Generations of merchants

Some years ago my friend George Wausnock, perhaps the area’s biggest collector of Pottstown memorabilia, gave me an 1887 New Year’s Day supplement to the Daily Pottstown Ledger, one of the precursors to The Mercury.

The booklet contains an illustrated poem about the travails of a newspaper editor, with such lines as these:

“The newspaper man is a miserable wight;
He burns barrels of midnight oil,
He ransacks the earth for news sparkling and bright,
O, his is a life of toil.”

It’s hard to imagine today’s generations reading poetry in a newspaper. In fact, few people are reading printed newspapers at all. But the written word was once savored.

The supplement also contains ads from local merchants, all of whom were located in basically the same area as today’s Downtown Improvement District.

As recently as the late 1970s, Pottstown still had a thriving downtown. I miss it most at Christmas-time. We had two junior department stores, three 5&10 cent stores, clothing and shoe stores, a fabric store, a theater, and Zipf’s, which sold the world’s best candy at 204 High St.

One happy survivor from 1887 — 130 years ago! — is Weitzenkorn’s Clothing Store, whose ad in the Jan. 1, 1887 Daily Pottstown Ledger read as follows:

TO OUR FRIENDS:
We extend to you the best wishes for the New Year. Our business for the coming season will be conducted on the same large scale and liberal principles as heretofore. Thank you for your past patronage and hoping to be favored with a continuance of the same, we are
A. WEITZENKORN
JOS WEITZENKORN
BENJ. WEITZENKORN

While this ad may appear less than compelling to today’s shoppers, it clearly worked, because Weitzenkorn’s is still thriving in the same building, and still being run by the Weitzenkorn family.

Nearly half of Victorian downtown Pottstown is still intact, and the buildings that remain are all salvageable. They are so well built that they can survive — and many have survived — years of neglect.

One only has to look at the Pottstown Center and the Coventry Mall to see that the vast oversupply of retail space, especially in the age of the Internet, afflicts more than downtown Pottstown.

But unlike dead and dying malls, the unique history and character of downtown Pottstown make it continually ripe for revitalization, even though the process is slower than we desire.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton