

PROFILE

Bill Holcomb

FULL NAME: William Luckenbach Holcomb
OCCUPATION: Hardware Merchant
BIRTHPLACE: Mount Airy
AGE: 64
FAMILY: Wife, Marjorie; Children, Inglis, Denise And Richard
EDUCATION: B.S. In Textiles From North Carolina State University
HOBBIES: Sailing, Fishing, Yardwork

By TERRY COLLINS
 News Staff Writer

In a world of "serve-yourself" retail, Bill Holcomb, longtime proprietor of Holcomb Hardware, refuses to change.

"We give our customers individual attention," Holcomb said firmly. "Through the years, I've probably worked on just about everything you can think of, and I can tell them what the products will and won't do."

Although the storefronts and their tenants that surround the Main Street business have changed over the years, Holcomb's has remained consistent.

Sitting in his cluttered office, Bill Holcomb is at ease talking about his past. A Distinguished Service Award plaque hangs on the wall, along with family photos, telephone numbers, a worn calendar and rings of keys — lots and lots of keys.

"In the last 45 years I've probably cut enough keys to fill a tractor-trailer," Holcomb said with a laugh.

He is from the old school of retail, but at the same time has learned how to change with trends to maintain a business that is doing better than ever.

"Sometimes I think I was probably born with a 20-penny nail in my hand," Holcomb said. "My family has been hardware-oriented for back as far as I can remember. I'm third-generation in the business."

Holcomb believes he owes much of his success to lessons learned early on: "In my early days I was fortunate to have caring, helpful and understanding parents."

His father, William Hugh Holcomb, was a strict, but caring, parent, and he kept his only son busy with chores. Holcomb grew up with only one sibling, an older sister.

"I can remember the Depression. Everybody had a victory garden. I had an oil-fired incubator and hatched chickens for the family to have something to eat.

"You got hand-me-downs. I got my sister's little red coat and it buttoned the wrong way on the opposite side, so everybody knew it was a girl's coat. If I could, I would slip out of the house on cold mornings without that coat.

"As we grew older, we had a list of things to do and when that list was completed we could play. One of the chores that is etched in my mind is pushing the reel lawn mower. I was young, and the handlebars would strike my chin while I was pushing.

"We became used to working at an early age as a part of life," Holcomb continued.

But along with the work came time for fun. In 1939, he joined the Boy Scouts of America.

"I would recommend the scouts to any youngster. The lessons I learned in my scouting years I carry with me to this day. The thing about the scouts is that you learn to be an individual and work and cooperate with people. My scouting career lasted four years, and I managed to achieve the Eagle Scout award," the longtime merchant said.

"I'd probably still be a Boy Scout if my body chemistry hadn't changed and those silly, giggling girls started looking a lot different from how they did before!" Holcomb revealed.

The downtown merchant recalled that his first memorable experience working in his father's hardware store occurred during World War II. The young Holcomb blacked cast-iron stoves, which were delivered unfinished.

"There was a labor shortage, and I asked my father if I could come and work in the store — it was messy work. When you paint with stove polish it has a tendency to splatter. I can remember my mother making me disrobe as I came in through the back door," he said.

"Somewhere along the way the Lord saw fit to give me the ability to make things and repair things — so I put this talent to good use. Around Christmastime we sold quite a few children's wagons and I'd have to assemble them. I got a penny for doing a number seven wagon, two cents for a number eight and a nickel for a number eighteen.

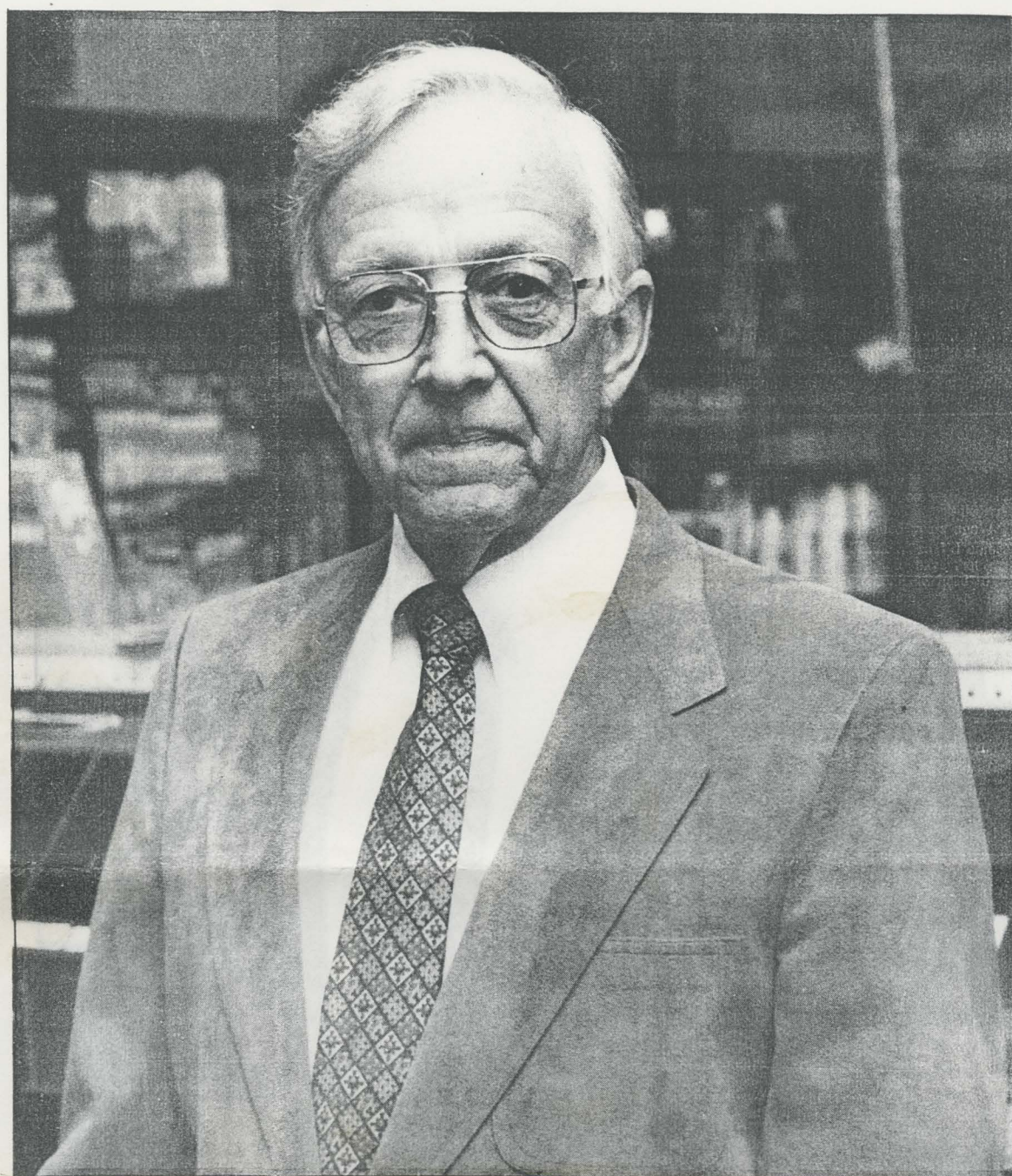
Holcomb went on, "I'd work all day and maybe earn a dollar; you know, we still sell those same (Radio Flyer) wagons today, and they still have the same numbers."

