

Businessman Dale T. Kirlin Sr., built company that is now largest independent Hallmark Gold Crown dealer in country



Well-known retired businessman Dale T. Kirlin Sr., who started his first fine candy store in Quincy more than 61 years ago, died Tuesday in Sunset Home. He was 93.

Quincy Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Amy Looten said Quincy has lost “an exemplary leader” and “a true gem” with Kirlin’s death.

“Mr. Kirlin was the ideal example of an entrepreneur. He experienced several disappointing businesses before starting [Kirlin's Hallmark](#), in the late 1940s, but he never gave up,” Looten said. “I doubt that he had any idea, in the beginning, that he would build the largest Hallmark dealership in the country. He was just trying to fill a need in our community.”

On March 10, 1948, Mr. Kirlin and his wife, Marian, opened their first candy store in the 100 block of North Sixth in Quincy, called Andes Candies after the Chicago-based candy company. After numerous requests from customers to also offer greeting cards, the Kirlins added the Hallmark card line.

“I had to borrow \$5,000 from my wife’s brother to open that store, that’s how poor we were,” Mr. Kirlin remembered in a story that is on the Kirlin’s Hallmark Web site. “We had to struggle in those early years. I’d take out before daylight in my station wagon to deliver merchandise and seldom got back before dark.”

He opened a second store in Hannibal, Mo., in 1951 and a third in Jacksonville in 1953. Mr. Kirlin moved the Quincy store to 518 Maine in 1957, and the business became known as Kirlin’s Inc. in 1963.

The store was destroyed by a fire that swept through the adjacent Brown Drug Store on Nov. 15, 1968. Mr.

Kirlin moved across the street and got back in business in seven days, and then in 1969, he bought the corner Kresge building where the store and corporate offices remain today as an anchor to the Historic Quincy Business District.

The Kirlin operation has grown to become Hallmark's largest independent distributor in the United States, with 97 stores in 10 Midwestern states.

"The first 30 years, we lived on a shoestring," Mr. Kirlin said in 1989 interview with The Herald-Whig. "The man upstairs sat on my shoulder a lot. We had a lot of good luck — you make your own luck."

Mr. Kirlin retired in May 1981. "Old candy men never die, they just become sweeter," he told The Herald-Whig.

Rob Ebbing, executive director of the Oakley-Lindsay Center, worked for Kirlin's for 28 years and was advertising director for Kirlin's Hallmark before taking his current job.

"He's always been my mentor and the man who taught me business ethics," Ebbing said. "He was the type of person who expected a lot from the people who worked for him, but he didn't expect anything of anyone that he wouldn't do himself."

Ebbing said he would often see Kirlin washing windows in the store or changing a light bulb.

A native of rural Stillwell in southern Hancock County, Mr. Kirlin moved to Mendon when his father drowned in 1924. He graduated from Mendon Township High School in 1933 and drove a truck for eight months before getting a chance to join S.S. Kresge in Omaha, Neb.

"I was a green country kid scared to death," he told The Herald-Whig in 1974. "I even had to lie about my age (which was 18). I was supposed to be 21. I was a country boy. I knew how to work."

His first job was as a stock boy for S.S. Kresge. After 11 years, he moved to St. Joseph, Mo., then to Chicago and Kansas City, where he met and married fellow employee Marian Gorman in 1941.

Mr. Kirlin and his wife sold fireworks in West Quincy, Mo., before they opened the Andes Candies store. Mrs. Kirlin died in 1989.

Those who knew Kirlin say his efforts on behalf of community causes were well-known.

Quincy Notre Dame High School Principal Ray Heilmann has been at the school for 38 years and said even before his arrival, Kirlin was a leader.

“He was a great supporter of education, both public and private. Anything for the community, Mr. Kirlin was always at the forefront,” Heilmann said.

Heilmann said the greatest testament to Kirlin’s influence is the continuing leadership and community support by his sons, Dale Jr. and Gary, who benefited from their father as a role model.

Mr. Kirlin was involved with the Quincy Chamber of Commerce, the Quincy Plan Commission, the Community Development Committee, the United Way of Adams County and Quincy Elks Lodge. He served as director of the Distributive Education Program and the Illinois Retail Merchants Association. He was the director of the fund drive for what was then known as the Parochial Secondary Education Foundation (which eventually became the Quincy Notre Dame Annual Fund Drive).

He received numerous awards, including Quincy Area Chamber of Commerce’s Parker A. Gates Award in 1989 and the Saukee Area Council of Boy Scouts Distinguished Citizen Award in 1993.

Mr. Kirlin was honored in 2007 by the Historic Quincy Business District with the Long Term Business Story Award and was inducted into the Chamber of Commerce Business Hall of Fame in 2008.