MORE THAN
90 YEARS OF NEWS

Rinehart News Agency has brought news to the Kirksville area for more than 90 years. It is and has been the only store in Kirksville which has carried, at one time or another, franchises on all available news publications in the United States. When you walk into Rinehart’s today, you find it looks much the same as it did over 50 years ago.

Rupert Leroy Rinehart owned and operated the business, until his death in 1970. Mr. Rinehart, or “Rupe,” as he was known to most people, was born in Knox County, Missouri, on July 29, 1878. After his father’s death in 1888, his mother and family moved to Kirksville. His daughter, Mrs. Mabel Willbanks, stated that her father often said, “The family moved to Kirksville at five o’clock in the afternoon on the day before Thanksgiving.” She went on to tell that the same day he got a job at a local newsstand working as a delivery boy. He sold his first newspaper to a local blacksmith for 3 cents.

Mrs. Willbanks remembered her father’s first news agency was in the Old College Inn Hotel on East Harrison Street. She said he started this business at the young age of 18. Mr. Rinehart received 75 cents a week working for Tom Sublette on The Weekly Graphic newspaper. Mrs. Willbanks found among her keepsakes a stack of Kirksville Daily Express newspapers all dated October 27, 1913, which stated “Rinehart Sole News Agent in Kirksville.”

After a short engagement, Mr. Rinehart was married to Gertrude Jane Upright on November 4, 1897. They had seven children: Mrs. Norman (Mabel) Willbanks, Kenneth L. Rinehart, Edwin L. Rinehart (deceased), Charles R. Rinehart, Richard W. Rinehart, John S. Rinehart, and Mrs. Ralph (Martha Jane) Jones.

Gertrude Rinehart and the children were a great help in the store, especially the oldest daughter, Mabel, who had as much love for the store as her father. The children helped deliver papers, clean up, or do other little things that needed to be done.

Mr. Rinehart attributed his good health to his walking every day. “By his estimates,” said Mrs. Willbanks, “he walked 21 miles a day.” Mrs. Willbanks also said that her father walked 15 miles on Mondays and 10 miles on Sundays for about 40 years. He always carried a pedometer to keep track of the miles, and in 40 years he had walked close to 312,000 miles.

He moved his newsstand from East Harrison Street to the College Inn at 109 South Franklin Street, where he had his news agency in half of the store and a soda fountain and ice cream parlor in the other half of the store. Mr. Rinehart had his office near the post office where his papers came in daily. From the College Inn, he moved to the Princess Drug Store at 120 South Franklin, then in 1922 he moved to the Owl Drug Store at 117 South Franklin and then to his present location at 112 South Franklin. Mrs. Willbanks said, “Dad worked from five in the morning until 10 or 11 at night, seven days a week. He didn’t miss one day of work until he was 72-years-old.”

In 1961, Mr. Rinehart was honored with a plaque from the International Relations and Geography Clubs at the Kirksville Senior High School. The plaque was inscribed, “…for your record of accomplishment as a public spirited citizen, your devotion to duty, your unique personal knowledge of the history of your community, and your willing-
ness to share it with others, and your interest in the welfare of youth..." Along with this honor, many people considered Mr. Rinehart an authority on history, especially Adair County history.

Mr. Rinehart was often quoted by local newspaper reporters as he reminisced about events that had taken place in Kirksville. One of the best remembered that appeared in the Kirksville Daily Express was the big Fourth of July celebration in 1925 which was attended by approximately 25,000 people. The occasion turned out to be a gigantic Klu Klux Klan gathering at Ownbey Lake, which is the lake in the College Park addition.

When Mr. Rinehart was in his early 70s, he was much publicized for his experience with and encounter with a man that tried to rob him. He was only a few blocks from home when a young man poked a gun in his spine. According to the Kirksville Daily Express dated February 2, 1954, "The robber asked, 'How do you like that?' Mr. Rinehart replied, 'Are you kidding? If you are this is very serious so make yourself known.' The robber said he was serious so Rupert replied, 'Then I'm going to have to pop you.' Mr. Rinehart swung his cane and broke it in two on the robber's head." Mr. Rinehart waved down a car to try to catch the bumbling robber. The robber was never caught.

Mrs. Willbanks stated that her father handled all Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City newspapers and that Rinehart's was the only source of news for the northeast part of Missouri. A story that got a two-column headline was a really major story. The first banner headline, like the ones used today, was run by the Chicago Tribune headlining the beginning of World War I.

By Mike Parsons
Jerry Winslow

Many boys were hired to help run the routes, but Mr. Rinehart always wanted to keep a route for himself. Mrs. Willbanks said the boys always like to work for him and enjoyed visiting with him.

The Rinehart News Agency has been at the present location, 112 South Franklin, since 1930 when Sholly's Book Store was purchased for the location of the news agency. The store specialized in newspapers and magazines.

At the age of 72, Mr. Rinehart had to give up his walking route because he had to use a cane after his illness. Mr. Rinehart died at the age of 91 on January 22, 1970. His daughter, Mabel Willbanks, returned to Kirksville from her home in Colorado after his death. Mrs. Willbanks owns and operated the store until she became semi-retired in 1983. Today her brother, Charles Rinehart, manages the store. Mrs. Willbanks is proud to be able to say she believes Rinehart News Agency is the only store in Kirksville which has remained in the same family for more than 90 years.