



SCENIC HIGHWAY, ST. CLOUD, MINN.

*Scenic Highway and 10th Street Bridge,
St. Cloud, Minnesota, circa 1920
Image Courtesy of Stearns History Museum*



*Coborn's Grocery, Sauk Rapids, Minnesota
Chester A. Coborn - circa 1921*

1850

1850s

1860

1870

*Chester R. and Sarah Marie Coborn
are among the first town settlers in
Sauk Rapids, Minnesota*

Meet the Coborn Family

STREET SCENE-SAUK RAPIDS, MINNESOTA

*Street Scene in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota*

Leadership, community and retail have long been a tradition of the Coborn family. For decades, the Coborns have been recognized as pioneers. But it was in the mid-1800s with Chester R. Coborn where that legacy began. Nestled in a small, modest home not far from the northern banks of the Mississippi River, and just up the road from the storefront that would later adorn the family name, Chester established the family's roots in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, and was among the town's first settlers in the 1850s. It was in the small river town where at age 23 he met and married his young wife, Sarah Marie.

The village, first organized in 1881 and incorporated in 1889, welcomed many well-known early explorers and missionaries who traveled through Sauk Rapids on their expeditions up the Mississippi River. Sauk Rapids derived its name from the Native Americans who first settled there and the rapids of the Mississippi south of the Sauk River.

1880

1884


Coborn's Bros. Feed Store opens in one of the first buildings in Sauk Rapids

1890

1900



*Site of First Carleton & Coborn
Grocery Store & Post Office:
Post Master Chester A. Coborn
circa 1901*



The town served as the intersection of supplies of all kinds, visitors and military personnel from Camp Ripley. Until 1878, Sauk Rapids represented the end of the line for railroads. Settlers from as far away as the upper Red River Valley brought their products to town for shipping.

Chester R., originally from New York, was at the center of the booming town, serving as the first depot agent for the Northern Pacific Railway in 1868. It was at the railroad that Chester and his sons first saw an opportunity that ignited the family's retail legacy.

By 1872, the U.S. population had grown to more than 38 million people, and Ulysses S. Grant had just been re-elected for a second term as president.

Knowing the potential and desiring to serve his community, Chester R. opened the family's first retail store not far from his home. This first store was both simple and small, but it proved early to be a gathering place in the community where neighbors chatted and connected with one another.

Tragedy struck the Coborn family the following fall when Chester R. accidentally shot himself in his left leg while he was hunting. He received six weeks of treatment before physicians amputated his leg. His health deteriorated and he died in 1874, leaving his wife, Sarah, to care for their children, including those that would have the most influence on the family business, Chester A., Lee and Dolly.

First Retail Store

While only teenagers, Chester A. Coborn and his younger brother, Lee, recognized the retail potential and opened Coborn's Bros. Feed Store in 1884 in one of the first buildings in Sauk Rapids. The building was owned and operated by the early settlers as a trading post. Two years later, a cyclone threatened the end of the store and the building. But reflective of Chester A.'s character – strong and steady – the building was one of few buildings to survive the 1886 cyclone.

