

Billy Martin's Store

Founded: 1859

Location: Crossroads at Martinsburg (1859–1974); 10295 South State Road 335 (1974–)

Ezra H. Martin and his brother-in-law Thompson Huff opened a general merchandise store in Martinsburg in 1859. It was typical of most country stores in Indiana in the mid–nineteenth century in that it sold almost anything one needed. The partners sold dry goods, groceries, crockery, glassware, ready-made clothing, writing utensils and supplies, paint, kerosene, medicines, and farm equipment.

Unusual for century-old firms is the fact that the site of the store did not move until a tornado damaged the building in 1974. The original building was already an old structure when Martin and Huff bought it. It was located at the crossroads of the village, and Ezra and his wife, Nancy Jane Huff Martin, lived in a brick house attached to the store. Martin was purported to be an excellent carpenter, and over the course of his lifetime he refurbished the old store, room by room.

Huff left Martinsburg after the end of the Civil War to set up his own business in Bloomfield. After selling his farm and moving next door to the store, Ezra's father, Stephen, filled in as a partner for a time. The oldest of Ezra and Nancy's nine children, William Marion, literally grew up in the store and ultimately succeeded his father in the business. Ezra died in 1918, and William took over. William died five years later, leaving the store in the hands of his second son, Omer C.

William and Mary Adaline Brock Martin had five children, two of whom died in infancy. Omer, born in 1889, grew up in the family store as his father did and started working at an early age. According to one source, Omer had a knack for the business and

gained the respect of his grandfather for his initiative. He enjoyed many sports, including baseball and fishing. He reportedly was also a voracious reader and hid books above the sugar barrels or behind the weighing scales so he could read them during slack periods. He married Effie May Akers in 1914, and after the wedding Effie May worked in the business with her husband and father-in-law.

Around 1918 the company stopped running its huckster wagon and bought a truck. Ezra had started the huckster wagon tradition at the store. He collected produce, such as chickens and eggs, traveled to New Albany or Louisville once a week to sell the goods, then picked up supplies and traveled back to Martinsburg. After the Martins bought the truck, however, the number of trips to the larger cities became more frequent.

Omer and Effie May made several improvements to the store after they took over in 1923. The couple widened the front of the store by taking out several partitions. In addition, Effie May's attention to fashion led her to pick out more popular fabric, which increased the amount of dress material sold at the store. Omer died in 1952, and Effie May followed him a little more than a year later.

In 1966 William "Billy" Martin, Omer and Effie May's only son, turned the general merchandise store into a business that dealt only in appliances and furniture. The company held a three-day sale to get rid of all its general merchandise goods. After a tornado ripped through Martinsburg in April 1974 and destroyed several of Billy's properties, he rebuilt the store across the street. He continued to use the upper floor of the old store building as storage for the firm, but the lower level was revamped into a community center. Billy and Imogene Martin's son, William Craig, joined his family's

firm in the 1980s. He and his wife, Janice Lloyd Martin, became the owners of the company in 1990.

In 1999 the company sold General Electric, High Point, and Whirlpool appliances, Tell City, Bushline, Fortress, and Bassett furniture, and Mohawk carpeting, as well as several hard-surface flooring products. William Craig Martin represented the fifth generation of the family to work in the store and continued as president of the firm, which served eight counties in Indiana and one in Kentucky.