

The Popcorn Stand



For 46 years Ida Thomas provided Greenville and Darke County with the best popcorn ever popped in these parts. She and her husband, Frank “Shorty” Thomas, started their legendary popcorn stand in 1891, and Ida operated it after Frank’s death in 1918 till her own in 1937. In the words of the late Greenville historian Bill Booker, himself a local legend, “You just had to have it.”

Ida May McNutt was born on May 3, 1867, in Missouri. It’s unclear when or why she moved to Darke County, but by the age of twenty, she was living here.

She married Frank Thomas in 1887 (he was thirteen years her senior) and just 4 years later the pair began selling popcorn in downtown Greenville. They sold out of a wagon initially, but eventually Frank cobbled together a semi-permanent stand, complete with a heater and proper serving windows, and their popcorn business became an institution. They operated their stand in front of Second National Bank for several years, but eventually moved to the sidewalk in front of the courthouse, on the corner of West Fourth Street and Broadway.

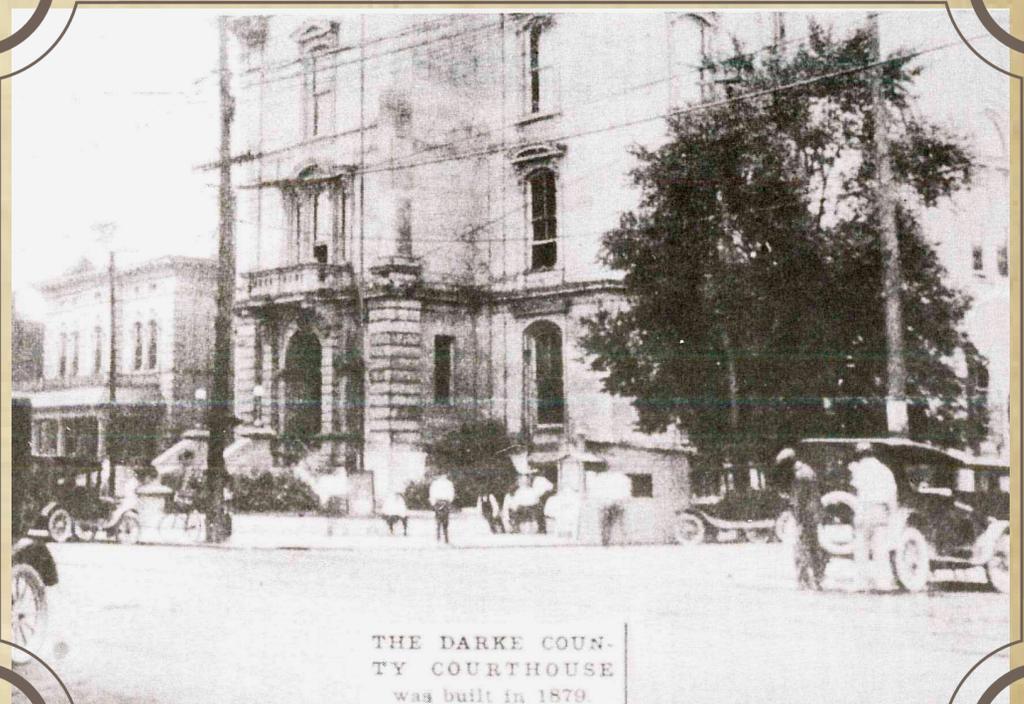
Ida and Frank sold their popcorn for 5¢ a bag, though they did eventually begin offering larger 10¢ bags. Their fresh, hot popcorn was covered with pure creamery butter, and the paper bags it was served in would be soaked through before long. Everyone loved it. In the days before everyone had an automobile and could travel easily, trips into town for rural residents were often only weekly affairs. No trip to downtown, where nearly all of the town’s businesses were located until development began at the north end of Greenville later in the 20th century, was complete without a bag or two of Ida and Frank’s popcorn. People of every age, profession, and class loved it and, just as importantly, could afford it. Rural residents looked forward to it all week, and on Friday or Saturday nights the steps and low wall in front of the courthouse would be lined with families, couples, and children sitting and nibbling on this wonderful treat, and wagons and eventually autos would be parked on the street.

Ida and Frank ran their popcorn stand together (Frank also ran a shoeshine stand) until his death on September 25, 1918, after a stroke. For the next 19 years, Ida operated the popcorn stand by herself. She became known as the Popcorn Lady. The city council passed a ban on sidewalk businesses (the sources I found differ on whether this occurred in 1915 or the early 1930s; it is possible these were separate issues), but they made an explicit exception for Greenville’s popcorn queen after public outcry arose at the thought of Ida being put out of business—and the thought of no more delicious popcorn. After she died at her home on November 27, 1937, the council released an edict officially closing down her exception clause.

For nearly half a century, Ida Thomas sold popcorn on Broadway. Her ramshackle shed ran for longer than most brick-and-mortar businesses can dream of, and she only sold one thing for all those years. Only one photograph survives of Ida, and only two of the popcorn stand (that we know of). There is another photo of the courthouse, with citizens sitting on the walls and talking in groups, but the corner where the stand would have sat is tantalizingly out of the frame and there’s no way to know if these individuals were Ida’s latest customers or not.

Beyond these few images, we just have the memories of our oldest residents and stories passed down to remember this little sidewalk business by. The popcorn stand itself is long gone, and no one knows what happened to it after Ida’s death.

What must it have been like as a child early in the twentieth century to ride downtown in a buggy on a weekend night, a nickel burning a hole in your pocket, and to be handed that bag of goodness you’d waited for all week? What was it like to get that first smell of popping corn and warm butter as you walked down the street? We’ll never know. We can only imagine what our downtown was like when 5¢ got you a fresh treat from Greenville’s Popcorn Lady.



Written By David Nilsen