

RAY LEE'S HARDWARE CIRCA 1950

The business was started by Ray's father, Tom Lee, who was originally in the grocery business. For many years Ray also ran the lumber yard and sold furnaces and pumps. The hardware store had a tin shop build on the back which burned in 1927 along with three grocery stores (Culvers, Norths, and Jordans).

When you walked through the door, you stepped back in time forty years. The wooden floor was worn by ninety years of use to the point that the knots protruded 3/8" above the softer parts of the boards. The counter on the west side of the store had built-in nail bins under it, and a fancy rotating screw cabinet with many sides and many drawers for different sizes of screws. The cash register was made mostly of wood and when the drawer opened, it didn't go "bing", it went blloong-gg!

You could buy almost any kind of tool, nails, hinges, stove pipes and parts, and glass (cut to size). In the back room, on a table, there were hunting knives and BB guns. Ah yes! I bought a BB gun. If my folks had known, I would have been in deep, deep trouble. But Ray was loyal to his customers and never told even though he lived across the street from my mother for over forty years. He was a director of the bank, and she worked for him for over twenty years. I can also remember taking my shoe in to have the heel nailed back on for about ten cents.

For many years Ray employed Tom Healey and Will Brown to install furnaces, fix plumbing and stoves, and hang eaves troughs, etc. Ray Lee also owned a farm south east of Irene where there was a wooded lot for firewood. The Healey boys use to tell about coming up Wheeler road where the I. C. Railroad bridge was, with a full load of lumber and having the front end of the truck up off the ground cover.

The store was heated by a furnace in the basement directly under a large, round register in the floor. In the winter the town's retired gentlemen would sit on chairs around the register and swap stories, and when Ray or uncle Tom would turn their backs, they would spit down the register on top of the furnace, which would result in a not too pleasant an odor. In summer these men would sit on captain's chairs in front of the store or on the "weeping plank" which was a wooden barrier set up to keep passersby from falling into the open basement to the west where Jordan's grocery had burned down twenty years before.

The Historical Society has a picture of the inside of the hardware store which was taken about 1910. There is another taken about 1950. The biggest difference in the two pictures is the age of the men at the counter.

Written by John Larson

April, 2007