

Saunders—oldest book salesman

By Ken Merlin
School of Journalism

The grand old gentleman of textbook salesmen in Nebraska is Gil Saunders, 77, host of the textbook exhibit, which opened Monday in the Centennial Room of the Union.

Saunders retired as a textbook salesman from Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1964. He now acts as a consultant and "pinch-hit salesman" in Nebraska and Texas.

He's a little man who comes up and shakes your hand like he wants to. He says he is happy with his work and doesn't plan to quit his semi-retired job which has taken him to Texas each January and February for the past nine years. In Texas he sells books and fishes for sand trout.

Meeting people

"I like being a salesman. I stay as far away from the office as I can. I enjoy going out and meeting school people," he said.

One of his friends in the field of education is Dorcas Cavett, UNL professor of elementary education, who has known Saunders since she was a young girl. (She is also the stepmother of Dick Cavett, the television personality.)

Mrs. Cavett first met Saunders through her father, who was a textbook salesman for a rival company.

"Gil Saunders was never high powered. He's the old style salesman who is always up-to-date on new materials, both his and his competitors," she said. "He uses the soft-sell approach. He talks content and method in a language easily understood by educators."

Also educators

Textbookmen are frequently educators in their own right and often are called upon to demonstrate materials in the classroom, Mrs. Cavett said.

Saunders was a school superintendent in Milford before he returned to college and received his masters degree in education from the University in 1928. He took a job the

same year as a textbook salesman, because, "I had too big a family and too little money to get a doctorate."

He worked for the University Publishing Company in Lincoln from 1928 to 1935 when he joined John C. Winston Company which became Holt, Rinehart and Winton in 1960.

Informed

Mrs. Cavett said Saunders is "the most informed man for his age in education that I know. He's been in the book business longer than anyone in Nebraska," she said, "of that I'm certain."

Norman Thorpe, who retired as associate dean of Teachers College last December, recalled meeting Saunders, "a most congenial kind of person, very much respected by school people around the state."



Photo by Ken Merlin

Gil Saunders

Thorpe was a school superintendent from Panama at the time Saunders was in his first year as a salesman (1928).

Farm boy

"I always felt he was totally trustworthy," he said. Thorpe and Saunders occasionally meet in Lincoln and exchange lies on fishing in Minnesota where both go, "but to different areas so that neither can verify the other's story," Thorpe said.

Gil Saunders was born on a farm in Webster County and attended a one-room rural school in Cowles, Nebr.

Saunders wife and mother are living. He has been married 57 years and his mother is in her nineties. They live in Lincoln in a home they purchased in 1941.

Saunders is secretary of the Nebraska Professional Bookman of America which represents 40 textbook companies. He has held every office in the organization including several terms as president.

What changes have occurred in the textbook business and in the annual Textbook Exhibit at the UNL over the past 45 years during which, as Thorpe recalled, "Gil Saunders sold a pile of books?"

Changes

Saunders said the period almost has brought an end to the family-owned, independent textbook publishing house. He said his own company's absorption into the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1965 was typical of the period.

With the conglomerates came increased competition and cost-consciousness. He predicted a decline in the number of display copies of textbooks and materials available to libraries and teachers, who usually have little say about which books are bought. Even now some companies are saying "you can have this book for examination, but if you don't buy it, send it back," he said.

"It won't effect the college level as it will the public school. The college professor has more say and, thus, is more important to the company who sells books," he said.

Profit margin small

Saunders said that contrary to popular belief, the margin profit in the textbook business is small.

"A lot of money is spend on

research and in paying the author's royalties. Textbook salesmen seldom get rich, but they do call on nice people. School people are almost always ladies and gentlemen," he said.

The people he contacts have changes along with the business, he said.

Superintendents did most of the buying in the '20s, while teachers committees do it now. There's more contact today with the teachers in the public schools."

Multi-media

Saunders said the University exhibit gives the instructors as well as the student teachers a chance to look at the newest material on the market, ask questions and discuss the philosophies of different book series.

He said the University's exhibit first began in the '20s and was held for years in the gymnasium.

"During those days, all we had were textbooks (in contrast to the multi-media materials available today) and we tried to get as many orders as we could," he said.

The exhibit also was held in Love Library for years until lack of space forced a move to Selleck Quadrangle, which almost ended the exhibit.

Saunders said that the salesmen voted to end the exhibit unless a centralized location was found. The next year it was in the Union where it has remained.

Today's exhibit is 98 per cent sales promotion. Only a few orders are taken, he said. "We discourage order taking. We don't like anyone to feel like they are being pressured."

Saunders compared the changes in philosophy of the annual exhibit to that of a farmer switching from harvesting to the planting and plowing of the seed.

It appears the farm boy from Webster County, who gained an uncommon respect among educators while plying his trade, is still needed to guide the plow.

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