

## **RALPH SWOPE'S STORE**

Written July 2003

By Paul Swope

Dad had always wanted his own business. After working for other people for many years he had a chance to open his own business. The year was 1934. It was in the form of a general store located at the intersection of Whetstone Rd and Hwy 57, on the north side. The store and ground belonged to some one else and he was leasing it. It is the intersection of Whetstone and Petersburg Rd. now. When the new 57 was built they renamed the old 57 Petersburg Rd.

The store had a large sales area in the front, a two room apartment in the back, and a full basement. Also there were Standard Oil gasoline pumps in the front. There was also a garage large enough for several autos to be serviced at the same time. These buildings had been there for some time with other people running business there.

About that time Bub (Ralph Leroy) had graduated from high school and had gotten married. Dad talked him into taking over the garage and living in the apartment in back of the store. Bub didn't think he had the experience to take over the garage but he did well.

These were hard times, during the worst of the depression. When he bought stock for the store it would be small amounts. He would not even buy a full case of anything; everything was bought in part cases lots. There is a picture taken in the store during that time that shows just a few things on the shelves, not a large amount of stock. Dad built free standing shelving with angle iron and plywood. These shelf units were used all the time he had both stores.

In 1938 it was time to renew the lease. The owners (and dad always thought standard Oil had a hand in it) would not renew his lease. Besides that they gave him only 30 days to get out. After couple of days in a quandary, he decided to try and move forward with a new store. Bailey France had property across the road so he went and talked to him. The property was in the corner of Whetstone and Hwy 57. It was property with a garage that would hold a dump truck. The County Hwy department had used it in years past. Mr. France and Dad quickly came to an agreement and Dad moved on.

First step was to get a permit to build. The building commissioner was insisting that it had to be a brick building. That would take months to build and Dad by this time had less than 30 days. Besides the cost of a masonry building was out of Dads reach. Dad went to his lawyer and the lawyer said there was no way they could make him build a masonry building. He told him and go back and tell the building commissioner what he was going to build, permit or no permit! They gave him the permit.

I don't remember, or if I ever did know, who ram-rodged the construction. But I do know that all the able bodied men in the area, that could swing a hammer was there working. I do remember all of the Moffett boys there working. The new store was frame, built on foundation pillars. I don't have dimensions but it was of adequate size for the use as a country general merchandise store. We have a picture of the store under construction and it is dated May 1938. It had a narrow room across the back for storage. The store had a small attic area with a stair up from the storage room. The sanitary facility was a one holer down the hill in back of the store.

Dad contracted with Texaco for gasoline and oil products. They put in the underground storage tanks and three pumps out front. Two pumps were electric and one hand pump for when the electricity was off. He also sold kerosene from a rectangular 50 gallon tank with a hand pump on top. When you turned the crank on the hand pump it would dispense one quart. If someone wanted 5 gallons you had to do a lot of turning.

Bub set up his repair business in the old county hwy garage adjacent to the store.

Both Dad and Bub were in business in the new location before the 30 days were up. They had moved everything across the road, closed the old store and garage, and had a sign up pointing out the new store.

When the new store was being built I was only 9 years old. I hope I have all of the happenings at that time fairly accurate.

During the next few years there were several people tried to operate the old store. They all soon gave up and moved out. After that Bub rented it and made a residence out of the store, and operated the garage for a few years before going into the camera repair business.

Soon after Dad moved across the road to the new store they decided the garage was blocking the view of the store from people coming from the north. So they lengthened the floor with rough sawn oak and moved the building back about half its length.

A few other things were added to the store over the years. Dad would negotiate with Texaco for the gasoline contract. Over the years Texaco added a canopy to the front, asphalt between the front and the pumps, and painted the store a couple of times. Dad also added a lean-to down the side with a room at the back and the rest storage area.

