

• Remember When •

Walker Hardware: traditional meeting place downtown



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"He was personable and enjoyed meeting and waiting on people in the store," said Belleville resident Ron Fox of his late father Wilbur Fox. But he could have been describing himself, as apparent from the way he set about his current job in the paint department at Rona's in Belleville.

It was, then, no coincidence that the hardware business by the name of Walker Hardware operated by two generations of the Fox family was successfully run in downtown Belleville for many decades until it changed hands in 1949.

Established in 1867 by John W. Walker, the business was incorporated in 1923. At the time the business went to the initials of Charles Clifford Walker, one of the company's three partners, and was known as C.C. Walker Hardware Company Ltd.

Fox said it was so called to distinguish it from another hardware store by the name — Walker Hardware — located in the east coast around the same time.

The Fox family name came on board with the arrival of Fox's Uncle Herbert W. Fox from Madoc in 1924. His father, Wilbur M. Fox, who already had a hardware retail background in Madoc, joined him in 1933. At the time his uncle was the president and his father became the vice president of the company. Doug Dumlinie, another Belleville resident, became the third partner and held the position of secretary-treasurer. When his father retired, Fox took over as the president of the company.

Fox recalled himself getting involved in the family business even as a young boy attending school.

"I started working at the store when I was still at school. I'd work after school and on Saturdays, sweeping the floor, carrying out the garbage, putting stock away, unpacking the merchandise and so on. I got paid, but not very much. I did get a token. I always told him that it was not enough," he said, his easy laughter break-



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The "Duck into spring" promotion featured five ducks that were hatched in store, attracting considerable interest. In 1987, Ron Fox won the grand prize, which was a trip to two Jamaica, for his innovative promotional merchandising ideas such as the "Duck in spring".

ing out at the memory.

The Walker Hardware was located on 248-250 Front St. in Belleville. The original store was destroyed in a fire in the later part of 1867; it was reopened at the same location in 1868. Those days Belleville was a centre for booming farmers and lumbering operations in the area. Prior to the 1920s, the store was noted to have had the most extensive and best selection of stocks relating to saddlery and carriage hardware.

Through the decades, the stock in the store began to change, reflecting the needs of the time.

"It was one of the largest retail hardware stores in Eastern Ontario," recalled Fox. "When my father joined the company, we had the main hardware business, paint business, houseware and gift items. We sold china at one time and we also had a large toy department. We had a huge assortment of stock such as bulk screws and nails. If someone was looking for a particular item, and we didn't have it, then it probably wasn't available at all. We tried to keep right up with the times," recalled Fox.

In the '50s, the company recognized a growing trend involving the decisive role women were beginning to play in buying household goods. The store shelves that once served to present basic hardware and household products to the male clientele began to take on more variety in design, colour and appearance in a bid to attract and hold the attention of the female counterpart.

Reminiscing along, he continued: "It used to be a meeting place. I can remember I was a just a schoolboy and people, especially those coming from out of town, used to buy their groceries and so forth downtown. They'd bring them to our store and leave them and go back out and do the rest of their shopping. We had a corridor that went behind the paint department and there were stairs going down to the basement and they would line their groceries up along this corridor. I remember seeing them there," said Fox.

A man named George Lee used to run a tailor's shop above the store, he added and when Lee retired another tailor by the name of Cooney Day continued to operate the shop. "His actual name was Clarence

but everybody knew him as Cooner. He was there for years up until the 70s, I think," he added.

At one time, four other hardware stores existed on Front Street at the same time, he said. Among them were Smith's, Will's and White's Hardware. But with extra attention paid to their creative and often unusual window displays, the Walker Hardware kept their hold on their regulars.

"Our window used to attract a lot of attention. At Easter time, we hatched ducks out of the eggs and have them in the window, and set them up with a duck pond. People, especially school kids, would come to watch the ducks. It created quite a stir."

At Christmas time, the store window was the stage for puppet shows.

"Some members of the staff would manipulate the puppets behind the stage. This was done on the window and people would stand out on the street and watch it." Over the years Fox won few awards for his creative hardware merchandising ideas.

"Reflecting on the store's employees, he added: "We had a very loyal staff. At one point, we had more than 20 people in the earlier days. Those days employees didn't move around as much and they were very loyal. People were treated well too. Over the years, we trained many people who went on to be successful like in their own business. We were a good training ground."

Former MP and the late Jack Ellis was, he said, one among many valued employees who received his retail training at the Walker Hardware.

Fox's uncle died in 1957 while his father died in 1986.

The store was no longer a meeting place in the '80s, he concluded rather quietly.

"We had the same department in the late '80s but we didn't have the toys, no china. We still had the houseware, bake-ware and that sort of thing. At the time the downtown area was deteriorating. It came to the point where all the family businesses had to move on. I can remember and this was when I was back in school, on a Saturday you could hardly walk up the street. It was a shoulder-to-shoulder human traffic downtown. Those days are long gone."

In 1993, Fox sold the Walker Hardware to Joe Talbino, who later sold it to the current owner Vince Mancuso. Today, the location is occupied by Maxwell Dell Cafe.

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