

# Eugene's Era

## Local hardware store loses a legend

by Brian Egston  
be@brianwrites.com

Imagine a place somewhere between Mayberry and Ace Hardware. A place where nails are still sold by the pound and the gray-haired man sauntering between the aisles has the answer to inquiries ranging from plumbing problems to landscaping losses. In Stone Mountain, this place, which commemorates an era of better days, has existed for the past 31 years. Although land development and demographic changes have altered the area tremendously, DeKalb Hardware has revealed in the notion that, not only is the customer always right, but the customer should be treated like a next door neighbor.



Cobb

**Raymond Eugene Cobb**, owner and founder of DeKalb Hardware, ruled over the establishment at 4807 Redan Road like a protective father over his brood. Known to most people as Gene, the store owner had a gritty and bombastic voice that would greet customers with a friendly salutation or perhaps his all-too-familiar phrase, "What cha got?" Cobb's voice, dripping with the heaviest of Southern drawls, was the store's version of a doorbell chime.

The slight humming of old brown ceiling fans still whirl above head on most days as the front doors are often wide open, inviting customers to partake of the store's hidden treasures. Just to the left of the register, a special clearance section is reserved for trinkets and specials Cobb had found on television shopping programs or items someone had donated such as an old schoolhouse desk for a toddler or a garbage can filled with odd-sized golf clubs. A vintage radio sits high above the store's small paint section with a price tag hanging from a cotton string—\$40 cash only.

With the prideful stride of a cowpoke retreating from a long trail ride, Cobb kept hours that began early in the morning and seldom ended before each question was answered and every customer served. It was the business philosophy of catering to customers like they're family that has seen DeKalb Hardware's survival through the big box home improvement surge. The store is surrounded to the north, south, east and west by its enemies: Home Depot, Lowes and Ace Hardware. But despite its smaller inventory and staff, DeKalb Hardware

gets a steady volume of business with customers wanting keys made or lawn mowers repaired.

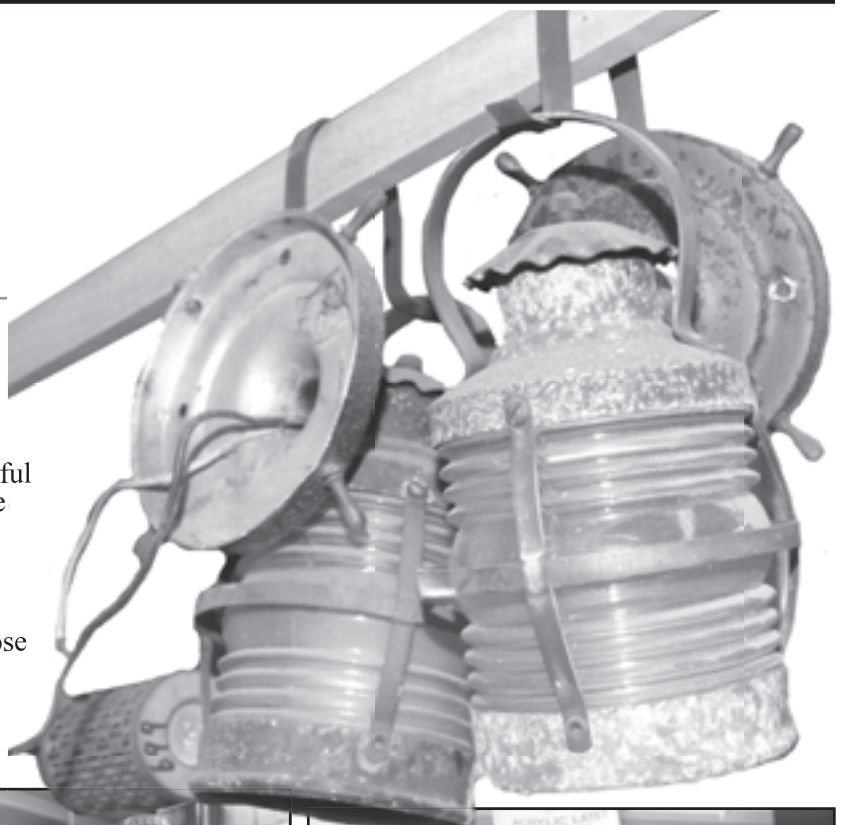
"I came here a minimum of once a week," said **Elsworth Drummer** of Stone Mountain. "If you know what you want to do, Gene could give you all kinds of pointers for what you needed. And he'd have the real stuff, not the modern day plastic version. 'I've been in the community over 10 years and I'd come in here for some weird thing and he'd have it. It might be covered in dust and have set on the shelf for 15 years, but he's got it. That's what happens when you're a fixture in the community.'"

But fixtures can be fragile, as is life. Cobb wrestled with

his voice would strengthen some, but the bombastic commands he once barked around the store had been reduced to a slightly high-pitched drone. Even his prideful gait began to wither under the necessary burden of chemotherapy.

