

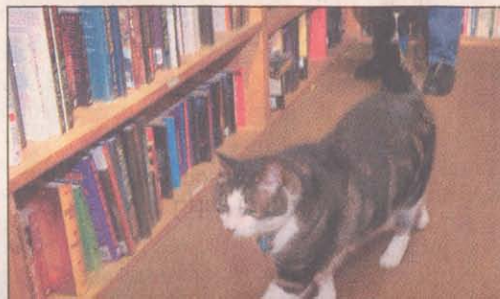
A GOOD READ



Photos by JEREMIAH COUGHLAN/The Columbian

Becky Milner and her husband, Alec, started Vintage Books 30 years ago. Other family members are now involved. Alec and Becky (in red) are joined by daughter Debbie Buck and son Chris Milner.

*Vintage Books marks
30 years of putting
book lovers near and far
together with tomes*



Henry, one of two bookstore cats, strolls the aisles of Vintage Books.

By CAMI JONER
For The Columbian

One could say Vintage Books was launched by spinning a yarn.

This month marks the bookstore's 30th anniversary as a Vancouver business. It evolved from owner Becky Milner's needle-craft work depicting the vintage cars of her husband, Alec. The needlepoint caught on with auto enthusiasts.

Before long, "People were sending me pictures of their cars and I would make up needlepoint kits," said Becky Milner, who started selling the kits through a home-based mail-order company in 1975, advertising in trade magazines like the Model-A Club of America.

When the business outgrew her family home three years later, Milner opened the Vintage Emporium antique shop in a leased 1930s farmhouse at Fourth Plain Boulevard and Northeast 65th Avenue. A next-door refinishing shop attracted customers to Milner's flea-market furniture.

She continued selling needlepoint on the side while Alec, a computer programmer by day, perused weekend swap meets for stock.

"And then the books just came along," Becky Milner said.

She displayed the budding collection on the store's second level "until we weren't sure it could hold any more."

Becky Milner found the store's current site in 1984, moving to a corner space in the Heights Shopping Center at Mill Plain Boulevard and Andresen Road with the help of customers, family and friends.

"They formed a human chain" to unload the books, Milner said.

She gradually stopped selling antique furniture and renamed the store Vintage Books. Remnants of Milner's antique-selling days create a homey atmosphere throughout the 6,000-square-foot store, which is furnished with row upon row of

Biz Bites

■ **WHAT:** Vintage Books, selling new and used books, marks 30th anniversary.

■ **WHERE:** 6613 E. Mill Plain Blvd.

■ **OWNERS:** Milner family.

■ **PHONE:** 360-694-9519.

■ **WEB SITE:** www.vintagebooks.com.

■ **HOURS:** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays-Fridays; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays.

Bookstore:

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pine shelving and an occasional well-worn chair or display table.

The shop carries an estimated 200,000 titles today, including specialty genres, such as hard-to-find auto manuals. The store pays for trade-ins with store credit good for one year. Prices for new and used books range from less than a dollar to nearly \$600 for rare editions.

"Things evolve," Milner said.

She said it was difficult to find support as a woman starting a business in the late 1970s.

"I guess you can say I was a feminist, but that word has a bad connotation today," said Milner, an energetic 62-year-old.

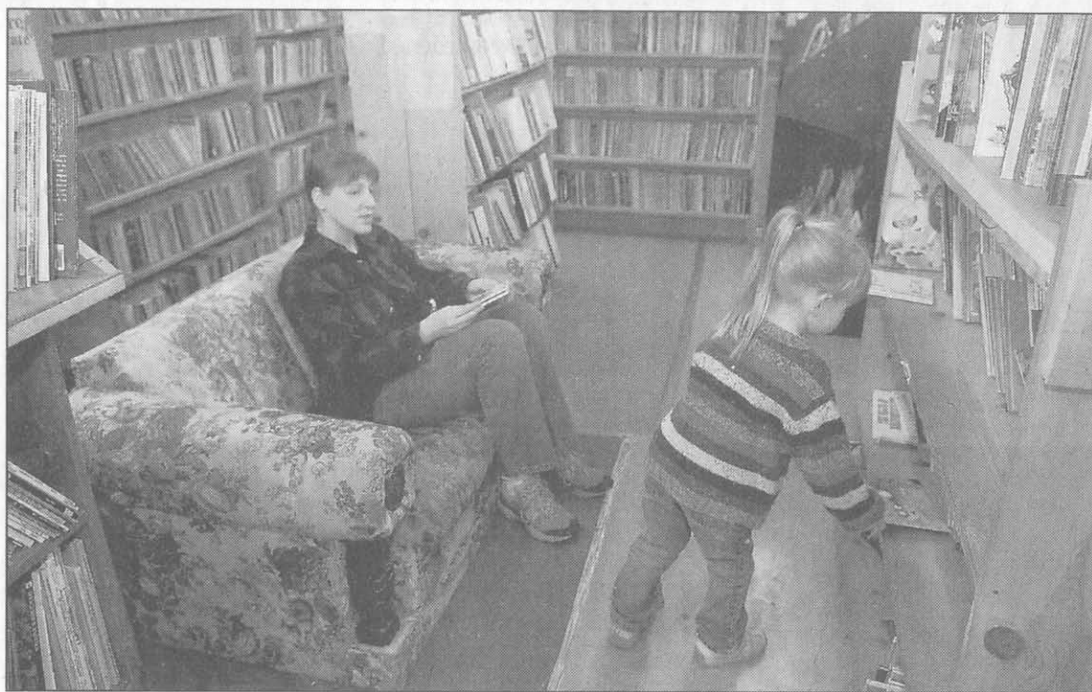
A male business consultant told her she belonged at home with her children.

"But early on, I found a woman who was a loan officer in a downtown bank. She helped me with loans for materials," although Milner had little collateral at the time. "I think the fact that she was a woman made her more willing to help."

Milner advises industry newcomers to be stubborn and practical.

"I tell everybody to have an outside income, because realistically, you're not going to make a good living being a bookseller."

Not with big-box competitors and corporate chains like Barnes & Noble Booksellers



JEREMIAH COUGHLAN/The Columbian

Tara Tanner and daughter Tamsen find a spot to sit and read at Vintage Books.

and a recently opened Borders bookstore muscling in on the local territory.

"There's a lot of competition for a business like ours. It's not just Borders; it's the Internet, people trying to be booksellers on their own. It's even garage sales."

'Keep reinventing'

Milner said her business still hasn't recovered from the 2001 downturn, which cut the store's Internet revenue by 30 percent. Yet she remains optimistic.

"You just have to keep reinventing. We're always looking in new directions."

And that's where her now-retired husband and grown

children have helped as business partners. Vintage Books employs a staff of six, including four family members. Milner's husband oversees the store's finances. Her daughter, Debbie Buck, is in charge of displays and an e-newsletter; and son Chris Milner's Web site design sells Vintage Books worldwide with optimized searches that key in on the store's rare collections.

Becky Milner said the tool provides her with greater leeway to purchase and accept trade-ins.

"Now we're not just looking for books to sell to our Vancouver customers."

The shop also relies on mega-e-commerce sites like Amazon.com, Abebooks and Biblio.

"But that presents a double-edged sword," as the companies charge monthly fees and commissions while Milner's company ships the order.

While she views the Internet as an asset to her business, Milner firmly believes technology will never replace books.

"Hopefully not in my lifetime, anyway. People like the physical feeling of holding a book, of carrying it along and taking it out whenever they can."

The former needlepoint artist who became a seller of books ought to know. Her clients include students, history buffs and paperback addicts.

"I like the feeling of putting people and books together."