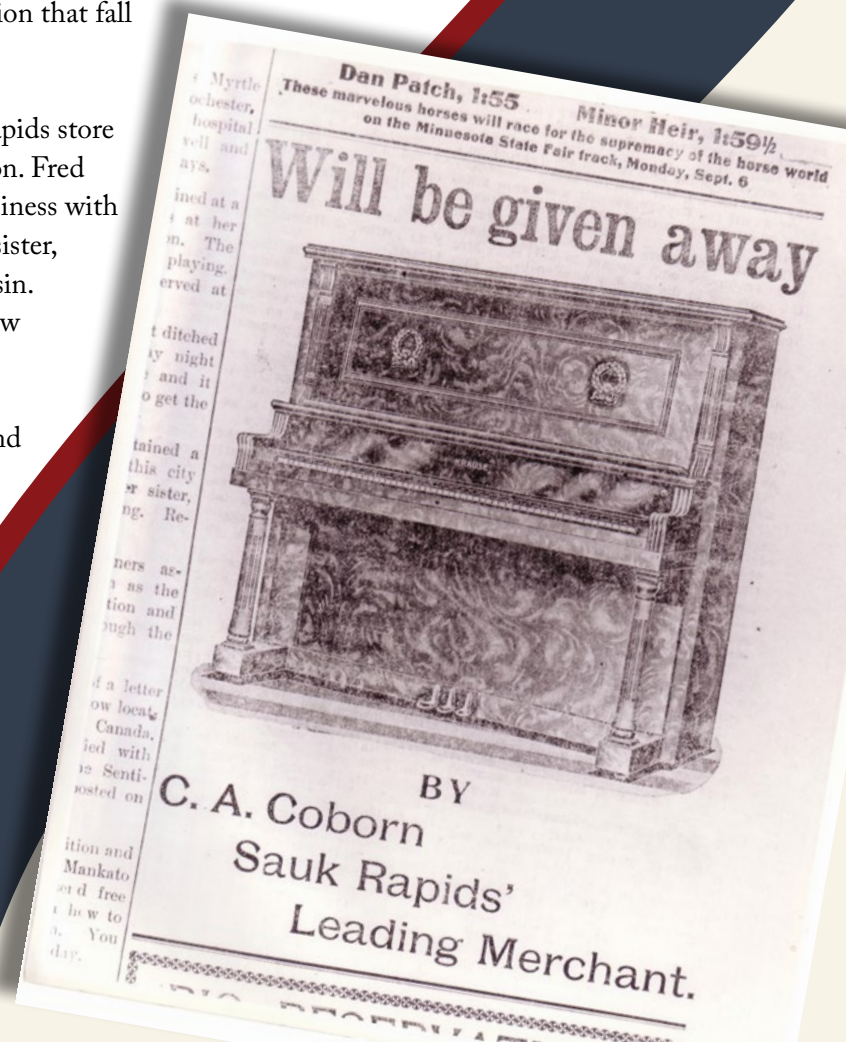
The brothers explored other interests and W.L. Nieman took over the feed store and later turned it into a general mercantile store. When the store closed in 1901, Chester A. reclaimed the space and opened his first general mercantile store called Carleton & Coborn. He had been serving as the postmaster at the time and moved his post office into the building to help him balance his career as a public servant and entrepreneur. He had become a pillar in the community, active both in politics and business. His reputation earned him an invitation that fall to meet then Vice President Theodore Roosevelt.

It was a family business even then. Chester A. opened the Sauk Rapids store June 6, 1901 as a partnership with his brother-in-law, Fred Carleton. Fred had experience in the retail business, first opening a mercantile business with his father in 1869. He ran that business until he met Chester A.'s sister, Dolly, and they married in 1872 and moved to La Crosse, Wisconsin. The couple returned to Sauk Rapids in the spring of 1901, just a few months before opening the store.

Committed to convenience and personalized service, Chester A. and Fred inaugurated the first free delivery service by the way of horse drawn wagon – the Coborn's name hand painted on the side.

After only six months in business together, Fred suffered a heart attack on New Year's Day. He never recovered and was 57 years old when he died in January 1902. His wife, Dolly, moved back to La Crosse a week after the funeral with her daughter, Alta, who was enrolled in business school at the time.

Chester A. continued to lead what had grown into a lucrative grocery business in less than a year, under the name Coborn's.



What Food Cost in 1902

Bacon (pound)	18 cents
Beef (pound)	6 cents
Bread (loaf)	4 cents
Butter (pound)	29 cents
Cheese (pound)	10 cents
Coffee (pound)	6.5 cents
Eggs (dozen)	25 cents
Milk (quart)	7 cents
Molasses (gallon)	7 cents
Rice (pound)	2 cents
Sugar (pound)	6 cents

