



*Coborn's Grocery, Sauk Rapids, Minnesota
Left to Right: Forest Roberts, Al Brawn "Brownie",
Fritz Leyk, Paul Harmen, Trunerd, Chester C. "Chet" Coborn
circa mid 1930s*

1900

1910

1920

War, Rations & Recovery

During its first two decades in business, Coborn's expanded in size and selection beyond what was common for grocers at the time. The growth and changes were driven as much by economic necessity and survival as it was the Coborn family's commitment to ingenuity. With the Great Depression ending and families regaining their footing, Duke initiated plans for a major expansion in 1941 that would double the store's size. He also brought in new checkout counters and introduced the first shopping carts at the store.

A pioneer in the grocery industry, he became the first to sell homemade sausage and operated one of the two main meat processing plants in the area. His strong relationships with farmers often made him the first call, especially for processing sought-after veal. Coborn's also had become a supplier in the meat business, processing and selling meat to other area markets.

But times changed in a moment. The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 brought on World War II and a test of resiliency in the grocery industry. The shortage of materials and labor that followed the start of the war brought the expansion of the Coborn's Grocery Store to a halt. Coborn's could not complete the exterior of the newly expanded store until a year later.

1930

1929

Stock Market Crashes:
Start of Great Depression

1940

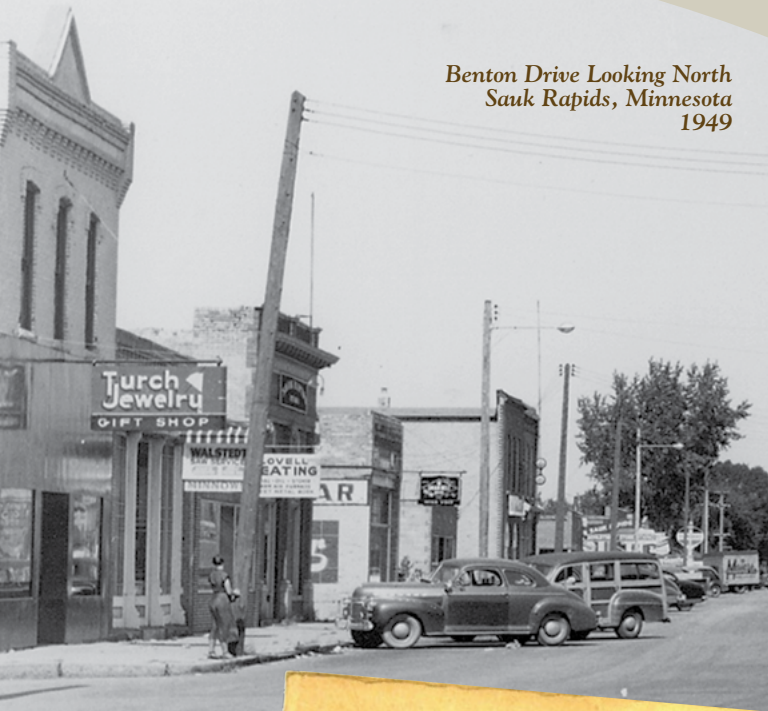
1941

Start of WWII
halts expansion of
Coborn's Grocery store

1950

“...it was a move grocers in the area and across the nation were making and one that Coborn’s needed to do to stay competitive.”

Benton Drive Looking North
Sauk Rapids, Minnesota
1949



The war not only brought uncertainty to communities throughout the United States, but also the loss of many workers who had reported for military duty, including Duke’s oldest son, Bob. With the traditional labor pool dwindling, Coborn’s was among the many supermarkets that began looking to women to help fill roles in the store. By 1945, women accounted for half the personnel in food retailing nationwide.

