

Kixmiller's Store

Founded: 1846

Location: Lot 1, Freelandville, corner of Carlisle and Indianapolis Streets (1846–1997)

Johann Ritterskampf and his wife Julia emigrated from Germany to “the Crossroads” in the mid-1840s. For a time the Ritterskampf family worked on a farm. Johann helped to settle the area that later became known, thanks to his wife, as Freelandville. The Ritterskampfs’ store was erected in 1846. Ritterskampf hired Samuel E. Smith to survey the town in 1866. The survey was started from an iron bolt on the corner of lot 1, the site of the store.

The firm’s first accounting books were written in German, and the building housing the general merchandise store was made of hewn logs. At the same time that the town was being laid out, a new brick building for the store was constructed; the structure was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. In the 1860s one could buy a live chicken for twenty cents or a bar of soap for ten cents at Ritterskampf’s. The store also offered shoes, boots, overalls, and fresh produce. Ritterskampf’s daughter, Louise, married Simon Kixmiller. Kixmiller was a director of the Peoples Savings, Loan, and Building Corporation and president of the Freelandville Milling Company.

Kixmiller helped Johann run the store after 1865. The name was changed to Ritterskampf-Kixmiller. The store’s designation was changed to Kixmiller’s after Simon became the sole proprietor in 1890. The store remained a general merchandise firm throughout his tenure. Included in the numerous products sold at Kixmiller’s beginning in 1895 were OshKosh products. Because travel into larger towns was sometimes a chore, Johann and Simon employed a “huckster” wagon to deliver groceries and dry goods to neighboring farms. The wagon ran five days a week.

William Rhinehart Kixmiller became the owner of his grandfather's business in 1943, after the death of his father. He made several changes to the old store, lowering the ceiling, laying linoleum and carpet, buying the building next door, and beginning an affiliation with the Red & White food store chain. While he discontinued the "huckster" wagon, he did not, however, end the tradition of giving any child under the age of six a dime to spend on candy. He remained the operator of the store for many years and always made sure that those unable to travel could get groceries. He was on hand to accept the Centennial Business Award from the Indiana Department of Commerce in 1976, and when the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, Kixmiller received the plaque. When he turned ninety a party was thrown at the store in his honor. At that time he still worked in the mart six days a week.

The fourth generation of family ownership began in 1984 when Mary Kixmiller Cummings Sakel, William and Inez Shake Kixmiller's daughter, became the proprietor. She had grown up working in the store. One anecdote, retold over many years by family members, tells that as a young woman Mary had been sent on a business trip to Cincinnati to buy buttons for her grandfather. Instead of buying the buttons by the card, however, she ordered them by the gross. Upon seeing the large number of buttons she had brought back, her grandfather chuckled and told her that she had purchased enough to last until the next century. As of 1992 the buttons were still available for sale. Mary discontinued the selling of shoes and updated some of the decor, but left the distinctive heavy wood and glass cases in place.

In 1995 the fifth generation of Ritterskamp-Kixmiller-Cummings took over proprietorship of the store. In June 1996 the store's sesquicentennial was celebrated with the giving away of several prizes, free samples, and gift certificates. Edward and Brenda Cummings, the son and daughter-in-law of Mary Sakel, owned the grocery and general

merchandise mart until it closed its doors in the summer of 1997. Changing market conditions and low profits contributed to the decision made by the Cummings family. Before it closed the old glass-top cases continued to hold candy and OshKosh clothing, just as it had for more than a hundred and fifty years.