Holcomb graduated from Mount Airy High School in 1944. During that summer, he decided to try something different from the hardware business and went to work at Renfro Hosiery.

"I worked in maintenance and was making \$22 a week — made me feel sort of like a rich man. The only thing I didn't like was getting up at seven o'clock in the morning."

During the fall of 1944, Holcomb attended N.C. State University for one quarter before joining the Navy in 1945. He decided to join rather than get drafted, because, as he put it, "Every man went when he turned 18, and this way I had a choice in the matter."

Holcomb spent most of his service days on the West Coast,



Judy Dickerson/The Mount Airy News

serving in ports from Portland, Ore., to San Diego, Calif. He was a motor-machinist's mate, using his hands and technical ability to service everything from power steering to emergency lighting.

"I was discharged from the Navy in August of 1946 and I came down (to Mount Airy) on August 20 to visit the new store (his father had moved the location of the hardware business six months earlier) and that's when I was introduced to key cutting. I cut my first key that very same day I was back."

Holcomb returned to college in the fall of 1946 and graduated in 1950. The young man now had to make a decision about where to proceed with the next step of his life.

"Being from a long family of hardware merchants, I guess it was in my veins and I decided to follow the hardware career," Holcomb said.

In 1951, he married Marjorie Benbow, which he believes to be one of the greatest things he ever did. Marjorie was from Winston-Salem. Holcomb met her through a job she had on Main Street near the hardware store.

"I kept seeing this girl go in the dime store across the street and I said, 'I'm going to marry that girl,' and that's the truth."

In 1953, Holcomb helped charter the Mount Airy Junior Chamber of Commerce, and later served as president of the group for one year. He was also an instigator in getting the regular Chamber of Commerce started, and served on its board.

He is also quite proud of receiving the Distinguished Service Award from the Jaycees in 1958 for his efforts in the community.

"In 1960, my father passed away and the hardware duties were so demanding that I didn't have time for a lot of other activities," Holcomb explained. "Times were changing. In the early days of the hardware business, there was a big call for plow points and horse-drawn equipment.

"No longer. I looked for items to sell and services to offer to fill the gap," he said.

One of these was the installation and servicing of oil furnaces and air conditioning. This continued until a few years ago when the store owner decided to retire that end of the business.

"In 1985, when we had that freeze in January and the temperature went to zero, and there I was crawling around under a

house at five a.m., I realized I wasn't 21 years old anymore."

In 1958, Holcomb began a landscaping business, which he operated for six years. He finally stopped due to the demands of landscaping, which were more than he could possibly handle and still keep the store open, too.

But in 1965, someone made a statement that permanently altered the way of life at Holcomb Hardware.

"George Monday of McManus Locksmith Supply looked at me and said, 'You know, with all of these years of cutting keys, why don't you try locksmithing?' So, I did. And business bloomed from day one," Holcomb said.

"My son started helping me in the 1970s, and by 1980 it got to the point where one of us had to do the outside locksmithing and one of us had to operate the hardware store — so I turned the locksmithing over to him."

It would be hard to imagine the interior of the hardware store without Bill Holcomb. His ready smile and knowledge of tools and parts make him an essential part of what Holcomb Hardware has to offer.

"I enjoy people. I enjoy helping them. I decided years ago there was no way I'd become rich in this business, so I'd come down here and have a lot of fun — you've got to have that niche to survive in business today. You can't compete head to head with Wal-Mart or K-Mart on price or selection, so we offer service and knowledge.

"Through the years," Holcomb added, "I have had an extremely supportive family, especially my wife. I have five grandchildren now, all boys, and it is a joy watching them grow up.

"Who knows, one might even grow up to be the fifth generation to perpetuate the hardware business in Mount Airy."

Favorite Books: *Current Events Material*
Favorite Food: *Seafood*
Favorite Movie: *"Pretty Woman"*
Favorite Song: *"Stardust" by Hoagie Carmichael*