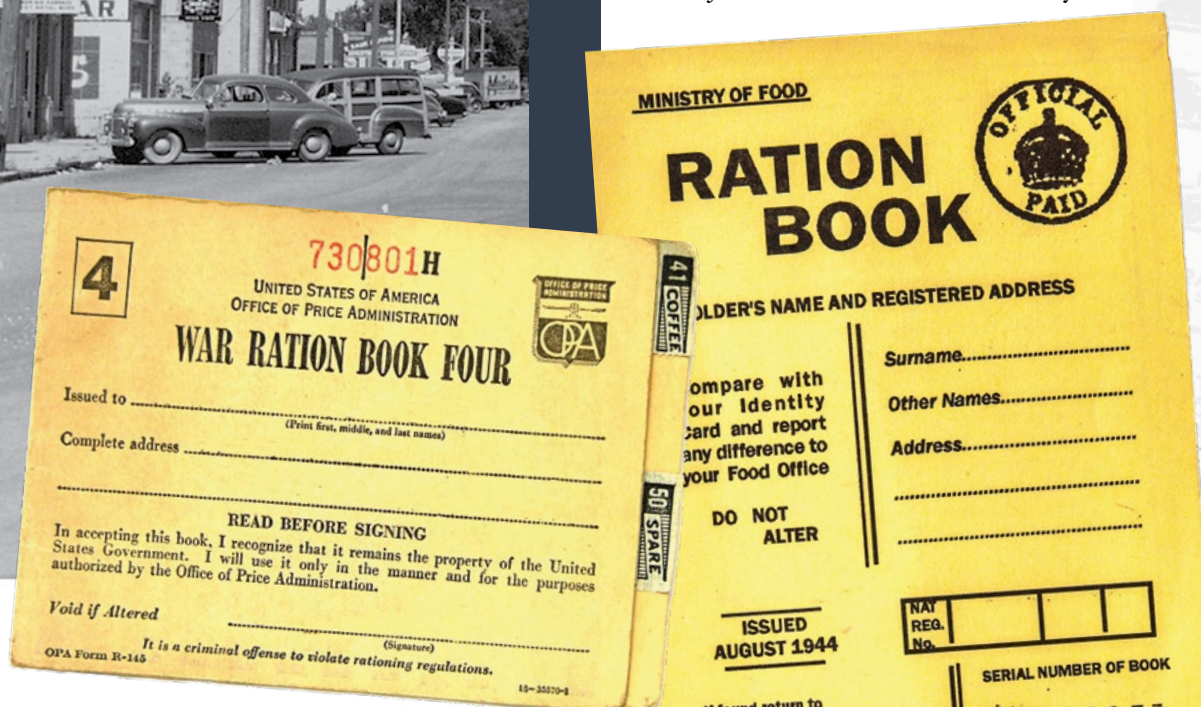
It was after the start of the war that Duke’s second oldest son, Dan, began working in the store. Still shy of his teens, Dan helped with the store’s credit and delivery system. On his first day, Dan took the route for the nearby town of Sartell that started a few miles up the road from the store. Most of the customers worked in the St. Regis Paper Mill and often invited him into their homes for a customary glass of wine. Trying to fulfill the role, Dan accepted their hospitality. But within a few stops, he had to call his father. “I couldn’t drive anymore,” Dan said. “I could barely walk.”

Dan went on to fulfill many roles at the store for his father, becoming a faithful helper willing to do whatever it took to care for customers and ensure the store’s success during many challenging times.

Rationing Food

The war tested the nation’s supply of food, clothes, gasoline and other goods and led to immediate changes at Coborn’s and other grocers nationwide. When the war began, the United States Department of Defense instituted severe rations. Sugar, meat and gasoline became major rationed items mandated by the federal government to ensure equitable distribution and fair prices.

The day after the war broke out, Coborn’s began to make changes to coincide with the new reality. Facing rations and a shortage of tires, Duke reduced the store’s delivery schedule to one time per day, except for Saturdays.



The limited supply drove prices on available goods to high levels and further strained the resources of American families. During the first two years of the war, the cost of meat – Coborn’s newest product line – rose nearly 20 percent while fruit and vegetable prices increased 28 percent.

“Be patient with your storekeeper,” T.G. Driscoll, state director of the Office of Price Administration, asked the town of Sauk Rapids in May 1942 in a newspaper article. “Don’t jump immediately to the conclusion that he is violating the law if the price on a particular item seems out of line. Talk it over with him in a friendly way and chances are you will find there is an explanation for the seeming discrepancy.”

