

Kiddles—A Lake Forest Tradition of Selling Bicycles

The Kiddles family and sporting good store in Market Square have been a fixture in Lake Forest for many years, one of the few businesses to continue since the 1920's! The store was opened by Stanley Kiddle. Stanley's brothers Joseph and later, Charles joined him. Originally, the store was more like a hardware store that also provided bike sales, rentals and repairs. In those days, bikes were sold from hardware stores and assembled. Joseph worked primarily with the bicycles which were located in the basement of the store. The Historical Society has a copy of a wonderful document from the early years at Kiddles, a hand-written register of every bike sold between 1936-1956 and then 1960. The list includes the name of each person who received a bike, the brand of bike and color. Initially there were only three types of bikes being sold; Hercules and Raleigh both made in England and Lincolns made by Chicago-based Schwinn Company.

In 1936, Kiddles sold 135 bicycles. In 1937, most of the 160 bicycles sold were Lincolns followed by 16 Hercules and 1 Raleigh. By 1953 they sold 144 Schwinn's, 65 Hercules, and 4 Raleighs. In 1946, Raleigh and other English bicycle manufacturers accounted for 95 percent of bikes imported to the U.S. However, the Schwinn company bikes were the popular ones locally. The last year of records in 1960 shows that Kiddles sold 434 bikes (including 85 at Christmas) and of those 319 were Schwinn's. Many current Lake Foresters can trace the year they got their first bike and then subsequent trade-ups from this wonderful document.

The Kiddle family traces their roots back to Othery, England. Charles and Ann Kiddle, parents of the three brothers who ran the Market Square store and one other brother William, emigrated to the United States in 1904. Charles had been a successful dairyman in England and established his own dairy farm in rural Libertyville. Later, he moved his family to Lake Forest and became the foreman of the David B. Jones estate.

Stanley Kiddle and his family lived at 895 Summit, directly across from West Park and the site of Lake Forest Day which was always a popular summer event for the Kiddles. In fact, Kiddles store was often represented in the Lake Forest Day parade with someone riding their antique high-wheel bicycle, also called a "penny-farthing" bike because it resembled two sizes of the English coin.

Kiddles has been located at 258 Market Square since the 1920's. Market Square designed by Howard Van Doren Shaw was the first planned shopping center. It began as a plan to "clean up" uptown Lake Forest. The hodgepodge of buildings and the rubbish behind them on Western Avenue in the early 1900's created slum conditions, according to Edward Arpee in his book *Lake Forest, Illinois: History and Reminiscences 1861-1961*. The center of the square and northside were completed first according to Leon Wells. Work started in September, 1915 and took a year and a half to complete. The first tenants were Charlie Paulson a barber, A.J. Itrich, a plumber and the American Express Company, the latter company having the space that became Kiddles.

There are some records which indicate that Sidney Burrige owned the current Kiddles site from 1925-1926.

The Kiddles store sold much more than bikes. A copy of an ad from 1960 states that they sold; “bikes, Schwinn, English Hercules, Raleigh, tricycles, wagons, pedal cars, sleds, ice skates, and children’s tractors. In the hardware section they sold electric drills, mechanics tools, work shop supplies and in the hobby gifts section they sold sports gifts, electronic gifts like electronic clocks, sunbeam appliances, irons, mixers , heaters, fryers and lamp shades. A1961 ad states “All wheel goods properly assembled, adjusted and oiled with free initials.” They also offered a special bicycle, “for the night rider there is a model featuring a built-in generator lighting system.”

In 1968, Kiddles Bike and Sport was sold to Ron Shlifka and he, his son and grandsons currently operate the store. As he states, “Timing for such a business was impeccable as healthy living became an important choice for America.” At the time they bought the store, lamps were still being repaired in the back. Since then they have dropped the hardware aspect and focus entirely on sporting goods, bicycle sales and repairs. In 1975, the store just east of the original Kiddles became available when the former Garnetts department store closed. This allowed their store to double in size to 3000 square feet. When Market Square was first built, this space was housed D.P. Roy’s gardening store which sold seeds, plants and gardening supplies.

Times have changed dramatically from when Shlifkas first bought the store, youth baseball bats were made of wood as were tennis racquets. Hardly anyone had heard of lacrosse much less played it. There were 15 gym shoe styles available and Nike and Adidas were unknown in the US. Jay Shlifka, Ron’s son, credits Kiddles growth to a decision his Dad made in 1969. Kiddles was the third Illinois dealer to carry Adidas footwear then Nike. As those two companies grew so did Kiddles. Jay says that three new inventions have also impacted their sales of sports equipment; rollerblades, snowboards and mountain bikes. At least 40 percent of his business is with team uniforms and equipment for not only Lake Forest/Lake Bluff but the surrounding communities. Lately, Shlifka says that the price of gas and environmental awareness has increased bike repair orders, sales and accessory sales to a 40 year high for them. People want to leave their car at home, shop locally, get fit and save money.