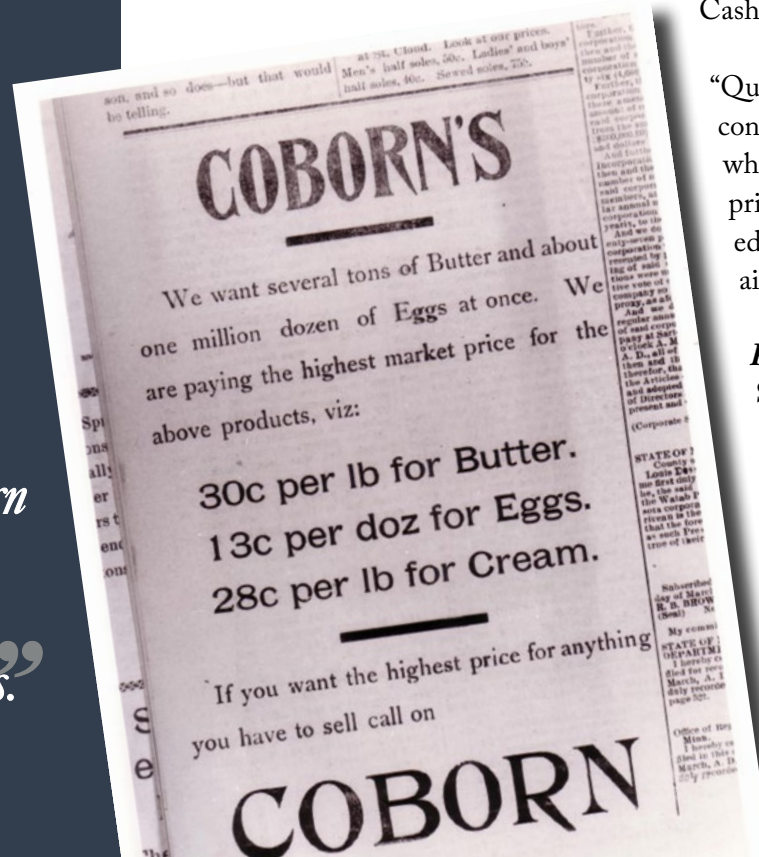
He received support from the local newspaper encouraging residents to buy from local merchants and often leveraged the newspaper to advertise his supply needs. He bought a stock of goods from St. Paul to initially start the business that first summer, and his commitment to the local community was seen soon after. Whenever possible, he purchased products from local farmers and provided a means for those farmers to accelerate their operations.

Ads published in the local newspaper reveal the magnitude of Chester A.'s business and commitment to buying local. He often advertised his product needs in the local newspaper and offered to pay an above average price. In an ad published on April 1, 1902, he requested several tons of butter and offered to pay 25 cents per pound. Two weeks later, he called for 1 million dozen eggs.

"We are paying the highest market prices for your farm produce," Chester A. Coborn often said in the local newspaper.

Competition soon followed. Two weeks after J.W. Dewey opened its store in town, Chester A. responded with a newspaper campaign promoting his business on both quality and price, two of the same tenets of the modern day Coborn's and Cash Wise brands.

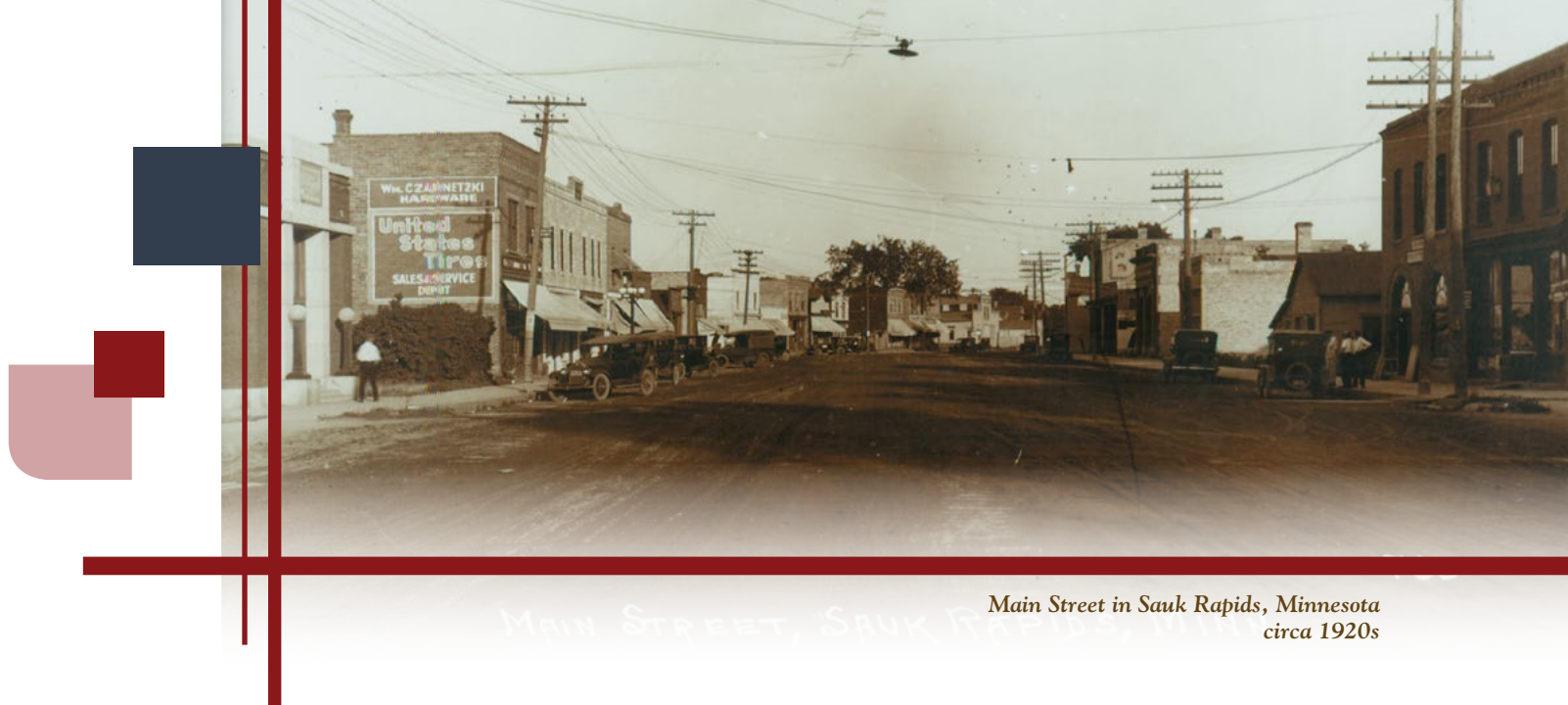
"...promoting his business on both quality and price, two of the same tenets of the modern day Coborn's and Cash Wise brands."



