

# Graif remains a downtown fixture

Profile



Gary Kratzke, owner of Matt J. Graif Clothing in downtown Mankato, says attention to the customer and keeping up with current trends has helped his business thrive.

By Marie Wood  
Photos By John Cross

About two years ago, Gary Kratzke, owner of Matt J. Graif Clothing, had the opportunity to move his store elsewhere, but he chose to stay downtown in the Graif Building.

For Kratzke, the decision was simple: The store had been downtown since 1924 when Matt J. Graif opened for business. Kratzke also recognized that his location was prime real estate in the redevelopment of Mankato's city center.

Kratzke observed that efforts were focused around the Graif Building due to its proximity to the Civic Center, Intergovernmental Center, Hilton Garden Inn and Mankato Place mall.

"When we looked into options, it was in our best interest to stay downtown," said the 61-year-old Kratzke of North Mankato.

In 1963, John Graif purchased the building, which he renamed the Graif Building and moved his store there. Graif hired his son-in-law, Kratzke, in 1973. After some years in the business, Kratzke bought the store in 1985.

Back in the day, Kratzke stepped out to watch the high

## ■ Gary Kratzke

- Owner, Matt J. Graif Clothing, Mankato
- Mankato Sertoma Club member
- Greater Mankato Growth and City Center Partnership member
- Greater Mankato Growth Business Hall of Fame, 1996
- Board member, Northwest Buyers and Jobbers, Minneapolis
- Volunteer football, basketball and baseball coach
- Business degree from Mankato State College, 1971

school homecoming parade go down Front Street and hung Christmas lights on the Mankato Piece sculpture. These days Kratzke is a key retailer in the revitalization of the city center.

"I think it's important to bring back some of the charm of downtown," Kratzke said.

Thanks to the sale and renovation of the Graif Building in 2008, Graif Clothing is part of downtown's charm. Developer Tony Frenz worked with Kratzke to create a new store with high ceilings, large windows for display, an open floor plan, cherry woodwork and brick facades.

"There are a lot of positives of keeping him (Kratzke) as an anchor tenant. The building is named after the store," said Frenz, who co-owns the building.

Kratzke ended up moving his merchandise about 40 feet to a remodeled retail space within the building. Photos of the Graif Building and business founder Matt J. Graif decorate the walls.

"Graif Clothing helps define the personality of the city center marketplace," said Jonathan Zierdt, president and CEO of Greater Mankato Growth.

Service with style

Graif Clothing has built its reputation on selection, service, and reasonable prices. With a staff of seven employees, it has survived as an independent men's clothing store in the face of department and discount stores.

"I tell men to buy clothes that are comfortable. Knowing that you buy them from Graif — they will perform well and last a long time," Kratzke said.

Graif Clothing is known for business attire and suits. In keeping with the business casual trend, Graif offers a selection of sport coats, dress slacks, dress shirts, polo shirts and stylish casual wear.

New sportswear lines of slacks and shirts have boosted business. One of its best-sellers is a non-iron dress shirt that comes out of the dryer wrinkle free.

Kratzke also carries and special orders sizes for big and tall men. That's one reason why Kevin Satre, co-owner of Mankato Mortuary, buys his suits and dress shirts from Graif Clothing. The other reason is that "hometown feel."

"I like Gary and his staff. It's personalized service where they know who you are," said the 46-year-old Satre.

After 86 years in business, Graif Clothing is always looking for new merchandise. As a board member of the buying cooperative Northwest Buyers and Jobbers, Kratzke and manager

Corey Willard shop two shows a year in the Cities.

At 32 years old, Willard has been in men's retail for 11 years. By gradually adding new merchandise such as flat front pants and fitted shirts in stylish prints, Willard is working to attract customers in their 20s and 30s while still serving clientele in their 40s and older.

"The store's evolving a little bit every season. We introduce a few new fashion items at different price points every season," Willard said. The store also offers a full line of formal wear for proms and weddings. The staff ensures a proper fit and guarantees to take care of any problems even on the big day. Kratzke never tires of hearing that everything was perfect when customers return their tuxes.

Full circle

Local teens from more than a dozen area high schools get their letter jackets from Graif Clothing. These same teens come back for their proms and weddings. In fact, many of their fathers rented their tuxes from Graif in the 1970s and 1980s.

"We have a good relationship through prom and letter jackets, and that's a definite positive," Kratzke said.

On a recent Saturday morning, he helped a college graduate purchase an interview suit. Kratzke has been helping the young man's father for years.

"We know a lot of our customers by name," Kratzke said. "My thinking is to treat every customer with respect."

Kratzke's business philosophy has earned him a loyal clientele and a venerable downtown store. He has witnessed the downtown area come full circle from the redevelopment of the 1970s to the revitalization of the 2000s.

Now Graif Clothing is poised for a busy fall season and beyond. "We're happy with our business. We're happy with the changes we made. It's good," Kratzke said. **MV**

Profile



Graif Clothing has been in downtown Mankato since 1924 and seen several transformations of the city's center.