Another big happening during the time that Dad had the store was the paratroopers being stationed in McCutchanville during the summer of 1943. It was the 502 battalion of the 101 division. Headquarters company was stationed on the hill back of the airport. Companies A, B & C were stationed in McCutchanville. One was stationed between Whetstone road and the big lake. There were no houses there at that time. One was stationed on the ground that is now the McCutchanville Park. The other was on Browning road just south of where the golf course is now. There were no houses from there down to where we lived.

During this time Dads store was made an official PX. We had a counter full of candy that could only be sold to the soldiers. There was very little candy to be had at that time. People would come in and point right through the sign that said it was only for soldiers, and say I want that that and that. We would have to tell them no. Most of the time there would be a guard stationed at the intersection of the roads out front.

The Troupers would fly from the airport down to Tennessee and jump out to maneuvers and then ride back to McCutchanville in trucks. Talk about a bunch of airplanes flying out. And also all the P47s were flying. By the time they got back they would want something more than K rations. It was hard to keep milk and sweet rolls in stock. When they were not training it took us all to keep things going.

There were those in the neighborhood that liked to spend time at the store. There was a Warm Morning stove (a free standing stove that got its name from keeping the fire all night) with a bench and a few chairs, and a table. The store would fill up on Sunday morning after church. Myself, and Mom would help out then. He had a couple of special friends that on Sunday morning he would fix a special Coca-Cola. He would pour out some of the Coke and replace it with a spirited drink. The drink was recapped and an X

put on top. He would inform whoever was helping who those were for. When those persons came in, ordered their coke and paid their 5 cents, that is the drink they would get. After the first drink they would have a smile on their face.

The children also liked the store. When they had a penny, nickel or a dime, they would head for "Mr. Swopes." McCutchanville School was just across the street and at recess the children that had a coin or two would like to go to the store for a candy bar. The kids seem to all like Dad and he would joke with them. There were some principles that had no trouble with kids going across to the store but there were a few that made the kids bring a note from home stating they could go across the road to the store.

Dad was into trading guns. There were several people around all the time that were gun lovers. Among these were a few State policemen that were coming by. Of course they wanted to try out different guns so he put in a shooting range along the south side of the store. It consisted of a large wall of rough sawed oak with a steel trap in front of it. There were many a shot fired at targets on that range.

In the winter time he would also conduct spot shoots out the back window of the garage. He would have the targets set up down the hill with a spot light on it. The shoots were at night. There would be a single target set up at a time and someone, usually Bub, would change the target between shooters.

Dad also fixed and sold telephones. In the 30s and 40s they were of the wood box type with the cranks to do the ringing. Everyone that had telephone service had to furnish their own phone. He sold Stromsburg Carlson phones and some times I would ride over to Illinois with him to pick them up. He had in the garage at home a bunch of the trade ins. I remember when he thought he had too many and they were worth nothing; we took a wheel barrow and dumped them in a ditch. It took several trips.

Another side line Dad had was that he fixed clocks and such. Dad was a trained jeweler so it was a natural that he would exploit his skills. People would bring in all kinds of clocks that they would say that no one else could make run. Every once and a while some one would bring in a clock with the parts loose in a box, and he would get it running. On occasion one of the old clocks with wood works would need a new gear. Dad would carve out a new gear and get it running.

About 1945 Dad and some of the other people in the neighborhood were talking about a fire department and a fire truck. They put their heads together and raised money, bought a fire truck and formed a fire department. The truck was bought in 1947. Dad was elected the Chief of the new department. By this time Bub had moved his garage business across the road so the old wood garage beside the store was used to house the new fire truck. To call the volunteers to man the truck they used a telephone tree and also the siren on top of Dads store.

This same organization, the McCutchanville Benefit Club, also bought the 20 acres that is now the McCutchanville Park. This was bought during the same time as raising money for the fire truck.

When Dad died in 1948, Mom ran the store for a few years. Then it was rented to different people for a while and finally Mom sold it to Doctor Nenneker. He tore it down and built a full grocery and a full gas station.