

For western drug store

Free ice water built a mini-empire

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WALL, S.D. — Free Ice Water! Five-cent coffee. A life-size animated cowboy band that sings! And signs. They're just some of the elements that help make up Wall Drug.

It's a far cry today from the Depression year of 1931, when Ted and Dorothy Husted bought a small drug store in the dusty, small western South Dakota town of Wall. Ted, a young pharmacy graduate, was just making his way in the world. "The early years were tough," he recalls.

Then, one day, Dorothy had an inspiration. Why not put out signs advertising free ice water?

It was a subtle stroke of genius; after the signs were erected, weary, dusty travelers began stopping to quench their thirst. They usually bought a hamburger or a few newspapers, too, and the Wall Drug epic began.

THE FIRST ice water machine at Wall Drug was a Huber Goldberg contraption, designed by Ted, that consisted of a 1,000-gallon cistern with pure spring water from Wasta, a little town down the road and a few miles west. Volume was about five hundred gallons a day. From the cistern a garden hose ran to a 30-gallon elevated tank in the old drug store. Each morning Ted pumped the tank full, and took in a supply of ice.

Today's travelers, motoring in air conditioned cars, still stop for the free ice water, sometimes as many as 15,000 a day.

But what they see today is a far cry from those Depression days of the dirtiest Wall Drug is a magnificent building, housing one of the finest private collections of Western art, a dining room that seats 400, Western clothes,

Black Hills gold, souvenirs and, of course, a pharmacy. Ted, Dorothy and their son Bill have put together an attraction that is one of a kind.

HARD WORK created today's Wall Drug. Bill Husted, who has worked 31 years with his parents, and now actively manages the store, remembers the early years.

"It was so hard and so difficult that I said to myself the last thing I'll do is come back to Wall. I went in the Navy at 17 and almost stayed. But always back in my mind was somewhat of a compulsion to make the drug store more than an ordinary store. After college Mom and Dad encouraged me to come back, and I thought, I will but I'll only stay for five years." He's been there ever since.

"When I was a kid, we worked hard like everyone else. We were all poor together, sold lemonade at celebrations, and I went house to house in the summer selling ice. I sold popcorn at the local movie theater. Those Depression years have made us what I call 'Depression cautious' in our nature."

THOSE DEPRESSION lessons helped make Bill and Ted Husted shrewd businessmen. "When we decided to enlarge in the 1950s, we took a hard look at things. It was the first time in our lives we were solvent," Bill says.

"We thought the expansion out and came to several conclusions. Our life blood was those tourists coming down the highways, and getting them to stop. If the tourists didn't come, and if they didn't stop, we were in trouble."

It was at this point that Wall Drug went international with outdoor signs. "We needed free publicity and the signs would do the job," says Bill. So up went posters in Paris and the French Riviera, 6,000 of them, signs in Amsterdam,

London and all over the United States and the world. "We started giving out 25,000 free Wall Drug signs a year to visitors. Those signs went out and are up all over the world. And the people came."

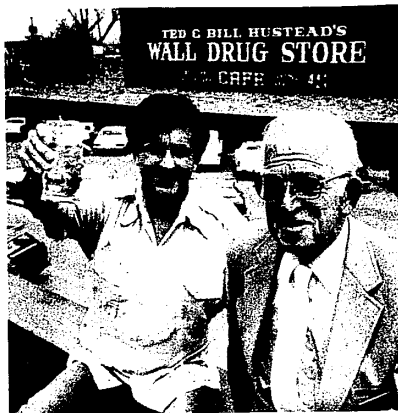
"We invited editors, writers, broadcasters, and suddenly Wall Drug stories began appearing in every newspaper in the U.S., from the New York Times to the smallest South Dakota weekly."

TODAY, WALL Drug doesn't cost the tourist a cent. "For free, you can see one of the finest, Western art collections in the Midwest, an excellent collection of Indian artifacts, the animated cowboy band, and the list goes on and on," says Ted Husted. "Ice water is still free, and coffee's a nickel. And if you don't want to purchase anything, you don't have to."

But it's not easy to get in and out of Wall Drug without buying something. Best sellers vary, but with a choice of 6,000 pairs of cowboy boots, a boxcar load of western straw hats, one of the finest choices of western books, rocks, Black Hills gold, and so on, it's hard to leave without buying.

"The best selling items are the native-crafted works, says Ted. "Moccasins made at Pine Ridge, Black Hills gold made in Rapid City and Deadwood, Badlands pottery made by local Sioux, and Black Hills ceramics."

WALL DRUG IS, and will always be, one thing of importance to the area a drug store. Bill's daughter-in-law Kathy is the fourth generation of pharmacists to work in the family business. We service over 6,000 square miles in the Wall area, and fill 30-40 prescriptions a day," says Bill.



Bill Husted offers a toast of ice water with his dad, Ted Husted, in front of their famous South Dakota drug store.


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