Weakened and frail, Cobb still worked as many days as his body would allow and those days when his body wasn't able, his will fueled him to head for the store if only to walk the aisles for a moment, then work the cash register for a while before retreating to the office upstairs.

In the office, perched above the store's inventory, Cobb perhaps found solace surrounded by his



Employee Richard Manross checks out Cobb's toy car and truck collection. Photos by Brian Egston.

various bouts of cancer for nearly a decade. All the time working through the pain and never missing a day of work unless it was absolutely necessary. **Richard Manross**, an employee at the store for 26 years said Cobb would only miss work by force. "It was all his wife **Lois** could do to drag him away from the store to take a vacation."

Manross said that while Cobb was having a tooth removed, a tumor was found that none of his numerous CAT scans discovered. Doctors later removed the tumor, but during the procedure a portion of his vocal chords were cut, said Manross. The beautiful Southern drawl that once swam in the raspy baritone grit, was no more.

For a long time Cobb was barely audible, but still he worked. He continued to help customers only whispering as loud as he could. Eventually

collection of toy cars and trucks. Among them a model of a turquoise 1957 Chevy Belair with a Jim Beam decanter camouflaged inside. Cobb's son **Mike** happily emptied the decanter. Mike now runs the lawnmower repair business in the basement of the store. "Ain't nothin' like working for your dad," said Mike. "I'm like him. He could do anything, and I can too. But my dad had a real good business sense."

Lois, Cobb's wife of 48 years, said his business acumen was attributed to his concern for other people and his ability to talk to anyone. "We were on a cruise once, and he was talking to these two women," said Lois. "He'd never met them and sat there for about 30 minutes just having a conversation. The women got up to leave and started speaking German."

Cobb's way of doing business stems from a period when relationships were based solely

on trust as opposed to contracts and credit files. For many years, Cobb kept a small yellow plastic bin running over with IOUs. Even now in the technologically advanced age when a customer can hardly leave a store without the merchant knowing his blood type, Cobb's store uses an antiquated credit card machine and checks are honored the old way—by putting them in the register instead of being processed through a check scanner.

Cobb's final bout with the illness took a turn for the worse when his mind and body would no longer allow him to make the trek into the store. "When he stopped working, I knew it was bad," said Mike. Just a few weeks after Cobb returned from hospice, he passed away on March 28 and was buried on his birthday.

The store remains open and customers continue to file in and out. Duplicated keys are still among the most requested items while others come to have a lawnmower blade sharpened along with buying fertilizer and fasteners. The clearance section is noticeably smaller. Some patrons are mournful, missing the presence of the gentle patriarch of parts. Others, just now learning of the news, seem deflated before looking around the store perhaps noticing for the first time that something is missing.

Lois has made plans to sell the business while the employees are looking forward to second careers. And the community braces itself for the realization that once again all good things come to an end.



### CHAMBER MONTHLY EVENTS

Brown Bag Series  
Business After-Hours  
First Monday Lunch  
Government Affairs Council  
Network DeKalb Leads Group

## EVENTS

**APR. 30TH** - 3rd Annual DeKalb Chamber of Commerce Golf Tournament & Silent Auction - Location: Smokerise Golf & Country Club - 4900 Chedworth Drive, Stone Mountain, GA 30087 - 770-908-2582. Tee Time: 10:00 am. To Register, contact the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce - 404-378-8000 x 222. Sponsorship Opportunities are still available.

**MAY. 2ND** - Network DeKalb Leads Group - LOCATION: Holiday Inn Select - Decatur - 130 Clairemont Avenue, OAKHURST ROOM, Decatur, GA 30030 - 404-371-0204. COST: \$10.00 for Chamber Members and \$15.00 for Non-members. Please RSVP via email at [rsvp@dekalbchamber.org](mailto:rsvp@dekalbchamber.org).

**MAY. 7TH** - FIRST MONDAY LUNCH SERIES Presented by SunTrust - Featured Topic: "Women & Leadership Panel" with Karen Hughes of Corporate Environments, Juanita Baranco of Baranco Automotive Group, LLC., Lily Winsaft of Aldebaron & Associates, Sonia Booker of Intown Condos & Lofts, LLC and Facilitated by Karyn Greer of WXIA 11-Alive. Time: 11:30 am - 1:30 pm. Chamber Members - Cost: \$25.00 in advance; Non-Members - \$30.00 payment after May 2nd and Non-members and Guests - \$35.00. To attend this event, contact the Chamber at 404-378-8000 x 224 or RSVP and prepay via email at [rsvp@dekalbchamber.org](mailto:rsvp@dekalbchamber.org).

For more information on DeKalb Chamber related events, visit our website at [www.dekalbchamber.org](http://www.dekalbchamber.org) - 404-378-8000