



Dan and Mabel Coborn



Dan Coborn, late 1940's



Dan Coborn building a Heinz Soup and Crackers Bonus Sale display in Sauk Rapids

The Legacy of Dan Coborn



Dan Coborn, former chairman, president and CEO passed away in March of 2017. Having led the company for a greater part of the 20th century, Dan served Coborn's, Inc. as its chief executive from the late 1950s until 1999. With great sorrow, family, friends and employees reminisced about his grand presence within the community and the legacy he left behind. He will always be remembered and commended for his integrity, work ethic and genuine care for people.

Dan Coborn wasn't destined to become a CEO. It was sheer tenacity, courage of conviction and a healthy dose of luck that got him there.

Dan was born to humble beginnings as the third of seven children to Duke and Florence (Graham) Coborn. Like most Depression era children, he was put to work at a young age to help make ends meet. He – alongside his three brothers, Bob, Bill and Ron – took on odd jobs as young boys. Many were what others considered the “worst jobs.” From checking eggs under a light

for freshness to filling soft drink bottles to wrapping fish amidst the pungent odor, there were few jobs the Coborn brothers didn't do.

“I started delivering groceries when I was 10 years old,” Dan said during a 2008 interview with Business Central. “All the able-bodied men were gone because of the war. I'd put a pillow on the seat so I could see out the window when driving the delivery truck.”

“You're the boss's son so you got to do it all,” Dan remembered his father saying.

Dan's youth was colorful – full of mischief, antics and risk. In later years, he wasn't proud of the trouble he had caused but he always took the good from the bad. His childhood experiences taught him lifelong lessons of patience, enduring optimism and the power of second chances. It was this remarkable influence that helped shape Coborn's, Inc. into the company it is today.

Dan graduated from Sauk Rapids High School in 1948. He went on to attend Saint John's University, where he played football. Temptations outside the classroom led to poor grades. One afternoon the Abbot called Dan to his office to bestow wisdom, “You know, Dan, the world needs truck drivers, too.” Dan got back on the straight and narrow and graduated in 1952 with a degree in economics.

Dan Coborn, featured in
Business Central Magazine



Dan & Mabel Coborn,
featured in Style Magazine

That same year, Dan married Mabel Hansen of Rockville, MN. He went on to serve in the U.S. Army where he was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri for two years. Upon discharge, he was accepted into law school at University of Minnesota but declined the opportunity and returned to Sauk Rapids to work for his father because he and Mabel learned they were expecting their first child. Dan quickly became his father's right-hand man and assisted with a variety of management duties. In 1959, Dan and his brothers found themselves at the helm of the company after their father's unexpected passing. Since Dan's older brother Bob was enlisted in the service at the time, Dan was chosen by his brothers to be in charge.

"We were trying to eke out a living," Dan said. "We needed to expand to support four families. One store was not going to do it."

In 1963, the brothers purchased their second store.

"The Foley school superintendent decided the grocery business was better than working for the school district,"

Dan recalled. "It didn't take long for him to decide the risk wasn't worth it. He wanted out and we wanted in. We moved out of that building in Foley and shortly after that the roof caved in," Dan said. "Just another example of how it's better to be lucky than smart."

Dan led the company over the years with bold vision and resolve. After opening the company's first Cash Wise store in Willmar in 1979, Dan envisioned the next Cash Wise location in an open field on the outskirts of Waite Park. Grocers typically planned their stores around residential growth, but this would break that convention. Dan was determined to build the store under the "build it and they will come" theory. The gamble would place the company as the wager. It took convincing for others in the company to see the potential, but the reward wound up being worth the risk. Today, the Waite Park store has been remodeled several times and is the company's largest Cash Wise store among a chain of 19.

Dan would admit that not all decisions were the right ones. Perhaps the biggest flop was Fountain Fresh – a bulk soda attraction, where customers could choose from 30 flavors of soda – some of the more unusual choices being peach, banana, sarsaparilla and piña colada – or mix their own combinations "soda-fountain

style.” Cash Wise in Waite Park was the first store in the five-state area to carry Fountain Fresh, but the concept just never caught on.

Dan was the eternal optimist. Even during the toughest of times, he didn’t dwell on them. “We made some bad decisions, but nothing that took the company down,” Dan said. “In the history of the company, we never missed a payroll except for four people – my brothers and me. And that didn’t happen very often. I never lost faith in the fact that it was a good business. People have to eat. They have to get their food from someplace.”

Dan had the ability to say so much while saying so little. His basic principles for business, leadership and treating others well, endure throughout the company today:



Third, Fourth and Fifth Generation leaders Dan Coborn, his son Chris Coborn, (current CEO and Chairman) and Emily Coborn, Vice President of Operations/ East Region



“It’s better to be lucky than smart.”

“You can’t sell from an empty shelf.”

“Talk is cheap. It still takes money to buy whiskey.”

“You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

“Figures don’t lie, but liars’ figure.”

“Keep the faith.”

Dan felt a tremendous sense of duty to his community. In 1967, he and his wife Mabel became charter members of United Way of Central Minnesota. He was also a founding member of the Boys & Girls Club of Central Minnesota board, which both he and Mabel served on at different times. In addition to that, he served on the Board of Trustees. Dan mobilized others to give back, as well. Coborn’s retired Chief Operating Officer, Bob Thueringer, who was with the company for 47 years, remembers Dan speaking to him as a high school student. “You may be a student; you may not make a whole lot; but you have a responsibility to this community,” he said.

