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 delicious cheesecake was icing 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 move because of lack of refrigeration.

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 "T'banas" 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 thrashing 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 wheelie 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 thrashing 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 contest, 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
opera house, and he was often called on to fiddle for a dance. He also was an avid fisherman and taught many a young man the fine art of casting for bass.

George added to his merchandise anything that he felt would bring more customers. He was the first and for several years the only retailer of Hallmark cards in the area. He hung racks from the ceiling and filled them with magazines shipped from Minneapolis. Later, when the Gaulke News Agency opened in Grand Forks, he added a magazine department in the back part of the store and carried the largest stock of magazines, books and comic books in the two cities.

The store became a sort of an institution of learning as young and old spent many hours in the magazine section, in the winter warming their feet on the floor register while they read and munched a handful of popcorn which they had grabbed as they walked past the shiny popcorn machine that stood by the front door filled with fresh hot popcorn. George knew the aroma or a sample would usually bring a sale. The machine became an important part of the business and also a harbinger of spring when George pulled it out on the sidewalk and took his familiar post behind it, giving him an opportunity to see what was going on in his beloved town and a chance to greet customers and friends as they passed by.

From the day the store opened until the day it closed it was "a home away from home" for the young folks who would come in after school, week-ends and during vacations. It became their "hang-out". George knew when a lad needed advice in order to set things right at home and gladly dispensed it. He liked to help with their school work, especially arithmetic as he had good training in that as a London cash boy. But with all this he was not averse to cussing a boy and rushing him out of the store when he was rude or got out of line. It was one thing to be loud but another to be rowdy. He knew when young couples were engaged to be married, often before their parents knew. Downham's was the place to bring a girl for a dish of ice cream after a show, often a vaudeville at the "Orpheum" in Grand Forks, and if he could afford to splurge the young man would buy Banana splits and a bag of popcorn to eat on the way home. A child, clutching a hoarded penny, would stare at the large assortment of candy and the patience of clerk and parent wore thin at the change of mind as to which was the best buy.

George was highly opinionated as to what was good or bad for the town and gave freely of those opinions to the men who ran the town or came to the store for their tobacco, coke or a dish of ice cream. He made some enemies but none could stay angry with him for long. He was often asked to be a candidate for mayor but always refused, saying that as a business man he had no right to take sides and politics was not his cup of tea; however, he was an influential man in the affairs of the city government. When it was decided that the town must have cement sidewalks he went from door to door on Second Street, where he now owned a home, and secured the signatures of everyone except a poor widow who could not afford the higher taxes. She was stubborn but so was George and he finally convinced her the street could not have part cement sidewalks and part wooden ones so she agreed to sign and for the rest of her life every Sunday he brought her the Sunday newspaper and a pint of ice cream which he delivered personally on his way home to dinner.

George prospered where almost no one thought it possible. He eventually bought the building that housed his store and later acquired the adjoining properties at 210 and 212 DeMers Avenue. For years he rented the building at 212, once a store operated by the Parness sisters, to the city for use as a city rest room. The city furnished it with two rows of rockers, cribs, a full view mirror and a "powder room". They even installed a free telephone. A matron was in attendance all day and
women could leave their children while they shopped. It became a meeting place and a social center, especially for the farm women. The location made it an ideal place for the many food sales that were conducted there. Policemen, always on foot, used it for a resting place at night and later had a telephone installed with a flashing red signal light over the street outside. Malicious vandalism was no problem at that time and the building was never locked. Once in a while during the night it would be a haven for some of the town characters like little “Peaches” in his long flowing overcoat, shuffling in and flopping into one of the rockers or “Wheel 'Em Pete” who once pulled a pair of pliers from his overall pocket and prevailed on Oscar Norlin to pull an aching tooth on the bank steps.

The women from the country churches came to George to get their supply of pop, candy and whatever was necessary for the refreshment stand at their annual Ladies Aid Auction every summer. This was a gala day. Many of the people from town anticipated these auctions enjoying the sumptuous dinners they had served on long tables outdoors, eating the home-made ice cream and buying home-made articles, the most popular items being the woolen mitts and socks the women had knitted from wool that they had carded and spun at their meetings. These meetings began in the morning and even though the homes were small they brought their spinning wheels and wool and worked all day, the hostess furnishing the noon meal and lunches.

