

Adventures in Starting a Small Business in Lewisburg

by
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Most of us have come from other areas to live in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and we each have a story to tell. This is the story of Charles and Irmy Hartung.

We had come from the New York City area, and then moved to Philadelphia where Charles attended and graduated from Optometric College. He had passed 3 State Boards the first attempt. Now the great unknown was before us. It was 1953. Where should we find a rural community in which there would be a good location to establish an Optometric practice and where it would be a great place to raise a family. The search was on.

During my three-week vacation from work as a Medical Assistant, we ventured off on a 1700-mile journey through Pennsylvania in our 1941 Pontiac. We kept a log - descriptions of the towns visited and information from talking to the locals and State Police about it. We arrived in Lewisburg on a Sunday morning. No one was on the streets; no stores were open. So everyone must have been in church or in bed. Oh well, off to the next stop. It was interesting to us that no matter where we went in a 60-mile radius, we kept hearing from state troopers that the area they served was nice but we really should look into Lewisburg for our needs. We traveled north, west, and south where we saw Bedford (located about half way between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh) as a possibility for locating. We returned to Lewisburg for a second look after all those recommendations. We met with Edwin Mensch, realtor, and stated our needs. He promised to call us within a short time with office and apartment possibilities. In those days after WWII, space was at a premium for business needs. Whichever space opened in Bedford or Lewisburg, that would be our choice. True to his word, Mr. Mensch called within a few days. Chuck went to investigate and returned with enthusiasm to begin a new phase of our lives.

In early August we arrived in Lewisburg in our Pontiac packed with all our belongings and our pet turtle sloshing around in its bowl near the inside roof of the car. It was 2 am and we tried to get into our apartment but no luck. Luckily the house next door had living room lights aglow and we found someone sitting reading. Whew. Possible help. A short introduction, assurance that getting into the apartment was a possibility and we thankfully had landed safely, so to say. The friendly neighbors turned out to be Bill and Nancy Ruhl, who became life-long friends.

With no furniture, we slept on all our linens and blankets and ate food that did not require refrigeration or heating. Now it was time to get to work at the office location in a space adjoining the Busser Supply business on Market St. between 5th and 6th Sts. A waiting room, secretarial space, wash room, exam room and storage had to be rebuilt. From August to October people would see a 6'4" young man working with a carpenter to create an optometric office. In the evenings for months we hand-addressed a total of 5000 announcements – yes, 5000. We heard about that personal touch for two years afterwards. On his first day open, Chuck never got home for lunch as visitors came in to look around and wish him good luck with his Practice. We were on our own and yes, scared if we could make it. We didn't know how to play bridge! (another story) The news that we were in a flood zone did not help.



Charles Hartung in the Lewisburg office

We started our family and Cathy, Steve, and Dane were born and raised in Lewisburg. While Chuck and I had adopted Lewisburg, our children are natives. We

were living in a small apartment with no hallway [called a railroad apt.] so the search for a home was the next step. Mr. Mensch came to the rescue again and offered a home in the "country." It was August, 1956. It meant a down payment and a mortgage for \$90/month. Could we do it? It was a brick home built in 1954, by a stone gravel street. There were soybeans and corn growing from the backyard to within sight of now Route 15, which was about a 1/2 mile away. There was no shade. Answer - we had a laundry pole with 4 corners of lines, on top of which was a canvas for shade. Since then many trees have been planted on the main lot and our adjoining lot.

Then came the years with events least expected, like Agnes, the flood of 1972. I heard a warning alarm during the night and called on the phone to see what the emergency was about. In those days you could talk to an operator. I was warned to come to the office and protect our property. Well, I put my bike in the car, packed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and my knitting and off I went to town. The nightmare began.

I drove to town, found a high place to park the car and opened the office. What was I to do? Starting with putting things on tables, etc. at least off the floor, I then was aware that the patients' charts had to be protected and somehow I managed to get them in the car. There was activity in the Doughnut Shop across the street (now Casa de Pizza), so I went there asking, "What do we do -- just watch the water come up?" I had no idea of flood damages of the past. The Police Chief, Gordon Hufnagle, had already drowned, and a car was being pushed sideways along 6th Street by the force of the water. Water was rising up the parking meters and one felt so helpless against the forces of nature.

