GEORGE DOWNHAM STORY
by Mrs. Charles Downham

"You say you want to start a soft drink parlor? HERE? Hell, man, this is a saloon town!". G. R. Jacoby, the town banker, stared incredulously at the small but determined looking man before him. "I know that, sir, but I think there should be a place where young folks and ladies could go", replied the small man. Mr. Jacoby was a man of quick decisions and said, "I'll trust you as you are, George, and lend you a thousand dollars. You can pay me back as you are able".

This was how Downham's Confectionery came into being in East Grand Forks, Minnesota, in the year 1905 and George Downham became one of its most colorful, loyal and devoted citizens. It was a dream come true for a happy little Englishman orphaned at fourteen and having lived the Oliver Twist existence on fifty cents a week and room and board as a cash boy in a large department store in London, England, where he was born, October 22, 1871. He had known the meaning of cold, hunger and the wants of children. When he was seventeen his brothers saved enough money to send him to America to seek his fortune. He had worked on farms, in grocery stores and as a delivery man, but now, in his early thirties, married and the father of a small son and daughter, he felt he was on the road to success. The little store on DeMers Avenue, dwarfed by the garrish and noisy saloons, was not making him rich but was catching on. People liked George with his hearty laugh and love of life.

At night George and his wife, Amanda, would count the contents of the cash box he brought up to their one-room living quarters above the store and if it contained thirteen dollars it gave them high hopes for the future. But one night in July, 1908, a fire broke out in the Smith and Sinclair livery barn and besides George's little store, the fire wiped out Lodgord's Blue Light saloon, P. J. Sullivan's barber shop, Sam Lee's Chinese laundry. Henry Knudson's barber shop, Peterson's hotel restaurant and saloon and stopped only because it reached the new foundation of the brick building being built by Andrew Peterson.

Undaunted, George rented a large tent and set up his store as best he could across the street on DeMers Avenue. He kept up a spirit of carnival and clowned to his customers but his heart was heavy because he knew the tent could not house a store in the winter and he still owed Mr. Jacoby most of the thousand dollars. However, Mr. Jacoby had faith in George's ability and one day he held out a roll of bills and said "Take another thousand, George, and start over again". Many years later George became a director of the bank and at one time affixed his signature on United States currency issued by the bank.

In November George moved into a building at 208 DeMers Avenue which had housed the Valley View (now The Record) which had moved to the basement of the newly constructed First State Bank. The frame building with a high false front became the permanent home of Downham's Confectionery. It was larger than the old store and George had many new plans, installing a huge marble soda fountain with a big mirror behind it and high stools in front of it. An ice house was built behind the store, where large chunks of river ice were stored. A most tedious chore was iceing up the soda fountain every morning. Hearing about the fad of ice cream cones, he promptly started making his own, using thirty eggs for each batch and baking them one at the time on a small iron, using a wooden cone to shape them. They were crisp and fragile and consequently George ate many of them himself. Filled with ice cream they sold for five cents each. Often he would buy a whole carload of fruit and sell it in one day on the sidewalk in front of the store. Mostly it was bananas but sometimes it was blue grapes in the basket, peaches or oranges which the wholesale houses could not sell because of lack of refrigeration. The saloonkeeper and showman gave George many ideas and early in the morning of the sale he would take a pot of liquid plaster of paris and a small paint brush and any-one walking down town would read the sidewalk signs announcing the sale. He induced Amanda to sew a tiny white apron and a tall hat for his small red-headed four year old son, Charles, who stood beside his father shouting "Tbanas" and telling the customers to hold the sack when they purchased fruit from him. He couldn't know then that this was the beginning of his life work in the store.

Boom times came to East Grand Forks. The candy store flourished and four girls were hired to help. High School girls eagerly sought these jobs and worked after school, week-ends, holidays and throughout the summer as part-time help. George worked early and late seven days a week. The store, especially on Saturday evenings when there was an influx of farmers and their families in town for an evening of shopping and fun, stayed open until one or two o'clock in the morning, and when there happened to be a street fair it was open all night. This happened the night his youngest son, Bill, was born. Bumper crops brought prosperity to farmers and the harvest attracted drifters from everywhere. They were not paid until the crop was in and their work was done. They trusted George and many of them would bring their hard earned money to him for safe keeping before they began their prowl of the saloons, knowing full well that was the only way they could hope to have any afterward.

Sometimes during the threshing season, some of the saloon keepers would hire Mr. House and his taxi to gather up these drifters for a week-end in town. The workers would wheedle the farmer for an advance on their pay, which the farmer was reluctant to give them because he knew he would have to take a team of horses and a wagon and go to town on Sunday night to gather them up or he would have no crew on Monday morning. A threshing crew would number anywhere from twenty to thirty men and the farm women would work from three o'clock in the morning until midnight to serve them breakfast, two lunches, dinner and supper.

When North Dakota banned the sale of snuff, George came to the rescue of the Scandinavian settlers and mailed hundreds of rolls of Copenhagen to the grateful customers. At one time the tobacco tax was lower in Minnesota than in North Dakota and Canadians would flock to the store to buy their supplies, which were cheaper than in Canada. Every Canadian holiday would find the streets crowded and every establishment full of customers. For a good many years the sale of fireworks was banned in North Dakota and not in Minnesota, and customers would line up for a block waiting to get into the store to buy their fireworks. The Fourth of July also was the day of the big community picnic held in the city park and attracting hundreds of families who brought their picnic dinners and stayed all day until after the fireworks display in the evening. George and Jack Sherlock spent many hours planning these picnics sponsored by the city merchants. George cooked the coffee in big wash boilers and conducted the sports program — foot and sack races, greased pig contests, hog and husband calling contests, ladies nail driving contests, etc. — and his antics were talked about for years. He loved to play the violin and was a member of the pit orchestra at the "Met", the Grand Forks