

## Hardware man more durable than his goods -- At 88, Hurley still cheerfully selling bolts, pipe, fittings

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - Monday, May 15, 2006

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Edition: Final

Section: Metro

Page: B1

There he stands, sentry to Aisle 13 at Hubbard's Hardware on Summer Avenue, one of the oldest living hardware men still going, the twice-widowed man born in 1918 still giving his bosses - and his customers - 44 hours a week, 52 weeks a year.

There stands Allen W. Hurley . Some say the "W" is for work, not Walter.

"Everybody loves him," says store owner Steve Hubbard, whose grandfather owned the old North Memphis Coal and Hardware on Main. "Customers come in and ask for him."

Need a nut or bolt? Head to Aisle 13.

"They keep the nut in the nut aisle," jokes Hurley .

He doesn't quite look 88, except for maybe his thick glasses. He's got those black Velcro shoes, but his stride's as swift and steady as a man 20 years younger. He eats three times a day, same thing almost every day.

For breakfast, three cups of Maxwell House coffee and three doughnut sticks.

For lunch, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, peanut-butter crackers and a stick of gum.

For dinner, the chicken strip meal from KFC.

Do not try this at home, aspiring geriatrics.

"You want a good mule," Hurley insists, "you feed him three times a day."

He left Humes High in the '30s to start working, for \$25 a week with room and board, at Shepherd Construction Company.

He got into hardware in 1951, at Walter May Farm Supply on Lamar. For many years, he worked two jobs - helping customers at May during the day and fixing big rigs at night for Navajo Freight Lines.

When May closed in the '90s, he went to Home Quarters Warehouse in Raleigh. When it closed 1999, Hubbard made him his first hire.

"When I got into the family, in 1953," says Hurley 's brother-in-law, Walter Clement, "that booger was working three jobs. He's gone at that pace ever since."

The pace at Hubbard's has slowed some recently, since the big-box Lowe's opened down the street.

"Been a little slow," they'll say at Hubbard's, "since the new neighbor moved in."

Hubbard, the owner, said sales are down significantly, but loyal customers remain.

Hurley and Roland Tomlinson, his 81-year-old co-worker, are part of the reason why.

"You get that personal touch," says Bruce Caldwell, who dropped by one day last week. "You ain't got some 16-year-old kid don't know anything trying to sell you something."

Caldwell and Raymond Braden came in for a plastic pipe on a water heater. They needed 2 feet.

"How about 24 inches?" Hurley had asked them, and Braden raised his voice to correct before chuckling.

"Lookee there," Caldwell said as Hurley bent to buff the cut end. "He'll smooth it out for you and everything."

Every customer receives the same cheerful greeting and hop-to-it service. On Summer, Hurley sees all kinds - young women and old men, black and white, Asian and Hispanic.

When they approach Aisle 13, they hear the same, peppy welcome: "Could I help ya?"

When they leave, they get the same goodbye: "Hurry back."

An encounter with a young woman last week typifies Hurley 's good nature.

"You didn't find what you didn't need?" Hurley asked.

She told Hurley he'd confused her: "I'm just kinda looking."

"Take your time," Hurley said, readying for a quip "We're open till 7. You got until then."

Hurley 's second wife, Sue, died in 1996. Five of his siblings - Hurley was the oldest of 10 - are still alive. He and his brother, Ray, went to a tractor pull just a few weeks back, down in

Mississippi.

All four of Hurley 's children are retired, and they all live out of town.

Some of Walter May's children and grandchildren still stop by the store. When they went to work, Walter would put them with Hurley , hoping his work ethic would rub off.

"I hope we picked up a little of that," says Scott May, now 63 and a local attorney.

Hurley says he'd like to make it clear past 90 before stopping. He doesn't know what he'd do without a job - he took about a week of full retirement, back in the '70s, before returning to May.

During last week's storms, Hurley found a grateful customer just the suction pump he needed for a 5-foot hole. As the man headed to the counter, a regular named Billy Conn apprised his smile.

"That old fella help ya?" Conn asked.

Yessir, came the reply. Sure did.

"That," Conn said, "is a good ol' fella there. He'll help you out."

Something those customers may not realize - they are helping him, too.

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Caption: Photos

Lance Murphey/The Commercial Appeal Allen Hurley , 88, (center) of Hubbard's Hardware visits with longtime customer Don Oswalt at the store where Hurley still works a full shift five days a week on his feet. Hurley shows a display he put together for the different types of springs sold at Hubbard's. Now, which one do you need?

Memo: The Memphis Life