

Lehman's celebrating seven decades of selling history

What's the secret to seven decades of selling history? "Service," said Glenda Lehman Ervin, director of marketing and daughter of Lehman's founder Jay Lehman (1929 – 2020). "Dad would not – could not – tell customers no. When they asked for a particular product or service, he worked very hard to find it," she said. Which is why Lehman's shelves, catalog and web site are full of products you probably thought they quit making years ago.

Today, in 2025, Lehman's iconic old time general store is celebrating 70 years of business. Lehman's customers range from the serious off-griders, to the curious visitors and tourists and everything in between!

Founded in 1955 by Jay Lehman to serve the local Amish with non-electric products, no one had any idea it would become the famous store featured in national magazines, Hollywood movies (using Lehman's products as historically accurate props) and over two dozen books.

Jay's original goal was to serve the Amish, whom he greatly admired, with the products they needed to maintain their agrarian lifestyle. He knew that without the non-electric appliances and tools they needed, their way of life might disappear. Of course, in the mid-50s, many small-town hardware stores were selling those types of products. What made Lehman's different was that Jay kept selling those products, long after being old-fashioned was no longer in fashion.



Lehman's store, circa 1960

In the early 60s Jay took his young family overseas to work with the Mennonite Church as a travel agent while his brother Dave and father Ezra ran the small store in the tiny village of Kidron. While overseas, he realized many of the missionaries lived much like the Amish, with little or no electricity. Upon his return to the States, he was determined to restock the store to serve his customers, which meant having a full line of black wood heating and cooking stoves. He had to order a huge supply, since stove dealers told him "No one wants these old stoves anymore." But in 1973 the energy crisis hit, triggered by an oil embargo due to conflict in the Middle East which meant people were concerned about how to heat their homes. And within months, his three-year supply of stoves was gone. And Lehman's was on the map as THE place to get brand new, but old-fashioned home heating stoves.

Like any savvy businessperson, Jay poured his resources back into the business so he could add on to the facilities, hire more staff and sell more products. The business continued to grow with the addition of a popular print catalog in the hey-day of the mail order business in the 1970s. Jay and his brother Dave started the catalog with absolutely no knowledge of the mail order business but a determination to get their products in front of as many people as possible. Now orders were coming from across the country, from Washington to California to New York to every state in between as well as internationally and he reached out to his overseas connections.

Jay's son Galen, who had joined the business just out of high school and eventually rose to President, had an idea in the mid-1990s was a bit outrageous. Why not try something new – using invisible waves across the air to reach people with paper, printing or postage – yes, the internet. And Lehman's.com was born. The irony of using high tech sell low tech was not lost on anyone. But now customers can find Lehman's, instead of Lehman's having to find them by mailing an expensive catalog.



Galen Lehman, who spent his entire career growing Lehman's into a famous brand.

And then, the biggest thing NOT happen to Lehman's (and the world) occurred. When 1999 turned to 2000 there was mass hysteria that the world's computer systems along with the electrical grid, would crash and the Y2K panic grew into a monster. People all over the world were terrified that they wouldn't have a way to heat their homes, cook their food or take care of their loved ones and many turned to Lehman's looking for answers to the question "How do we live without electricity?!"

Starting in the summer of 1998 Lehman's was inundated with orders from people, many who didn't even know what they wanted. Historically, the typical Lehman's customer knew what they needed because they were farmers. But much of that generational knowledge was already lost and Lehman's staff spent hours on the phone, teaching, consulting and helping customers. Lehman's desperately tried to hire more staff as the phones were always busy, mail was piling up and back orders were a nightmare. Many products are Amish made, and Lehman's was selling a few a month. During the Y2K craze there was demand for 100 a week and the vendors simply could not keep up. A normal mail order cadence is that when you place an order, it ships within 48 hours. Orders were pouring in so fast; this small company was five weeks behind...opening the mail! This frenzy was fueled by the media and Lehman's was featured in national magazines and television shows, including crews from Japan and Germany, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today and more.

When midnight 2000 came and the grid didn't shut down, the phone calls and mail did shut down. Lehman's leadership started to wonder if the demand for non-electric goods was saturated. Perhaps this was the beginning of the end. But then, after considerable sleepless nights, a change in direction was made. Instead of being the place where you came when you wanted supplies, Lehman's turned into the place that could help you achieve your goals. Lehman's provided helpful information to solve your problem. Want to plant a garden to eat healthier? Lehman's can help! Want to be prepared in case of a power outage? Lehman's can help! Want to save money and be more self-sufficient? Lehman's can help! The company became much more inclusive instead of exclusive and reached an entirely new audience, including the newly popular homesteading community.



Jay Lehman, and his children, Glenda Lehman Ervin and Galen Lehman, successfully ran the family business for decades.

Homesteading, loosely defined as more than a gardener and less than a farmer, these folks want to live a simpler life, one where they could provide for their family by producing their own food, raising their own livestock and living off the land, much like the Amish did, and once again Lehman's was the bell of the ball. After a brief hiatus of not printing the 156-catalog, fondly

called the Big Book, it was brought back by popular demand and, selling for \$6 and is one of Lehman's most popular products.

Throughout the years, the web site grew much larger than the store, although the store doubled in size with a massive expansion in 2007 and draws visitors from over 35 states nearly every single week. The store was voted the Best Destination in Ohio's Amish Country five years in a row and continues to be a must stop destination for visitors to this area. With a museum-quality display of antiques, four pre-Civil war barns and thousands of practical and pretty products for your home and gardens, there is nowhere else like it.



It appears that every 20 years (1970s – oil crisis; 1990 - Y2K) Lehman's is destined for challenge every two decades...COVID hit in 2020. No one knew how long it would last or what would happen but with fears of supply chains collapsing and people stuck at home, Lehman's again experienced a tremendous demand for its products. From puzzles and board games for bored families, to gardening and food preservation supplies, to wood cook stoves and oil lamps, folks were questioning the typical unprepared lifestyle. Lehman's continues to preach the same

message they have since 1955: Be prepared, not scared – let us help you take the next step on your journey to a simpler life.

Again, the team at Lehman's was struck by the lack of generational knowledge. The things our grandparents knew – where milk and eggs come from; how to fix and repair hand tools; how to preserve food; how to manage livestock – appeared to be all but lost in some areas of the country. With a blog with hundreds of how-to articles, active social media channels, classes and events and at the store, Lehman's continues to teach and inspire customers to live a simpler, satisfying and understandable life.

Jay Lehman, who passed away in 2020, would be proud to know that his legacy of preserving the past for future generations continues today, 70 years later, as Lehman's continues the tradition of selling history.



Family of the museum-quality antiques in the store were lovingly restore by Jay Lehman.

In January 2021 Lehman's was purchased by HRM Enterprises, the company that owns Hartville Hardware, Hartville Kitchen and Hartville Marketplace among other businesses, to ensure the legacy of Lehman's continues, long after the Lehman family is no longer involved,

SIDEBAR

Lehman's is celebrating 70 years of selling history all year long. The store officially opened on January 2, 1955 (not the best day for a party) and there will be a birthday party to celebrate with customers on Saturday, July 12, from 10 am to 2 pm. Enjoy fun free activities for both children and adults. Visit [Lehmans.com/event](https://lehmans.com/event) for details.

