerations". Charley happily took in his son, John, as a partner. The business was renamed Charles Mochel & Son at about the same time the address became 5122 S. Main Street.

Young John Mochel had grown up in the shadow of his father, one of the most prominent men in Downers Grove. He was much like Charley, though, in that they were both quiet but friendly and personable as well as stout, dimpled and twinkle-eyed. John was educated through high school at the Maple Avenue School (later, Lincoln School). Quite the athlete, he played third base throughout school and was known to be a nimble base-runner and excellent bunter who batted left-handed. After graduating from the University of Chicago, he toured Japan with the college baseball team. When he returned, he played on the Downers Grove baseball team with a group of men who invited women friends to go out socially after watching the Sunday contests. (They apparently enjoyed a grape Nehi or black cow as this was during prohibition.) It was at one of these gatherings in 1920 that John met Ollun Anderson of Farmington, Illinois who was then teaching school in LaGrange. Ollun dated several other men in the group while trying to get better acquainted with John when suddenly, he called her.

John and Ollun were married in October, 1921 at the Hyde Park Congregational Church in Chicago. Outside the church following the ceremony, the newlyweds were approached by two teenaged boys who advised "Trust to luck and hope for the best." John and Ollun adopted the phrase as their personal slogan.

Perhaps that slogan helped John decide to leave his job of two years at the American National Bank in Chicago to join his father, Charley, in the hardware business. The young couple viewed John's partnership as inevitable but exciting and profitable: business was strong; the advent of trucks simplified transporting merchandise. The hardware store was improved again as the building was expanded fifteen feet into the alley previously on the south side. A four-car garage and warehouse were constructed behind the

store while a larger scale replaced the original weighing machine removed to make room for the addition. A cement sidewalk garnished the store's front entrance.

In October, 1925, Charley Mochel hired a 21 year old bookkeeper named Katherine Fraher. The benevolent but outspoken redhead became a fixture of the store. She never married but was considered a member of the Mochel family; she loved to have the young Mochel children overnight and would play Parcheesi with them by the hour. Katherine had a great sense of humor, taking in stride the alarm clock given her as a gag Christmas gift because she regularly arrived late at 9:15 a.m.. Also at a celebration in 1960 given in her honor, she arrived dressed as a decrepit woman complete with black garb, gray wig and spectacles sporting a banner claiming "This is what 35 years at Mochel's has done to me!" Miss Fraher was probably the only employee to work for all three generations achieving 57 years of service - the longest of any Main Street personality.

Katherine recalls her early days at Charles Mochel & Son as a "boom". The store was busy with customers in its tin shop who were converting stoves and oil burners to furnaces. In 1931, Charley remodeled the store, tearing down the inside partitioning wall remaining from the previous decade's addition. The other major undertaking was the new store front which remains unchanged today except that the window display walls have been removed.

During the depression, business remained brisk at Charles Mochel & Son, spurred by the need for necessities. Customers could only afford to buy small quantities of coal, feed, flour and seeds at a time. It is unlikely that any one person helped more people than Charley Mochel. A kindhearted man, he found it difficult to turn away people with no money for coal. Having a real soft spot for families with children, Charley often gave them coal as he couldn't bear the thought of cold youngsters without hot food to eat. Normally, Charley made special arrangements for those without adequate funds; there was a record of a customer who owed the store \$19.00 for coal and finally repaid his debt after twenty years.

The village of Downers Grove recognized one

hundred years of existence in 1932. (Ironically, the town is a year older than the city of Chicago.) The focus of the celebration was the Fourth of July. In addition to the watermelon festival and fireworks, there was a long parade. The Mochels entered a float which was a huge ship built around the delivery truck for an extravagant \$200.00. The vessel was labeled 1884-1932 and curiously, the bow read "Mochel Hardware" above an enormous anchor. John Mochel, Sr. and his six-year-old son, Jack, rode on the float which captured first prize.

Only two years later, Charley Mochel proclaimed a Golden Anniversary Sale for seven days. He offered a double surfaced washboard, "a new idea" for fifty-nine cents and a six-pound electric iron, "Complete with cord, only \$1.19". The sale lasted all week from June 23rd through the 30th, which leads one to believe the store was open on Sunday. Also notable is the fact that in the fiftieth, sixtieth and the one hundredth years, the actual anniversary date of June 25th fell on Mondays.

