SNOWDRIFT
ART SPACE

Snowdrift Art Space: One Hundred Years of History

Babbitts on the Mother Road

The Heyday of Route 66

In 1926, the section of the transcontinental National Old Trails Highway that passed through downtown Winslow on Second Street became part of the newly-commissioned US Route 66. Babbitt's Department Store was now located on the "Main Street of America" romanticized in songs, movies, and on television. Travelers and townspeople alike patronized businesses along the route, which now included motor courts, campgrounds, service stations, diners, curio shops, and roadside attractions.

Left: Babbitt's Department Store on the corner of US Route 66 and Warren Avenue in the 1950s

Right: US Route 66 became bottlenecked in downtown Winslow, the largest city in Northern Arizona from 1900 through the 1950s. In 1953, the city council addressed traffic and safety concerns on Winslow's section of Route 66 by making Second Street eastbound (seen here in the 1950s with Babbitts on the left) and Third Street westbound.

Babbitt Brothers Department Store

By 1939, the company's Winslow businesses consisted of Babbitt's Department Store (now Snowdrift Art Space), two small grocery stores, real estate holdings, a lumber yard, up to 30 employees, and the highest annual sales by a branch store thanks to the large number of Santa Fe division employees. At that time, Winslow railroaders and other workers would cash their paychecks at Babbitts twice a month, buy their groceries on credit, and have them delivered. Departments included groceries, produce, and meat on the east side; the men's department, dry goods, and Indian goods in the center; shoes and hardware on the west side; ready-to-wear and alterations in the loft; and Indian trading and bulk dry goods in the basement.

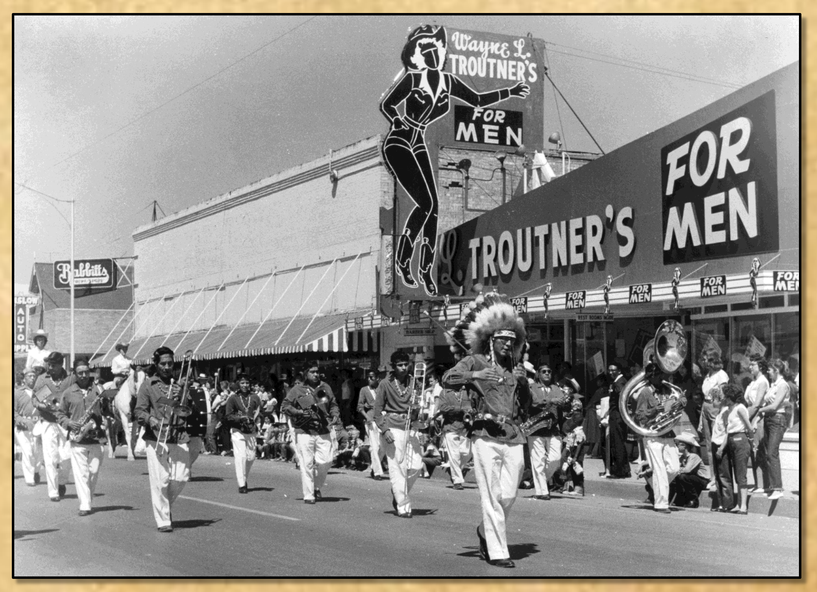
A Winslow Christmas Parade passed in front of Babbitt's Department Store in the early 1950s. Winslow's Retail Trade Committee founded the annual parade in 1946 to encourage citizens to do their Christmas shopping locally. Babbitts was very involved in local community activities and often had a float in the parade. Now a project of the Winslow Chamber of Commerce, the parade continues to kick off the holiday season on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. (Courtesy of Lawrence Kenna)

Mike Howell, who graduated from Winslow High School in 1946, worked for the Babbitts during and after high school in the grocery department and again after college as an office manager. He reminisced on the positive influence the company and its people had on him, their customers, and the community at large:

"*Babbitts was very good to you. You didn't make a lot of money , but they were good people . . . Babbitts was the dominant force . . . It was a way of life that if you wanted anything at all, you came to Babbitts . . . from a Navajo rug from dry goods for sewing, you could buy a rifle, you could go get your meat, produce, food, you could go upstairs to ready-to-wear . . . Babbitts was an outstanding, wonderful organization that provided a lot of good things to the people here at their time.*"

Swedish immigrant A.B. Nelson started out with Babbitts as a butcher in 1909. He managed the Winslow branch for many years and retired in 1955 as the trusted General Manager of Babbitt Brothers Trading Company. Mike said of him:

"*God bless that man – he gave me the biggest, strongest knowledge of business and how to do it properly and fairly.*"



The Santa Fe All-Indian Band paraded by Babbitt's and Wayne L. Troutner's Store for Men in 1959. The intertribal group of Santa Fe employees and family members formed in 1923 and performed at civic functions like this Rodeo Parade for the next 41 years. The Troutner building burned down in the mid-1990s, leaving an empty lot to the east .

The Babbitt Family Businesses

Babbitt fortunes fell after their peak in 1918, and the family businesses survived by securing loans and selling off investments. After World War II, the second and third generation Babbitts that were now in leadership positions decided to focus on ranching and retail operations and began to modernize those businesses.

The Babbitt's Department Store in Winslow re-opened on May 11, 1951, after a modernization and beautification remodel. Left: Through the front window is Route 66 and the service station that was where Bojo's parking lot is today. In 1955, the family built a new shopping center for their modern "Babbitt Thriftway" grocery store on West Third Street, while the Second Street store used the former grocery space for furniture and appliances.

The Decline of Route 66

Winslow's growth slowed after World War II when the Santa Fe streamlined operations and expanded its workforce elsewhere. It stalled again when Interstate 40 bypassed Winslow's section of US Route 66 in October 1979, which was the death knell for the city's vibrant downtown. Floranel Troutner Earl, daughter of Wayne L. Troutner, reflected on returning to Winslow after its heyday had passed:

"It wasn't the town that I had left . . . the town was a bustling town . . . you could hardly cross the streets downtown because of the traffic . . . We knew the freeway was going to come, but we really didn't know that it would have the impact it had." (Mary Tolan interview, 2009)

The Babbitts began closing department and grocery stores in the 1970s due to increased competition and management struggles. They leased the Hubbard Building on Second Street from 1914 through the late 1970s, when they closed the large store that had supplied Winslow families with almost everything they needed for decades.