

Stout's Factory Shoe Store Company

Founded: 1886

Location: 66–68 Massachusetts Avenue, Indianapolis (1886–), 318 Massachusetts Avenue

In 1886 Harry Stout and William A. Bristor established Harry Stout & Company, a boot and shoe store at 66 Massachusetts Avenue in Indianapolis. Stout's parents came to Indianapolis from Lexington, Kentucky, shortly after they married in 1853. His father, Benjamin G. Stout, who died in 1875, worked as a bookkeeper and later a retail and wholesale grocer. According to family lore, after Harry founded Stout & Company, his widowed mother, Elizabeth, managed the shoe store while Harry finished an engineering degree at Purdue University. It is unclear what role Bristor played in the business, although his involvement in the company was relatively brief. Harry's brother, Edward E. Stout, seems to have replaced Bristor as a partner in 1891.

Some predicted the store would fail because it was outside the retail district, but Harry attracted customers by selling name-brand shoes at a low profit margin and by stocking a wide variety of sizes. Harry bought shoes from the Selby Shoe Company's factory in Portsmouth, Ohio, and sold them at low prices, and he specialized in hard-to-find sizes, stocking a wide range of sizes (2 to 14) and widths (AAAAA to EEE). The store continued to follow this policy, and in later years Stout's shoe store became popular with athletes with unusually large feet, particularly basketball players. By the turn of the century Harry had shoe stores at four different locations, including stores on Washington Street and Indiana Avenue. The Massachusetts Avenue store had sixteen-foot ceilings and a mezzanine and was fitted with a system of wire baskets attached to an overhead

system of cables and pulleys. The salesman placed the customer's purchases and money in the basket that was transported by cable to the mezzanine where it was rung up and wrapped and then returned to the customer in another basket.

The Stout brothers incorporated the firm in 1901, although they operated under different names at different locations in the first two decades of the century. For example, at 346 West Washington Street the brothers operated the Stout Shoe Company. Other Stout shoe stores included Stout & Amos (later Stout's Special Shoe Company, with Edward acting as president) on South Illinois Street, Stout Company on East Washington Street, and Stout's Factory Shoe Store Company at the Massachusetts Avenue location. The company prospered, staying open late at night to serve customers traveling downtown on the interurbans. The individual stores were connected by a party-line phone, each store answering to a predetermined number of rings, and a bicycle delivery boy shuttled stock between stores. Prior to World War II the company maintained a complete shoe repair service.

Harry died in 1914, and Edward ran the stores while all three of Harry's sons served in World War I. Richard Stout joined the American Ambulance section of the French army before the United States became involved in the war. He was later awarded France's Croix de Guerre for recovering wounded troops while under enemy fire. (The certificate still hangs in Stout's store.) He later became a pilot, joined the reserves, and was killed in an airplane accident over Fort Benjamin Harrison in 1926; Stout Field, the headquarters of the Indiana National Guard, is named in his honor. Harry's other sons, Sidney A. and Oliver H. Stout, both joined the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps and saw active duty. Following their military service, Harry's sons took part in the

management of the family store, which eventually expanded to include six downtown branches.

Stout's Factory Shoe Store Company prospered throughout the 1920s but suffered during the depression. Three of the Stout stores closed during the depression, in part due to management problems at the branches. The company survived with a \$100,000 loan. By the end of the 1930s sales began to increase, and the company was able to repay its debt. World War II presented another crisis for the company. Sidney and Oliver were members of the Indiana Air Reserve and were called up for duty in World War II. (Sidney attained the rank of lieutenant colonel, and Oliver became chief of staff of the Indiana Air National Guard, retiring as a brigadier general.) Edward Stout came out of retirement to manage the stores while Oliver and Sidney were on active military duty. Unwilling to compromise his standard in the face of government regulations that required stores to purchase a certain number of shoes in order to buy rationed all-leather shoes, Edward allowed the stores' stock to dwindle.

After the war Oliver and Sidney returned to manage the stores; Oliver became president in 1946, the year in which Edward Stout died. Sidney served the company as vice president and secretary-treasurer before his death in 1964. The store continued to boast a wide selection of sizes and widths, and a parrot named Billy became a distinctive feature of the store and a major attraction to children. Two reporters writing in the 1970s claimed one could walk into Stout's at any time and find 30,000 pairs of shoes. Oliver's son, Harry, also a pilot in World War II, assumed ownership of the store. The last of Stout's old branches closed in 1960, but the company began to expand again in the 1980s, opening a Carmel store, owned by Harry's son Brad Stout, in 1985 and a

Greenwood branch in 1991. Stout's Factory Shoe Store Company continued to maintain its downtown location on Massachusetts Avenue, however, complete with its antique shoe-delivery system of baskets and pulleys.