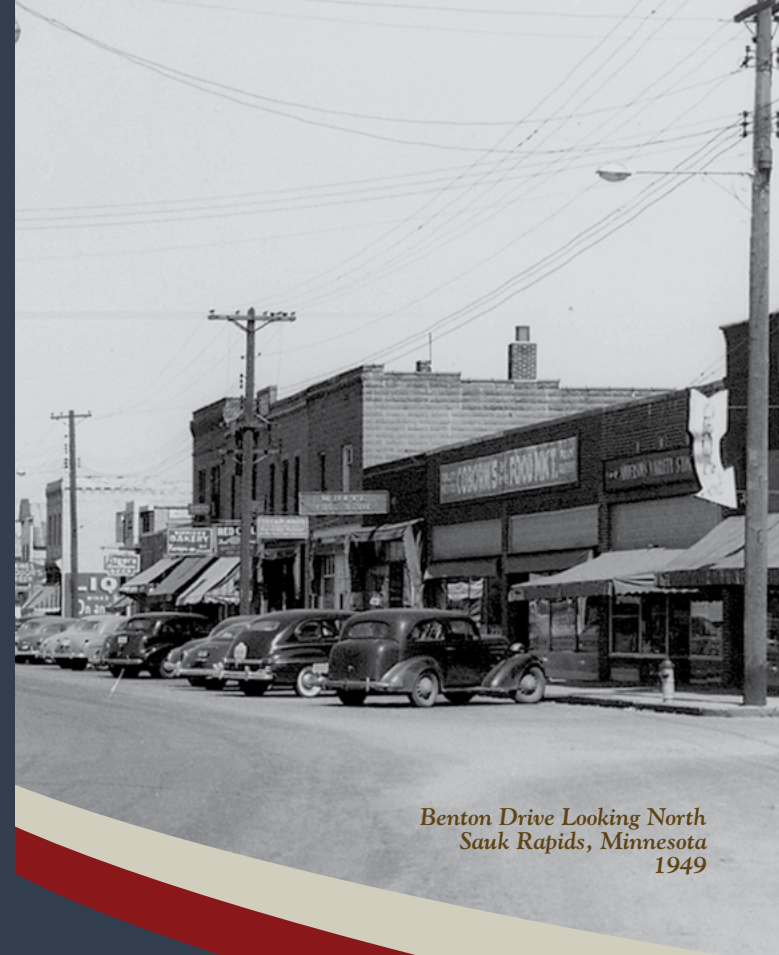
Duke, like many grocers at the time, took on the responsibility of administering ration plans, allocations, price controls – and all the paperwork that came with it.

The government required Coborn’s to post the maximum legal prices for nearly all items on the shelves and file a statement with the state rationing board showing the maximum price the store charged for each commodity. The government did not set price limits on some goods, though, including fresh fruits and vegetables, eggs, poultry, cheese, butter, mutton, lamb and fresh fish.

The lack of food supply led Coborn’s customers to be resourceful and creative to conserve their food. The rationing of gasoline put additional pressures on consumers and made one-stop shopping a necessity. Although the war brought on challenging times, Duke faced few complaints because the customers recognized the men and women in the military were making a greater sacrifice.

Customers responded by recycling, bringing their own bags from home, organizing scrap drives and growing their own food in what they called “victory gardens.” Shortly after the war began, the Sauk Rapids community loaded trucks provided by Coborn’s and others with 50,000 pounds of salvaged food to help those in need. The local American Legions and Sauk Rapids schools led the drive that brought the community together.

Saving and salvaging food became a community value and a way for community members to do their part to support troops overseas. Posters created by the Office of War Information that hung in the



*Benton Drive Looking North
Sauk Rapids, Minnesota
1949*

A note from customer Leona Synder

When I was 6 years old my parents moved to Sauk Rapids. That was 1929 - the year when the Great Depression started. There were 2 other grocery stores in Sauk Rapids - The White Food Store and Callahands. They did not survive the hard times. My sister worked in the office at Coborn’s and she said that more than once Duke told her to “pack up a bag of groceries and send it up to so-and-so because they are having a hard time.” He was a great man - friendly with everyone. That friendliness shows in all the people who work at Coborn’s today. I would shop nowhere else!!!

*Loyal customer
from 1923 - 2011*



Nancy (Coborn) Fandel recalls the Depression Days

Back then the sugar was rationed. In our family, expectations were clear: even though we owned a store, we shouldn't be treated differently, and so we didn't have any candy, even though we could have gotten some.

Coborn's store became visible reminders, stating "Do with less so they'll have enough" and "Be patriotic. Sign your country's pledge to save the food."

The hard times were evident. Coborn's published a full-page ad on Feb. 11, 1943 before the food rations began and then refrained from running the full-page spreads for Easter and Christmas. They also cut back on the many other regular ads they were long accustomed to running in the local newspaper for the next couple of years.

Emotional Changes

The end of the war and the devastating Great Depression that preceded it had challenged the Coborn's business and led grocers nationwide to re-think how they did business. The economic times had made cash flow challenging. Under the credit service, Coborn's receivables ebbed every two weeks with payday at the area's largest employer, St. Regis Paper Mill in the neighboring town of Sartell.

Duke made a dramatic shift in the business model in 1952 from allowing customers to purchase on credit to the modern day cash-and-carry system. It was a difficult decision for Duke to make because it meant he could no longer extend credit to his friends and neighbors. But it was a move grocers in the area and across the nation were making and one that Coborn's needed to make to stay competitive.