"Quality – this is a matter seldom taken into consideration by the average buyer, many of whom are more interested in hunting for low prices," Chester A. shared in a newspaper editorial. "Let quality rather be what you aim," he encouraged his neighbors.

Partnership Emerges

Staying true to those tenets allowed Chester A. to not only compete, but also to continue to thrive in the grocery business in the small, but growing Central Minnesota community. After two years



Main Street in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota
circa 1920s

in business, a local sales representative from a prominent wholesale grocery house went on record saying Coborn's was among the company's largest customers and that the volume of business equaled that of either of the two leading grocery companies in the nearby city of St. Cloud.

The store's monthly sales averaged \$1,500 and allowed Chester A. to bring in his sister, Dolly, as a partner in business.

Moving back from La Crosse, she brought her vision that led them to reorganize as Carleton & Coborn Staple and Fancy Groceries in the summer of 1903. The store broadened its large grocery and confectionary stock. The company began purchasing a number of quality goods directly from the manufacturers and passing on the savings to customers.

Despite the store's growth, Chester A. regularly assured his neighbors that he wanted to serve them all. "Your orders, no matter how large or small, will receive our careful attention," he wrote in a local newspaper article.

In the rise of that success, a fire started at the store while crews worked to repair the roof. News spread quickly and caused concern throughout the town before rumors were dispelled and the newspaper shared that the fire was quickly contained.

1890

1900

1903

Reorganized as Carleton & Coborn Staple
and Fancy Groceries

1910

Community Asset

The Carleton & Coborn store had become a landmark and a frequent destination during the holidays not only for the buying of goods, but also its festive appearance. The store's corner lot and architecture had made it a focal point along the town's main street and Chester A. became known for his creative window displays each Christmas. He spent time throughout the year crafting plans that surpassed the previous year's endeavor. He captured community-wide acclaim in the early 1900s when he installed electric lights that brilliantly illuminated the storefront. Each light shone at the power of 100 candles – and cost \$2.70 a piece.

The town of Sauk Rapids had grown to 2,000 people by the summer of 1907, with more people moving in every week, according to newspaper reports.

As the town and nearby city of St. Cloud grew, so did the Coborn family's passion for retail. Five years after Chester A. opened his store, his brother, Lee Coborn, opened a grocery store. Their mother, Sarah, started a milling and dressmaking business the following year next to the post office and traveled throughout the area with an elegant supply of dresses, trimmed hats and milling articles that she sold at reasonable prices.