Dan’s leadership in the grocery business and commitment to his customers and community earned him recognition over the years. In 1987, he was named Minnesota Grocer of the Year by Minnesota Grocers Association. He also received accolades from College of Saint Benedict, National Grocers Association, St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce, St. Cloud State University and United Way of Central Minnesota. In 2002, he received the Father Walter Reger Distinguished Alumnus Award from

“You work hard, you know what the goals should be, and if you want to put in enough blood, sweat and tears, you’ll succeed.”

Saint John’s University – the highest honor they bestow – for outstanding service to the Saint John’s community by an alumnus. He was never in it for the recognition, but he appreciated it.

Dan’s success in business created opportunities for him and the company to give back. His generosity touched many organizations and institutions, but he had a special place in his heart for education. He provided gifts to Cathedral High School, College of St. Benedict, Saint John’s University, St. Cloud Technical and Community College, St. Cloud State University, and others.

He also tirelessly gave of his time. He served on countless boards and participated in many civic organizations, including CentraCare Health, Friends of the College of Saint Benedict, Sauk Rapids School Board, and others. He was a Sauk Rapids volunteer fireman for many years. While serving on both the MNSCU and St. Cloud Hospital Board of Directors, Dan learned about the shortage of nurses in Central Minnesota. He worked behind the scenes to connect the right people, lobby and advocate, and ultimately succeeded in helping to establish a nursing program at St. Cloud State University. Dan and his son, Chris, were instrumental in bringing Division I Hockey, Herb Brooks and the National Hockey Center to St. Cloud State University.

Dan’s philanthropy was born out of wanting to give back to those who had been so good to Coborn’s. In 1999, he was honored to receive an award on behalf of the company when Coborn’s, Inc. was named one of the Ten Most Generous Companies in America. The award was sponsored by John F. Kennedy Jr.’s magazine, George, and was presented by Kennedy and actor and philanthropist Paul Neuman. “I thought it was a joke at first,” Dan said. He and Mabel flew to New York to receive the honor. “We all share responsibility for the health of our communities,” Dan said upon receiving the award.

“Dan had a real knack for being able to truly thank you for all you’d done and yet challenge you,” Chief Operating Officer Dave Meyer said. “You really felt good about knowing you were appreciated, and you wanted to do more.”

In his later years, Dan found satisfaction spending winters with his wife Mabel in Florida and playing golf with friends. He loved watching his son Chris and his management team lead the company into new possibilities. Well into his 80s, Dan would drive from his home in Sartell to the former Coborn’s,



Dan Coborn and a captive audience of family members at Shannon’s Camp in Canada.



The Coborn family and special guests who were supported through the Coborn’s annual Grocers on the Green Golf Tournament to provide financial assistance to families dealing with childhood cancer at the Coborn Cancer Center.

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Inc. office on the East side of St. Cloud, just to be there and read the paper. He moved a little slower in his later years, but he never missed an opportunity to attend a Friday morning staff meeting. "It's good to see you, Dan," employees would tell him. "It's good to be seen," he'd reply.

"It is rare that a person has the opportunity to work so closely with their father for most of their life," Chris said. "I was blessed to have had my dad be such an influential personal and professional mentor. He was absolutely extraordinary."

In his interview with Business Central Magazine, Dan summed up success in these simple terms, "You work hard, you know what the goals should be, and if you want to put in enough blood, sweat and tears, you'll succeed."

Dan was adored and beloved by so many at Coborn's, Inc. He will be deeply missed but we honor his memory with his favorite toast, "Friends may come, and friends may go, friends may peter out you know. But we'll be friends through thick or thin, peter out or peter in."

"He was such an eternal optimist, which was so special in itself," Vice President of Operations East Region and Granddaughter Emily Coborn said, "He loved the community to his core. He loves his family, and he loved our employees as if they were family."

Dan married Mabel Hansen of Rockville, MN in 1952. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Mabel, and his five children, Chris (Becky Bergner) Coborn, Suzy (Marty) Ellis, Duke (Amy Armstrong), Tom Coborn; grandchildren, Danny (Tina) Coborn, Maria Coborn, Emily Coborn, Michael Coborn, Peter Coborn, Maggie Ellis, Jack Ellis, Charlie Ellis, Duke Jr. Coborn, Willy Coborn; 1 great-grandchild, Dahlia Coborn; and his sister, Nancy Fandel. He was preceded in death by his parents, Duke and Florence (Graham); daughter Shelly Coborn; brothers, Bob, Ron, Bill and Neil Coborn; his sister Betty and his grandson, Nicholas.

Dear Coborn Family,

On behalf of the nearly 8,000 employees of Coborn's, Inc., we pass along our deepest sympathies following Dan's passing. To many of us, Dan was a friend, mentor and felt like a member of our families, too. Right now, our hearts hurt along with yours. Please take comfort in knowing that we all stand beside you during this difficult time. Dan's shining personality will never be forgotten nor the amazing impact he made during his time with us.

From all the employees of Coborn's, we send you our deepest sympathy.

A special floral memorial tribute, complete with a grocery cart, on display at Dan Coborn's funeral in March of 2017, from Coborn's employees.



Dan and Mabel Coborn celebrate with a mimosa toast at the Grand Opening of the new Isanti Coborn's Marketplace in August, 2016.