On that day in 1934, the entire business community shut down at 5:00 in the afternoon to march en masse from Emery Klein's grocery store to the hardware store. There, George Bunge spoke for the group of thirty people, presenting a huge plaque which read:

CHARLES MOCHEL  
FROM HIS FRIENDS AND ASSOCIATES  
THE BUSINESS MEN OF DOWNERS GROVE

"Charley - we know you best by that familiar name - we each and all want you to know the esteem and affection we have for you.

For fifty years, a full half-century, you have been a business man, a successful merchant, in our village, a record to be proud of in itself.

But more than that, through all those years you have taken an active part in all that meant the welfare of the village in its growth from an obscure hamlet to its present high standing as a metropolitan suburb.

Always mindful of your civic obligations, you have served your home town well.

As friend and neighbor you have always stood the test.

Gesundheit, Charley - We are all for you."

Charley was so overcome with emotion, he declined to give a speech but chose instead to shake hands and speak personally with each business associate. He continued to receive congratulations all week long while customers and friends trooped through the flower-bedecked store receiving refreshments and pink glass cake plates with golden anniversary stickers.

Unfortunately, Charley's wife, Caroline, passed away March 7, 1934 so that she did not live to enjoy the Golden Tribute. However John and Ollun Mochel were there with their son, John Jr.

As Charley aged, John Mochel Sr. took on more business responsibilities, including helping to found Citizens' State Bank of Downers Grove in 1940. John served on the board at Citizens' for twenty years. Another major contribution John Mochel, Sr. made to the village was initiating the organization of the Y.M.C.A.. His grandchildren swam on the "Y" swim team before the beautiful facility that became the Indian Boundary Y.M.C.A. was built at Fairmont and 59th Street. John's wife, Ollun, should also be recognized for her decision to donate the proceeds from the sale of their house to the "Y" years after his death. John was also a deacon in the First Congregational Church at Forest and Curtiss Streets as well as being a member of the village Chamber of Commerce and the American Legion. (As a minor, John had volunteered for service during World War I, requiring his parents' consent. Luckily though, he was called home from Waco, Texas when the armistice was signed after only six months of duty.)

John Mochel, Sr. shared a hobby with both his sister Bertha Mochel Downes and father, Charley. They all were gardening enthusiasts, developing vast portions of their ample yards into flower and vegetable beds. It was a sight (and smell) to behold when all three lived on adjoining properties. They grew everything: sweet corn, tomatoes asparagus, spinach, beets, sunflowers, roses, gladiolas . . . and more.

As the forties progressed Charley Mochel became the elder statesman of Main Street, stopping every afternoon in Wolf's Pharmacy for a chocolate malt and a cigar. Gertrude Hawk, the personable woman behind Wolf's Soda Fountain, described Charley as a round, jolly old gentleman with a sweet disposition and white moustache. She said it was particularly comical when Charley drove his 1940 two-door Ford coupe because all she could see was a tuft of white hair as he was quite short. Evidently, the doting grandfather, Charley allowed John Mochel, Jr. to drive the coupe upon occasion. Unfortunately Charley died only two years before Johnny married Gertrude Hawk's daughter, Doris. However, Charley would have remembered Doris as the first Fall Festival Queen in Downers Grove in 1943.

Only months later, it was time to acknowledge another landmark for Charley Mochel: sixty years in business. Several weeks before the anniversary, the octogenarian entered the Hinsdale Sanitarium with a stomach disorder. Charley's absence caused the celebration to be limited to the presentation of a plaque signed by seventy members of the Retail Merchants Association to John Mochel, Sr.. The hand-engrossed plaque and a huge bouquet of roses were delivered to Charley in the hospital by his son. Resolutions honoring Charley were also passed by the village board and the Grove Lodge A.F. & A.M. of which he was past Master.