George had unlimited energy and met each day with zest. What was good for the town was what he wanted. He laughed and joked and enjoyed business for almost fifty years. When the store was temporarily closed in July during the Second World War, because it was not an essential business, George wept openly and so did many children. Charles became an essential milkman until the Minnesota Dairy found a man for the city route and later an essential worker during campaign at the beet sugar factory. He found it a novelty to work just twelve hours a day instead of seventeen or eighteen and fully enjoyed being able to stay home on Sundays and holidays. George kept in touch with his city by selling popcorn in front of the store and selling war bonds on DeMers Avenue. When the cold drove him indoors he enclosed a small area in front of the store, where he sold popcorn and whatever merchandise he could beg and buy from the wholesale houses. By the next midsummer the store was again in full operation. When the city celebrated V.J. Day, George rushed to buy American flags, remembering the clamor for flags and how he had sold hundreds of them when the First World War ended. The next day he was dismayed to find that only a few flags had been sold and he wondered what had happened to patriotism and flag waving.

There were fine years and there were lean years, but George found all of them worth living. When both George and Charles were finally spent and the store was closed forever, it was a sad day for the town. The store housed the gay happy place they had known. The young people today missed a fine era, an era that produced men like George or perhaps it was an era produced by men like George. He and his store were so much a part of the past history of East Grand Forks! Twenty-five years have passed since George entered into rest on May 21, 1951. Even though he may not have agreed with some of it, he would have been proud of the progress made by the city in that quarter century.

EICKHOF CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

Three sons were born to Daniel and Magdalene Meier Eickhof of Wohlesbussen, Germany. Chris, the oldest son, was born September 25, 1849, and attended school for eight years at Hollestedt, Germany. He was rejected from military service because of ill health, and became an apprentice to a contractor for three years, receiving board, room and clothing, plus seven dollars a year. After this, he studied architecture at a technical school in Buxtehude, Germany.

On May 9, 1875, Maria Kathina Christina Johanna Dammon was married to Christain (Chris) Eickhof in Hollestedt, Germany. Maria (called Johanna) Dammon was the youngest daughter of Heinrich and Magrata Harms Dammon and was born in Alkoster, Buxtehude, Germany, on November 19, 1849. She had six sisters and one brother, namely Anna (Mrs. Barrett Heinrichs), Magrata (Mrs. Morris George), Gisa or Bertha (Mrs. Otto Wallman and later Mrs. John Kann), Elizabeth (Mrs. Carl Billig), Dorothea (Mrs. William Eggers), and Heinrich Dammon.

Johanna's father was a shoemaker and she had a very good education. She could read and write Latin fluently and was confirmed in the Lutheran faith on March 2, 1868. Her father died when she was seventeen years old and her mother died when she was nineteen years old. After that she lived with her sisters until her marriage to Chris Eickhof. Johanna and three of her sisters later came to America to live.

Chris inherited the Eickhof estate because he was the oldest son. His father lived with them for six years. Three children were born to them in Germany — Bertha, Johanna, and Dora. They sold their home in the spring of 1881 and came to America to live. They stopped ten days at Liverpool and were on the ship for twelve days in crossing the Atlantic. Chris's brother, John, also came to America with them and the fare was three hundred dollars each. Johanna had two sisters living in Red Wing and Chris had a brother, Fred, living at St. Hilaire, Minnesota. They visited in Red Wing when they arrived in Minnesota and came to Crookston the following spring. They lived on the hill until their home at 510 North Front Street was completed on September 24.

Eight children were born in America — Henry, Laura, Flo, Chris, Ann, Nettie, Frances and William.

Chris had his own business and named it "Chris Eickhof Construction Company." Many houses and buildings still stand as a monument of his work.

Chris and Johanna celebrated their Silver and Golden Wedding anniversaries with all the living children and their families present. They took many trips, and in December, 1908, they returned to Germany to visit relatives and friends. Johanna's sisters and brother were still living at that time. One winter they spent in California, attended the World's Fair and visited the Panama Canal Zone. Every Christmas their children, their in-laws and grandchildren would come home. This was an occasion that no one would miss.

Chris would not allow any of his girls to work with him, and in 1910 he took Otto in as a partner. The firm was then named "Chris Eickhof and Sons." Henry passed away in 1885 and when William returned home after World War I he was not interested in the business. Chris retired in 1921, leaving the business to Otto.

Chris and Johanna enjoyed good health until the summer of 1927 when Chris was very ill. He was ill again in 1930 and was never very strong after that. They enjoyed each other's company and played a game of cards called "Sixty-Six." Chris would help Johanna with the dishes so they could return to their card game. The days were also spent reading the daily papers and when Johanna's eyesight failed, Chris read the papers to her. The reading also included a German paper with a serial story.

On December 24, 1934, when everyone was home for Christmas, Chris passed away. The family came to celebrate, but stayed to mourn.