

Abbott's Candy & Gifts

Founded: ca. 1890

Location: Restaurant, Main Street, Hagerstown (at least at one point in Newcomb House Hotel, Main Street) (1890–97); candy factory, behind home at 105 West South Market Street (1897–1985); Two Sisters Store, Main Street (1956–69); Two Sisters Store, Old Redman's Hall, 101 Main Street (1969–); factory, 48 East Walnut Street (1985–)

It is difficult to determine the exact date of the founding of William Clay Abbott's restaurant or the date he began making candy, however, by at least 1890, Abbott was running a restaurant on Main Street in Hagerstown, and for awhile the restaurant was located in the east room of the popular Newcomb House Hotel. Abbott was an excellent cook, and his restaurant was successful. He was regularly tapped by the state fair board to cook for its guests. Evidently Abbott began selling homemade candy and ice cream on the side. In June 1897 he sold his restaurant and became a traveling salesman for Dilling & Company, a local candy maker and confectioner. Frank Dilling and Abbott became fast friends, and Abbott learned the candy business from Dilling. Abbott's daughter-in-law, Rhea Abbott, believed that Abbott's recipes came from Dilling. After awhile, Abbott returned to Hagerstown, reopened his restaurant, and started to sell candy again.

Abbott eventually started a candy factory behind his home in the garage, becoming especially well known for his butterscotch and caramels. William and his son, J. Bruce Abbott, manufactured the candy without machinery, cutting and shaving chocolate, beating the cream for the candy centers, and dipping the candy in melted chocolate by hand. Abbott gradually expanded his backyard factory and quit the restaurant business to concentrate on making Abbott's Candy.

As William's health failed, his son gradually took over the firm. After his father's death in 1942, Bruce and his mother, Florence, continued operating the factory, developing a successful mail-order business that operated throughout the Midwest. Bruce made candy making easier by inventing and installing mechanized stirrers. As a child he had hated that part of the craft and decided as an adult that no one else, including him, should have to stir the chocolate by hand.

Rationing during World War II forced Bruce and Florence to close the factory. Shortly after the war ended the candy-making company was again in business. Three years after V-E Day the Abbotts expanded the factory, adding an extended basement to their home and an additional room on the first floor, complete with a hand-operated elevator and plenty of windows. Bruce died of a heart attack on Christmas Day 1949, leaving behind his wife Rhea and three young children; he had been working overtime to ship out thousands of pounds of Christmas orders. The candy business was left in the hands of Florence and Rhea.

The two widows determined to carry on the family legacy. In order to maintain the secrecy of William's recipes, they manufactured the candy in the back-alley factory themselves. Abbott's Candy continued to use the original recipes into the third generation of the family business. Rhea discovered that the recipes themselves were somewhat sketchy, including instructions as to quantities (handfuls of salt, pounds of sugar, etc.) but no directions as to when and how to mix the ingredients. Furthermore, production by hand was exhausting on such a large scale. It took three women to beat the first batch of cream filling. Rhea quickly mechanized, installing machinery for mixing the cream, melting the chocolate, and dipping the candy.

Rhea was a savvy businesswoman. “Good candy is up our alley” was her slogan, and she began to supply candy for Boy Scout troops, sororities, and churches. She also began to produce elaborate chocolate hats, rabbits, and eggs, which she sold as novelties across the country. In 1956 she opened a candy and gift shop at 101 Main Street and named it The Two Sisters in honor of her daughters. As Rhea told a newspaper reporter, the shop paid for her children’s education. The shop was later moved to a larger location at the west end of the block. The company was incorporated as Abbott’s Candy & Gifts in 1976. One of Rhea Abbott’s daughters, Suanna Abbott Goodnight, took over the shop, which moved to an abandoned 1852 church at 48 East Walnut Street in 1985.

Rhea held a grand opening for the new factory in August 1985. More than a thousand people came to view the new candy operation. Several television stations took viewers on video tours of the facility, and candy enthusiasts from the East and Midwest took group tours. Rhea died in 1988, and Suanna and son-in-law Gordon Goodnight took over the business. The two have added new equipment to the company. The Goodnights constructed a cooling tunnel, installed new shelves for the shipping and storage rooms, and expanded the mail-order capabilities through computerization of records. In 1993 Jay and Lynn Noel opened a branch store in the Clearwater Crossing Shopping Center in Indianapolis. The Goodnights intend to open several additional Indianapolis stores in the future.