While the cash-and-carry concept required a change to consumer behavior, it also reduced the mark-up on goods and provided customers better prices. Duke understood the change he was asking his customers to make. He made the move gradually, asking customers to pay what they could as they could.

1940

1950

1960

1952

Adopts the "cash-and-carry" concept

Duke did what he had to do for the business, but never compromised his compassion for people. Even after fully moving to cash-and-carry, Duke continued to extend credit and make arrangements for customers to pay later.

Duke remained community-minded like his father and grandfather. He contributed his time and resources to many civic organizations that benefitted from his leadership, talents and sound advice. His involvement spanned the community, from the school board and volunteer fire department to president of the Lions Club and Benton County Cemetery Association. He also became a visible leader in the grocery industry, promoting St. Cloud in the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association and the General Merchants Association.

Cash & Carry System

The cash-and-carry system became widely adopted by retailers nationwide following the Great Depression and Second World War. This is the modern day system that consumers have become accustomed to.

In this new payment system, customers pay cash for the goods they want to purchase from a store and then are able to carry the items away themselves.

Previously, retailers created credit accounts for each customer and asked that customers paid as they were able. Customers commonly made payments with retailers when they received their paychecks every two weeks.

This credit system taxed retailers during the Great Depression and Second World War when customers could not pay their bills for extended periods of time.

In this credit system, delivery services also had become popular. When retailers shifted to cash-and-carry, they discontinued the delivery service in most cases.

Spending Spree

The end of the war roused a spending spree by consumers. The government lifted the strict rations and released its food reserves, providing an abundance of products to consumers, primarily through the supermarket channel.



*“All the customers
did was give
us the list and
we did the rest,
including delivery”*

Jean Lieser, Employee since 2001

One of my fondest memories was meeting an elderly man that used to drive truck and deliver to the Sauk Rapids Coborn's store. He told me that the Coborn family was always so welcoming. He talked about how he would back his truck up to the receiving door, and Chester Coborn would say to him, "let the young men unload the truck, let's go for coffee." Chester Coborn made an impression on this truck driver - enough so to tell me the story, and this also made an impression on me.

My daughter and I were standing in line at Subway in St. Cloud. The gentleman in front of me turned around to look at me and it was Chris Coborn. I introduced myself and my daughter and told him we were on our way to visit my mom who has always been a loyal Coborn's customer. Chris Coborn took the time to ask me many questions about my mom. This impressed me that the Coborn family is still a very welcoming family! Thank you for taking time to care!

The economy quickly recovered and automobile registrations skyrocketed 55 percent to \$40 million from 1945 to 1950. By 1945, total U.S. food sales soared 20 percent — three times the sales a decade earlier. The rise in mobility put added pressure on Coborn's as consumers no longer needed to rely on their hometown grocer and could drive to nearby communities for their food and other basic needs.

Birth rates doubled, giving way to the large generation of people born between 1946 and 1964 commonly known as "baby boomers." Coborn's remained committed to service — full service. "All the customers did was give us the list and we did the rest, including delivery," Duke's son, Bill, said.

A New Generation

Duke's four sons — Bob, Dan, Bill and Ron — had long worked in the store, taking on odd jobs as young boys and what many considered the "worst jobs" as teenagers. From checking eggs under a light for freshness and filling soft drink bottles to wrapping fish amidst the pungent odor, the boys have many memories of working — and playing — at their family's store. There were few jobs they didn't do. "You're the boss's son so you got to do it all," Dan remembers his father saying.

After high school, his older brother, Bob, stepped back from the business. He studied at the University of Minnesota and served in the Naval Air Corp. After the war, he married Hazel Rogers, a woman from Arkansas, and held a variety of sales jobs outside of the company. He returned to the family business in 1960.

(Far left):
Duke Coborn at James Bay
circa 1950s

1930



Dan earned a degree in economics from Saint John's University in Minnesota and after returning from military service, was accepted into law school at the University of Minnesota. He declined the opportunity and returned to Sauk Rapids to work for his father when he and his wife, Mabel, learned they were expecting their first child. Dan became his father's right-hand and assisted with a variety of management duties.

Bill, four years younger than Dan, also served in the Army and earned a degree from St. John's University before returning to the family's store and leading the company's thriving meat business.

"That small store we worked in would turn the heads of today's customers," Bill told employees in 1982. "We had penny candy and hamburger retailed at \$1 for five pounds."

Duke's youngest son, Ron, stayed with the business after high school and helped primarily with the company's accounting.

