

# LIGHT IN OXFORD

HOW A BOOKSTORE REVIVED THE HEART OF A TOWN

*Rob Gurwitt*

**A** PHOTOGRAPH OF OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI, catches the town on the gloomiest day in its postwar history. It shows the courthouse square, Oxford's literal and symbolic heart. A couple of young white men, facing away from the camera, are hurling glass bottles at an unseen target.

This was the moment in the 1962 riot aimed at preventing a black student, James Meredith, from registering at the University of Mississippi. In the background of the photograph, you can see Blaylock's Drug Store, with its oval Fortune's Famous Ice Cream sign seeming to hang, incongruously, over the heads of the bottle throwers.

It is startling to see the photograph these days because of how much is still recognizable, and how much has changed. The square looks the same. You can stand where those rioters stood and instantly identify both the ornate commercial façade of the building in front of you and the Fortune's sign. But the business inside is no longer Blaylock's. It is now a bookstore. And as Oxford over the past decade, finally having overcome the trauma and shame of the 1962 riot, has become a popular travel destination and thriving town, some of the credit should go to that store, Square Books, and its owner, Richard Howorth.

Howorth is certainly best known these days as Oxford's mayor, but before he assumed that post in July 2001, he served as president of the American Booksellers Association, the scrappy organization of independent bookstores that has sought to prevent chain stores and online booksellers from sweeping them into the dustbin of history.

What tends to get lost in the arguments over the future of independent stores is that the dangers posed to them by superstores and online sellers don't just threaten some quaint form of distributing goods; they imperil the fabric of our community life. Real-life stores—their place on the street, the people they draw in, the presence they cast in the community at large—help define their neighborhoods. As Oxford's experience with Square Books suggests, the quality of our daily lives, and of the places we choose to live, is up for grabs as well.

Of all the ripples cast by the events caught in that 1962 photograph, Square Books must be one of the least likely. Howorth was 11 at the

time, and he remembers his mother's anguish about the riots. Oxford was hardly free of the assumptions about race that marked the rest of Mississippi—that was, after all, the community that William Faulkner wrote about—but the townspeople also felt a deep faith in it, a sense that Oxford was both of and apart from the rest of the state, a place where the children of dirt farmers could study Shakespeare and Einstein.

“But the riots shook Oxford's idea of itself,” Howorth says.

“We reached bottom, commercially and emotionally, with the Meredith Riot,” says Will Lewis, who co-owns Neilson's department store, which has anchored the square since 1839.

And so in 1979, when Howorth and his wife, Lisa, left their apprenticeship as managers of the Savile Book Shop in Washington, D.C., and returned to Oxford to open their own store, they had more in mind than simply serving a market for good literature that—curiously, for Faulkner's hometown—had until then gone largely unserved. They also wanted the store to help Oxford cast itself in a different light, as a place of culture and literacy and broad-mindedness. It was not an instant success—in fact, Lisa had to get a job at the university library to bring in some income—but their business quickly made an impact. “It was a cultural focal point,” says Tom Freeland, a local lawyer. When Square Books began holding readings and book signings it became clear that here was a force capable of transforming Oxford's cultural life.

William Ferris, founder for the study of Southern Culture at Ole Miss and later chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, remembers “I saw it as part of my mission to support Square Books in everything it sought to do. At that time, our problem in Oxford was the increasingly insecure future of the square as an economic unit. And Square Books represented a modest investment in the future of the square.”

It is hard these days, when so much of the commercial life of our communities takes place in malls well outside the center of town, to understand just how deeply a town square can be embedded in the gut of a place. On Saturdays, the Square was where everyone in Oxford and in the surrounding county came to get a haircut, buy produce from farmers

who set up trucks around the courthouse, listen to preachers—white preachers in one corner, black in the other—and simply spend the day. It was, in short, the center of Oxford life.

As chain retailers began arriving in town, the square's life began to ebb, as in most other Southern towns. Many of the merchants closed up or moved, though a few, like Will Lewis of Neilson's, made it clear they weren't budging. There were others like him but even so, by the late 1960s it looked like the square's best days were over.

Then two things happened. One was that Oxford approved a liquor-by-the-drink law (Mississippi had been dry until the late 1960s), and bars, restaurants, and night-clubs began setting up around the square. The other was the arrival of Square Books.

No one in town, least of all Richard Howorth, would say the bookstore saved the square, but it certainly helped change the ambience of the town's center. Townspeople thronged to the readings and book signings and hung out at the café upstairs. Even the daily conclave of old-timers that has met for three decades at Smitty's, the no-frills café just behind Square Books, will sometimes repair to the bookstore if Smitty's gets too crowded with Ole Miss football fans in town for a game.

It is hard to pick apart the precise alchemy by which a bookseller turns good business practices into a vital community presence, but it is clear that Square Books' success as a store is inseparable from its impact on Oxford. "Square Books really is an anchor in the soul of Oxford," says William Ferris.

With Square Books as a model, others have followed: furniture sellers, restaurateurs, clothiers, a record store, art galleries. The square is not the egalitarian gathering place it was in Faulkner's day—on the whole, its stores are too upscale for that now—but it is still the center of town, and it is still vibrant, night and day. Thanks in part to the ambience Square Books helped bring into being, the center of Oxford is a vital place, and at the same time somehow unhurried. And over the past decade, the rest of the world has taken notice. The town is perennially on lists of desirable places to retire, with a reputation as "a surprisingly urbane and energetic place," as the *Chicago Tribune* put it a few years back.

And so Oxford has been growing—booming, in fact, at least by Southern small-town standards. Out on the edge of town, new retail establishments are popping up at a dizzying pace. Real estate prices are climbing, nowhere more rapidly than around the square; most of Howorth’s employees can no longer afford to live within walking distance of the store. Developers are scurrying to snap up available parcels, including sites just off the square that are slated for condo projects; the last independently owned grocery in town was demolished for offices. It is possible to feel quite gloomy about all of this. People who like Oxford as it is fear the recent developments. “If growth is unrestricted and uncontrolled,” says Ferris, “it essentially destroys the very heart of the place that made people want to move there.”

Still it’s worth remembering that the community has been in the process of becoming something different for decades. Indeed, as Tom Freeland points out, “You can find Faulkner writing letters to the editor of the *Oxford Eagle* about the decline of the square in the 1940s.”

Communities are constantly reinventing themselves; sometimes they do it with grace and imagination, as Oxford has demonstrated with its courthouse square. So just as Square Books is, in a fashion, part of Oxford’s problem—having helped make the town so attractive—it may also be part of the answer. Even now, Howorth has his eye on a piece of property into which he might move his main store while keeping his current location to specialize in books about the South. He has mixed feelings about expanding. But vital neighborhoods need vital stores to anchor them, and even a larger Square Books will stand for the importance to a community of ideas and reading and writing and lively discourse. Even as Oxford becomes a busier, more crowded place, that’s an encouraging set of values to have sitting at its heart.

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*Rob Gurwitt writes regularly about urban and community issues for a variety of U.S. national magazines. This article was reprinted with Mr. Gurwitt’s permission and the permission of Mother Jones magazine where the story first appeared.*