"Mrs. Coborn understands the business thoroughly and deserves patronage," a newspaper article read in 1907. "It is to be hoped that the people both of Sauk Rapids and the vicinity will give her encouragement."

One of the most disastrous fires to ignite along Sauk Rapids' Main Street threatened the

C. A. COBORN
SANTA CLAUS' HEADQUARTERS

Let Us Speak a Word for the Children:

Next week Christmas will be here, a day which should make the heart of every child in Benton County rejoice. Bring the little folks in and let them help in selecting the Christmas tree decorations. We have everything you need. Also Candies, Nuts, Fruit etc., by the barrel.

Do NOT FORGET THE PLACE TO PURCHASE. A little forethought will prompt you to think over to-day the things that you really need at home and where you can make your dollar go the farthest. Here is a partial list.

Wine	Christmas Cigars, Pipes, Tobacco	Ornery
Apples	Christmas Candles, Bells, etc.	Porcelain
Oranges	Gloves and Mittens	China
Lemons	Shirts, Stockings	Glass
Peaches	Shoes, Overalls	Stoneware
Butter		Full Size
Pigs Etc.		

Do Not Forget

COBORN'S

SATURDAY THE 11th

Will be Market Day at Coborn's

On this day I will sell for cash or its equivalent in trade, the following goods at the following prices:

20 lbs Sugar	\$1.00	Men's Overshoes, any size	\$1.50
20 lbs Rice	1.00	Men's Felt Shoes worth \$3.00	2.25
12 lbs Prunes	1.00	Wool Hose worth 25c for	20c
7 lbs Coffee	1.00		

All Shoes except children's, will be sold on this day at 25c per pair less than regular retail price, which is marked on every box.

On This Day Only, I Will Pay
25 cents per dozen for Eggs, and 25 cents per pound for Butter.

No goods will be charged at above prices. You will have to have the CASH, or its equivalent in trade to obtain these goods.

Remember Coborn's, Sat. Jan. 11, 1908

existence of Chester A.'s grocery store and leveled Lee's store to the ground in March 1907. The fire spread across three landmark brick buildings and resulted in more than \$23,000 in damage, according to newspaper reports. Citizens responded in great numbers to try to save goods.

"I am here to stay," Chester A. said in a newspaper editorial printed the day after the fire. "I am paying for your farm products a price that is the best, the very best that the market affords. I am here for our mutual good. Are you with me?"

The editorial reflected Chester A.'s commitment to sustaining the store and increasing competitive pressures of the time. He, and other hometown retailers began seeing business escaping due to the rise in popularity of mail order catalogs. He continued to reach out to his neighbors through an extensive advertising campaign in the local newspaper, sharing the best prices of the week and his desire to have their business.

"C.A. Coborn is making some extraordinary bargains in strawberries for this week only," an ad read in July, offering a 16-quart crate for \$2 and a 24-quart crate for \$3.

The consumer shift led Coborn's and other local merchants to organize "Market Day" and attract the town's 2,000 people to Main Street. Chester A. drew a crowd with his advertisement in the local newspaper, "I will serve a big FREE DINNER all day on Market Day."

"We want you to take a look at everything in our store," Chester A. said in the newspaper on Sept. 12, 1907.

BORN

COBORN

MARKET DAY

FEBRUARY 8th, 1908

St. Paul, Minn., Feb. 1, 1908
DAIRYMEN OF SAUK RAPIDS,
Sauk Rapids, Minn.

Gentlemen:
This is to notify you that we have appointed Mr. C. A. Coborn, our agent at Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, for the special purpose of buying your CREAM and paying SPOT CASH for same. He will be ready to take in cream on February 8th and may be ready before that time. Call on him.

We can assure you that he will be able at all times to pay you the highest market prices regardless of others.

We are aware that most people, when they have anything to sell, like to see it handled, especially cream. Now in this case you have a man you all know and one you have confidence in to weigh and buy your cream, which assures you that you will get a fair and honest treat-

Feb. 1st I am going to move the Post-Office into the building recently occupied by the Benton County State Bank. In the space the Post-Office now occupies, I am going to
Buy Your Cream.

Watch This PAGE Next Week

For the prices you can buy your Merchandise for, of me.

A FREE DINNER

will be SERVED over the store.

