



Photo provided

John Koning rebuilt his store after a fire in 1903. The building pictured stands today and still houses the local hardware store. It remained

Koning Hardware until the Wilkins family purchased the business in 1985.

Historic building houses Wilkins

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SAUGATUCK--Step into Wilkins Hardware Co., located at 439 Butler St. in downtown Saugatuck, and it feels as though you have stepped back in time.

Friendly smiles greet you with a hearty hello from behind the old wooden checkout counter, and the knowledgeable staff knows at least 90 percent of the customers by name.

Ron and Bonnie Wilkins, the store's sixth owners, bought the property in 1985 and are currently working in their 11th year of running a successful business.

Little did they know back then, they had not only bought a hardware store, but an important part of Saugatuck's rich history as well.

The building, originally a wooden structure, was built in 1864 by John Nies when the streets were dirt and the sidewalks were made of wood. It stood where it is today (the center of town back then), with the Saugatuck Drug Store located next door.

In 1875, John Koning came to work for Nies as an apprentice and became such a trusted employee, Nies made him a partner in 1887. Koning eventually bought the business from Nies in 1894. The name of the store became Koning Hardware and remained so up until the Wilkins purchased it.

In addition to the hardware business, Koning offered some unique services that were prompted by the use of steamships as a means of transportation. In the basement of

the building, he built stovepipes for the steamships that hauled lumber and coal on the waters of Lake Michigan.

As a result of the extensive lake traffic, drowning fatalities were quite common. In response to the demand, Koning also lined pine caskets with zinc to preserve the bodies of the victims when they were shipped home. After the advent of the railroad, the casket-lining business died down with the decreased lake traffic.

Koning suffered his own tragedy when, in 1903, a popcorn fire broke out in the neighboring drug store. His building and five others were destroyed before the blaze could be extinguished by both the Saugatuck and Douglas fire departments.

Koning rebuilt the structure (which still stands today) using eight inch thick brick walls and steel I-beams. He built the solid foundation with the thought that the center of town would be built around him, using his store as a main support. For unknown reasons, the center of town was located elsewhere.

Over the years and through the owners, the upstairs of the hardware store has housed a dance hall, the town library, an import bike shop (during this time a crane was installed on the side of the building in order to move bikes in through the window), lawyers' offices, accounting offices and, currently, living quarters for the Wilkins and their three children.

Since purchasing the building, the

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