The brothers' leadership in business became necessary in 1957 when Duke suffered a heart attack. With diminishing health, Duke decided to change the business from a sole proprietor to a corporation to ensure the Coborns' business ventures could be carried on by his family. According to state law at the time, a business would be dissolved upon the death of its owner. Two years later, Duke passed away, leaving the management and legacy of the business to his four sons.

Duke and Florence Coborn attend the Lion's Club costume party circa 1950s



(From left to right):

*Back: Bob & Hazel Coborn,
Ron & Carol Coborn,
Florence Coborn,
Joyce & Bill Coborn
Front: Dan & Mabel Coborn,
Russ & Betty Clepper,
Mike & Nancy Fandel
circa late 1970s*

1950

1960

1970

1959

*Duke's four sons - Bob, Dan, Bill,
and Ron - take over the business
after their father dies*

Third Generation of Leadership

The Coborn brothers, as they were commonly known, started working at the family grocery store on Broadway Avenue at a young age. They have fond memories of jobs they held and pranks they pulled. As teenagers, they were leaned on to fill regular roles. While in their twenties and thirties, they took on leadership roles and full management responsibilities of the store when their father, Duke, died in 1959. Over the years, they each brought their talents to the business and took responsibility for key areas. They knew their customers by name and took an interest in their customers' personal lives. Their sisters, Nancy and Betty, worked as registered nurses.



Bob Coborn

Business: Bob, Duke's oldest son, had a career in sales before returning to the family business in 1960. In his early days, he led the meat department. He later served as Secretary of the company and managed the health, beauty and non-food items for the stores. He was known as a storyteller among employees.

Education: University of Minnesota, Naval Air Corp.

Family: Bob and his wife, Hazel (Rogers), had one son, Bob Jr.

Interests: Manicuring the lawn at his home, hunting, fishing, boating, gunsmithing, playing pool and frequent winter vacations to Arizona.



Dan Coborn

Business: Dan took an early interest in the Coborn's grocery business and became his father's right-hand shortly after college. He forwent plans to attend law school and decided to return to Sauk Rapids to work in the family business. He served as the president and general manager of Coborn's for much of his career at the company. With a bachelor's degree in economics, Dan led the company's expansion plans and financing, in addition to other daily duties of running the stores.

Education: Bachelor's in economics from St. John's University, U.S. Army

Family: Dan and his wife, Mabel (Hansen), had five children: Shelly, Chris, Duke, Suzy and Tom. All of them worked for the company as teenagers and some worked in the business early in their career. With the exception of Chris, all of the children pursued careers outside the company.

Interests: Fishing, hunting, racquetball, golf and flying. Dan and Mabel enjoy relaxing at their home in Sartell, Minnesota on the Mississippi River and spending winter vacations in Florida.

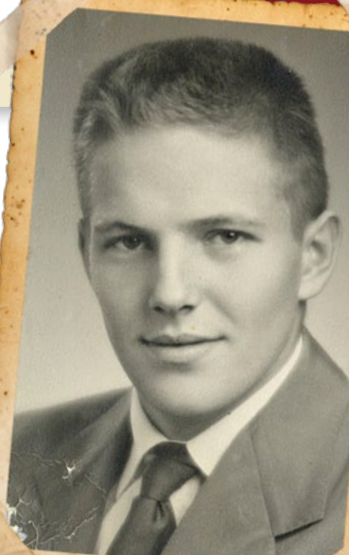
Bill Coborn

Business: Bill had planned to attend Marquette Medical School after college, but instead joined his brothers in the family business after his father died. Bill served as vice president of the company for much of his career and took care of the meat, deli and maintenance for all the stores. Bill quietly led the company through its growth and was known for his soft-spoken style. Even as an executive, he commonly filled in for missing workers in the deli and meat departments.

Education: St. John's University, U.S. Army

Family: Bill and his wife, Joyce (Karls), had four children: Mark, Julie, Kent and Noelle. Mark and Julie pursued careers with the company.

Interests: Hunting, fishing, golfing, and cooking.



Ron Coborn

Business: Ron came to work for his father at the Coborn's store at a young age and never left. As an adult, he handled many of the accounting duties. He later became treasurer of the company and managed dairy and frozen foods for the stores.

Family: Ron and his wife, Carol (Pries), had one son, Steve, whose step-daughter Carissa Coborn, worked for many years as Front End manager at the Coborn's store on Cooper Avenue in St. Cloud, Minnesota and now serves as Front End Specialist/Trainer.

Interests: Hunting, golfing and fishing, traveling to Washington for salmon fishing and especially enjoying trips to Lake Michigan for trout fishing.



“There were few jobs we didn’t do. You’re the boss’s son so you got to do it all.”