Coborn's
February 8th, 1908

Coborn
Coborn's is the place you have always got the best prices for your Farm Products.
We lead them all, the rest follow. You know this by years of experience. You know that the goods we sell you are the very best the market affords. Compare our prices and quality with any other dealer in this city or St. Cloud, or with Sears, Roebuck & Co. of Chicago. We handle your perishable produce at a profit to you. **THEY HANDLE YOUR CASH AT A LOSS TO YOU!**
We Are Here To Stay
To do business with you right. If there is anything we differ about we are here to meet you face to face and settle. We wish to call your especial attention to our brands of **Primrose Teas 40c 30c 60c** per pound. If you have used these brands of goods you will see no other. Come and get samples.
"Home Brand" Coffees.
On Saturday, May 9th
MARKET DAY AT COBORN'S
We are going to have exceptional bargains on everything in our line consisting of Groceries, Shoes, Hosiery, etc. You and we will be the losers if we don't get together that day.
Remember Coborn's

ARE YOU READY FOR THE FOURTH ?

NOT UNLESS YOU'VE STOPPED AT

...COBORN'S...

Here are the Things You Want to Properly Celebrate the Nation's Birthday. Let us Supply You with

FIREWORKS

Roman
Candles,
Sky Rockets,
Firecrackers.

FRUITS

The 4th is not complete without some fresh fruit for your dinner or your lunch. We have made special arrangements to supply your wants.

CANDIES

Our candies are sweet, wholesome fresh and delicious. In boxes or by the pound.

DRIED FRUITS

Here is where we're ahead of them all again. Peaches 15c per lb. Apricots 15c per lb. Prunes 3 lbs for 25c.

DON'T FORGET

That we have the best line of SHOES in the city.

C. A. COBORN

"You don't have to buy. But you will buy when you see our unexcelled offer for 20 pounds of sugar for \$1 and everything else in the grocery line for proportionately 'knock-down' prices."

The day built excitement and drove traffic to local stores. During the event, local merchants extended bottom dollar prices to all patrons in addition to special promotions, contests and prizes. Buying local was not only convenient, but it also engaged families in a fun activity. The success made Market Day an annual event with free food, grand giveaways, local exhibits and "can't miss deals" on goods.

"We have earned the reputation of having 'the store that saves you money,'" Chester A. said in a newspaper advertisement at the end of that year. "We're bound to live up to that reputation." The store offered everything from groceries and confectionary to fruits and vegetables of the season to footwear for everyone in the family. He regularly encouraged the community to compare the Coborn's prices and quality with stores in St. Cloud and specifically Sears, Roebuck & Co. of Chicago.

Chester A. had never been just about the profit. He did what he could to help the people of his community, sometimes extending credit beyond the norm

"Chester regularly encouraged the community to compare the Coborn's prices and quality with stores in St. Cloud..."

**C. A. COBORN'S
Market Day
Saturday, Nov. 14**

C. A. Coborn has lined up through the center of his store a full line of seasonable footwear which he is selling at the right price.

Have just received a carload of choice New York apples. I should be pleased to have you place your orders with me. Remember market day, Nov. 14.

Very respectfully,
C. A. COBORN

"THE HELPING HAND"

are going to serve Coffee, Sandwiches, Doughnuts, etc. at

Coborn's, Sat., the 23d

You can aid a good cause by lending a helping hand to these young ladies by purchasing of them. They use the money thus secured to aid people who are less fortunate than you and have not the helping hands to help themselves. They would be pleased to have you use your helping hands to help them use their helping hands.

Very respectfully,
CHESTER A. COBORN.

Birth of Businesses

and looking out for those who could not help themselves. He became a supporter of “The Helping Hand,” dedicated to serving the less fortunate. He asked for his customers’ and community’s support, offered his store for a fundraiser and even took out advertisements on the charity’s behalf.

In 1909, Chester A. gained a new partner in the business, Miss Cora Grunswold. She had served as deputy postmaster under him. The partners changed the store’s name to Coborn & Grunswold, but struggles ensued. The partnership only lasted a few months before they closed the store and sold the stock. He opened a flour store the following summer in the Bell Building and later closed it. He decided to take a break from the grocery business and worked at the local paper mill.

Coborn’s was among a number of retail icons that started business in 1902, including:

Coca-Cola Bottling Company United Inc.

J.C. Penney

Pepsi Cola

Cadillac

3M

