

History of Odyssey Bookshop sent originally in December 2007

FROM DANA AND FROM SUE COMES A HOLIDAY GIFT FOR YOU: A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROMEO GRENIER AND THE ODYSSEY BOOKSHOP

We're celebrating the Odyssey and its very recent move into adjacent renovated quarters. And we're celebrating Romeo's great gifts to us and the Valley -- of course the Odyssey but also his courtly, witty, thoughtful, bright, kindly, and visionary self. Romeo created, and was, a gift that keeps on giving.

FROM ODYSSEY BOOKSHOP'S WEBSITE [with italicized asides by assorted admirers]:

The Odyssey Bookshop was established in 1963 by Romeo Grenier, a French-Canadian immigrant who arrived in Holyoke, Massachusetts, in 1923 at the age of thirteen. Despite a limited high school education, he became a passionate reader, buying a book a week. In 1935 he became a pharmacist, and in 1957 he bought Glesmann's Pharmacy across the street from Mount Holyoke College, one of the Seven Sisters and the first women's college in the United States. [*I truthfully have no Glessie's stories because I was almost afraid to go into the place -- too "sophisticated" for me. My attachment came post graduation.....*]

Soon Glessie's, as it was affectionately known by town-and-gown, became a literary gathering place. The soda fountain, booths, and especially the round table were filled with students, faculty, and townspeople often engaged in spirited discussions about books and current events. Romeo decided to move the toothpaste and aspirin aside to create a book department at the front of the drugstore. He began this new adventure with 500 Penguin titles. [*I remember him as absolutely a figure of authority because of his white pharmacist's coat and name badge, and because of his mellifluous voice and measured, precise way of speaking -- and because he was the magus who created a Left Bank cafe in the rear of Glessie's. He did it with a couple of booths, a round table, art posters, some serious paperbacks, classical music in the background, and his presence. The whole place was alight, buzzing with intellectual energy and purpose.*] But it did not stop there, and five years later Mount Holyoke College asked Romeo to open a full-fledged bookshop. Thus, in November of 1963, with the help of the Mount Holyoke community, boxes of books were moved several buildings over to the Odyssey Bookshop.

[*In those days the store was small, cluttered, and magic, and it seemed to hold thousands more books than a Barnes and Noble holds now. Romeo sat in the center of the shop. He talked. He did his book-keeping. He examined books.*]

During the next two decades, the Odyssey became known throughout Massachusetts as a unique place to look for books. But in the 1980's the store suffered two major fires. With the help of Mount Holyoke College, many generous members of the community, and a dedicated staff, we rebuilt. In 1991, the ownership of the business passed to Romeo's daughter, Joan Grenier, who oversaw the re-location of the shop to its present location as the anchor store of the Village Commons. In 1998, Neil Novik joined the business as co-owner, bringing his expertise in the crime fiction genre, management, and technology.

The Odyssey continues to be a vital part of the Mount Holyoke College community. In 2001, the Odyssey won a contract from the college to provide the books for all courses and in 2003 started carrying art supplies required for the college's art studio courses. In addition, many of the Odyssey's events are planned in conjunction with college faculty and departments.

We have also kept up with the growth of book E-tailing, with the development of a full service website, www.odysseybks.com, offering customers the opportunity to order books 24 hours a day. We believe that many customers need to look at, touch and feel a book before they buy, so being a 'clicks and mortar' store can afford them the best of both worlds.

We have also lived up to our goal of bringing readers and writers together, with a literary event schedule including more than 150 events a year for adults and children, and attended by more than 2,500 people annually. In addition, in 2001, we initiated the Signed First Edition Club. Each month, club members receive a signed First Edition of a newly published book selected by the Odyssey for its literary merit and potential

The Odyssey Bookshop is proud of its history and its continuing role in community life. We will be celebrating our 45th anniversary in 2008, and expect to celebrate many more.

Odyssey: 413.534.7307

FROM COLLEGE STREET JOURNAL OF NOV 21 1997: In Memoriam : Romeo Grenier, former owner of the Odyssey Bookshop and a familiar face to many long-time members of the MHC community, died November 8 at the age of 87. What eventually became the Odyssey Bookshop began in the 1950s, when Grenier stocked a shelf of books in the pharmacy he operated. By 1963, there were more than 25,000 books, and employees suggested he decide whether he was running a pharmacy or a bookshop.

Over the years, countless MHC students, faculty, and staff were frequent visitors at the Odyssey. Among them was Musicorda director Jacqueline Melnick, who recalls Grenier's love of good music and travel as well as his passion for literature. "Everyone found him incredibly interesting," says Melnick.

Mary Lyon Professor of Humanities Penny Gill says Grenier was a bridge between the South Hadley business community and the College. She remembered him talking with faculty and students at his store, attending campus events, and "practically holding court during alumnae reunions and commencement weekends, greeting a parade of alums who wouldn't dream of coming to campus without a visit with Romeo."

The College acknowledged this deep link by creating the Edward Hitchcock Bowl award for Grenier in 1980, "in recognition of singular service to the College community by a friend of Mount Holyoke. (This is) a most deserved tribute to a man whose contributions to our community and to our college are beyond adequate measure or recognition."

The citation said in part: "Having made your way, with sure purpose, down the Connecticut River from Quebec to the city of Holyoke and an apprenticeship in the pharmacy of Simon Flynn; and having attached yourself, with surer purpose, to Miss Elizabeth Flynn; you then, with surest purpose, pointed your destiny at the town of South Hadley, the drug store of Glessmann, and the college of Mount Holyoke. You had resolved to be the most cultivated apothecary since John Keats (1795-1821).

Daily, after long breakfasts complicated by culture, you motored to work, fashionably late, in superannuated Cadillac convertibles, meditating changes involving profound value judgments. Soon aspirin and toothbrushes had to be sought with difficulty amid shelves and more shelves of books and records and prints. Putting first things first, you abandoned your pharmacopeia and moved to your grand new emporium of arts and letters. You gave an intellectual home to the colleges of the Valley.

You gave us credit, you gave us discounts, you cashed our perilous checks. You remembered our names, young and old. You loyally displayed, and occasionally sold, the fugitive productions of Mount Holyoke professors. Air stagnant with Muzak and stunned with Rock you purified with Mozart. You made us confident that at least two seats would be filled at every significant college event. You saw to it that every book worth having could be had at the Odyssey.

You have done all that a man can do to civilize us, and we thank you."

With best wishes and high hopes for the new year,
Sue and Dana