Quite suddenly the front door of the office flew open and a small army of men rushed in, grabbing things off the walls, tables, etc. Who were they, what were they doing in our office? I panicked and screamed for help as I saw John Baker, our mayor, come in. I yelled over all the bedlam, "John, get Chuck!"



Agnes flood, 1972: Market St. looking west from 5th St. Our shop was just beyond Busser's Supply

Men pushed past me and went into the exam room. Before I could stop them, they forcefully lifted the top of Chuck's desk up, not realizing it was notched to side cabinets. Everything flew in the air - lamp, books, frames, lenses and whatever he had laid there the night before. Suddenly things were being put into two trucks parked out front. John had managed to get Chuck across Rt. 15 in a rowboat. We stood there in the middle of a nightmare. The trucks rushed off, we followed. The men were volunteers from wherever and were not aware of the bumps in the road. Hitting straight on, the contents of the truck fell over - everything (yes, lenses, instruments, etc.) fell over in a heap. They continued on to unload at the Armory. As best they could, the debris was piled in a heap on the floor. When Chuck saw that he said, "Here is my life's work." Shock. I was blamed for having gone to town and opening the office. Next came many days of scrubbing walls and doing anything to restore the office. Of course, moldy walls showed up soon because of all the water behind what we could see. There was nothing more to be done except wait out the summer months for things to dry out and all his equipment could be repaired. Optical labs at that point were overworked repairing the equipment of other victims of Agnes.

Finally in fall, we were able to begin again. What we did not realize was that the whole building was water soaked and the dampness would be a hazard to Chuck's health. He came down with another viral pneumonia causing him to lose 3 months

work. I marvel to this day how loyal patients were to wait long months for their glasses over the summer and then followed by his illness. That takes us up to fall, 1973.



Demolition of flood damaged buildings;
Busser's and our shop are already gone.

Redevelopment government agencies slowly began to demolish or buy up houses on the square that was Market Street from 5th to 6th, that became Hufnagle Park. We were promised we could leave our office in just a few weeks. That promise dragged on until December 1977, five years.

There were legal complications with our lease with Busser's that would not allow us to move into our own building across the street. We would lose all government help (1% loan to rebuild, if I recall correctly). Had we known it would take five years we probably would have just moved. In those years Chuck had to do the best possible in making repairs for the office while aware it was not his property. I remain amazed again at the patience of Chuck's patients.

Finally Christmas 1977 we were given three weeks to build a new office at #528.

We worked round the clock with many loyal workers to create a new office. During that freezing time, the pipes froze, had to be thawed, and that caused a fire. Mike Black heard the alarm and came to the rescue. His quick thinking and action saved us from more damage. I worked at night tearing out horsehair insulation.



Charles and Army Hartung in front of #528 Market St.

John Ruhl worked in the cold basement putting in insulation for the new heating system. I still have the long knife with a short piece broken off as a reminder of those days of him cutting insulation. Thanks to a great many hard-working plumbers, carpenters, etc., we prepared to open January 13th. That date held its own story. We moved across the street in a blizzard on January 13th, a Friday no less. There Chuck had his optometric practice until 1989 when he retired.

Retirement. Again, changes in life in which Chuck expanded his pottery skills, his own basketry patterns, and finally water color painting. His is probably the only painting of the Presbyterian Church tower half sporting half white and half black paint. It happened to be at the time the church was being painted and he painted as he saw it. My favorite memory of his painting is of him sitting along the side of the stream at Half Way Dam (that's how we got to know the name).

Point of interest – the pine tree that was in the back yard of the old office on the south side of Market is the beautiful tree that graces Hufnagle Park, a special beauty at Christmas time.

It has been a pleasure to reminisce with you. Lewisburg Is Our Home and we have been blessed to be here.

✧ **ACCOUNTS** ✧