John Mochel, Jr. was unavailable as well for the sixtieth anniversary since he enlisted in the Navy immediately after graduating from high school. Like his father, Jack attended Lincoln School but then went on to Downers Grove High School, now known as "North High", where he lettered in football and basketball. Everybody liked Johnny Mochel: he was the popular BMOC) captain of the champion basketball team and class salutatorian. Like the other Mochels, John Jr. is a reserved man but one with a very infectious, almost mischievous sense of humor. Honest to a fault, he would not eat ice cream if it were illegal. Another member of the class of 1944 was Doris Hawk, the pretty brunette who waitressed at the Last Word Restaurant.

While en route home from his tour of duty in the Pacific, Jack's grandfather, Charley Mochel died on May 6, 1946. Charley's stomach problems

gradually deteriorated his health so that he was hospitalized for the last few weeks of his life. Once again, the newspapers were filled with articles paying homage to Charley, detailing his eighty-five years. Innumerable people attended the wake at 811 Maple Avenue besides the funeral at the First Congregational Church of Downers Grove.

The whole event was over when Jack Mochel arrived in Downers Grove. Discharged from the Navy and anxious to continue his education, he contacted several college-bound friends including Doris Hawk. In late 1946, he joined her at Denison University in Granville Ohio where he worked toward a business administration degree. Johnny and Doris became engaged and then married on June 12, 1948. Over a hundred people attended the ceremony at the Congregational Church including Bebe Shoppe, who was then Miss Wisconsin named Miss America that September. Displaying his naive style of humor upon the suggestion that he and his bride should leave the reception, Johnny said, "Good. I want to get some sleep!"

The newlyweds had planned to return to Granville enabling Johnny to finish college at Denison) where Doris had earned a math education degree in '48. However, John Mochel, Sr. became ill. Since his family was his business, it was impossible to separate the two and John Mochel, Jr. stepped in to help his dad handle the hardware store. It was not until 1957 though, that Johnny was made a partner and the business name changed to Mochel's Hardware.

Johnny and Doris raised their four children in Downers Grove, spending most of their years in their present home in Denburn Woods. By 1955, their three little girls were a well-known sight on Main Street. This was the year of a major addition to the hardware store which doubled its size. Three floors were extended including the basement, and an electric freight elevator installed. The original wooden floor was replaced with terrazzo although the front half of the second story now boasts one hundred-year-old wooden floorboards. The shelves on either side of the store sport ten-foot ladders on wheels that slide nearly the length of the store which date back to 1926. Another late-fifties change was that

the coal business, Mochel's bread and butter through the early years was closed out. Customers turned their attention to convenience items like new household appliances and water softener appliances and water, softener salt as well as lawn furniture and outdoor, grills for leisure time activities. Some examples of these items as advertised in 1959 were: a pint thermos for \$1.39, a lawn chair priced at \$3.98, one-gallon picnic jug at \$2.98, and the bargain for the novice outdoor chef, a quart of charcoal lighter fluid for 39¢.

1959 was the year of Mochel's 75th Anniversary, the most gala of all celebrations so far. Buffet lunch was served to 500 guests in the store's basement where there was also an open bar. There is a guest book signed by 700 customers and friends. The seventy-fifth anniversary souvenir was a rectangular glass plate on which the original 1884 storefront was etched through white opaque onto black glass below. 4000 of these beautiful plates were given away.

Two months before the tremendous party, Johnny and Doris announced the birth of their fourth child Lawrence John. Since "it was a boy," the newspapers had an absolute field day in that once again there were three generations of Mochel men to "mind the store". Pictures of John Mochel, Sr. with his son, Jack, and grandson Larry, were taken in front of the store as well as those of the entire family, including the three cherub daughters Leslie, Linda and Cynthia. Although it has never been established that any one of Johnny's children would take over the family enterprise, they have all worked in the store. They started out folding and stuffing bills to be mailed to charge customers and went on to tasks such as gift wrap, bookkeeping, cashier, floor sales, delivery and ordering merchandise.

These four descendants of Charley Mochel remember well the family atmosphere of the store into the mid-sixties. Mochel's Hardware was really a jovial place to work where the owners hosted two major gatherings annually. Every September there was a store picnic which started at breakfast in McDowell Park. Food and beverage was unlimited for all employees and their families. Organized games like feed-sack races were set up for the children; the adults

played poker and softball. And no picnic was complete without wading through the park's waterfall.

At Christmas, there was another dinner in the store's basement where workers exchanged mostly gag gifts. First John Mochel Sr. and then Johnny Mochel stood before the group, ringing a bell, enunciating "Ho! Ho! Ho!" and reading the clever dedications from one, employee to another. Santa always came with presents amazingly wrapped in hardware store paper and neatly labeled for each child.

In April, 1960, John Mochel, Sr. died suddenly after a series of heart attacks over a six-day period resulting from arterial sclerosis. The store closed for the huge funeral, a sad but beautiful spring day. The ceremony was performed at the Congregational Church and John was buried at the Clarendon Hills cemetery, not far from tile site of the farm where his father, Charley, was born.

The sixties progressed as a decade of change for Mochel's beginning with a sprinkler system installed throughout the entire store in 1961. This was a result of the disastrous fire December 22, 1960 that destroyed Thompson's Men Store and Citizens' National Bank, just two doors north of Mochel's! The hardware store basement was a haven for the frozen firemen where they could change to dry clothes and consume hot food and beverage.

Mochel's became a True Value Hardware Store in 1962 and has purchased its merchandise through Cotter and Company since then. Another major change occurred in 1963 when John Mochel, Jr. sold some of his property to the village to expand public parking. The garages and original barn were leveled and a large cinder block warehouse constructed. The next year, the rear of the store was remodeled which included the creation of a glass door and display window. The rear stairway to the basement was also opened up to add to sales space. Johnny then purchased a lift truck to modernize transfer of goods.

Like his predecessors, John Mochel, Jr. has donated his time and energy to several community organizations. He served on the



boards of the D.G. Chamber of Commerce, twenty years at Citizens' National Bank, eighteen years with the D.G. Public Library. Johnny was highly instrumental in securing donations for the primary building of Indian Boundary Y.M.C.A. besides acting as a board member. He is now a regular visitor of the Y.M.C.A. where he swims laps daily to keep in shape. Other activities Johnny enjoys are fishing, travel and spectating at major sporting events. Toward that end, he can already list the Super Bowl, all-star baseball game and Indy 500.

John Mochel, Jr. has been described by his children as the extra kid at the Easter egg hunt. The ideal family gathering to him would be to collect his offspring around a television to cheer on the Black Hawks for three hours. Oldest daughter, Leslie Mochel Rueckert is a veteran flight attendant with United Airlines. She and stockbroker husband, Craig, share a home in Crystal Lake, Illinois. The two older girls both graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio.

Linda Mochel Moler migrated to Littleton Colorado where she is a personnel consultant and her husband, Dave, is a truck-driver/warehouse worker. They have a son, Drew, born in 1978 followed by daughter Amanda in 1979. Johnny's first grandchild arrived in 1971. She is Adrienne Cozza, daughter of Cynthia Moche1, a retailer herself, having owned the LaGrange Merle Norman cosmetic studio for fourteen years. Cyndy and Adrienne share their LaGrange home with stepdad/husband, Lee Smith also a stockbroker. Larry Mochel is twenty-five years old the year of the one hundredth anniversary. He was a mechanic at United Diesel In Elk Grove Village for three years. He is currently involved in several entrepreneurial ventures like plowing snow and painting apartment complexes. Like his grandfather and father, Larry attended Lincoln School but graduated from the "new" South High as did his sisters. He recently began his college education and has accompanied his dad on hardware store business so that he seems to be contemplating continuing the family heritage in hardware.

Larry Mochel and his dad, John Mochel, Jr. both

rode in the Downers Grove sesquicentennial parade in 1982. The Mochel's Hardware float took first prize, just as it did in 1932. Now that Mochel's is observing its 100th year in business, four generations have served Downers Grove customers. John Mochel, Jr. has been the sole proprietor of the store for 24 years, longer than any other owner and, obviously almost one quarter of Mochel's existence. John Mochel, Jr. is the only owner present at all three major anniversaries in 1934, 1959 and 1984. It is conceivable that he will be back in the year 2009 to celebrate 125 years of success.

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