

## 2018 BRUNSWICK DISTINGUISHED CITIZENS

### Leroy Strawsburg

by Caroline Mansfield

If you've lived in Brunswick for any time at all and needed a particular nut or bolt, odds are Leroy sold you one at Brunswick Hardware. He loves hardware. "I was teething on it," Leroy said, chuckling. But that's not how his path began. Born at home in 1933 on South Market Street in Frederick, Leroy attended Washington Street and Elm Street schools, then Frederick High. "Which are now all gone," he said. At age 12, Leroy worked in grocery stores and at age 16, he worked summers at Jenkins Canning Company of Frederick. "They can corn, primarily. They'd hire me in the summer as soon as I got off school. I made boxes, ran the scrambler, and ran the boxing machine and forklift."

While he was working, he went from high school to the University of Maryland. "I majored in accounting and minor in economics. I was in banking for 17 years at Farmers & Mechanics... which became National Bank which was taken over by Mercantile Trust and then by PNC. I left there as a vice president. I was in charge of all of the consumer loans from all the branches and the main office."

But Leroy's father had the hardware itch, and that bug bit Leroy. "My dad was in hardware. He didn't own a store but he worked retail and wholesale. I always thought I'd like to own a hardware store with him. He and I talked about it, but I had four girls. I said, 'Dad, I'd love to open a hardware with you but with four children I can't afford to take the chance that we'd fail.'" So Leroy stayed at the bank. "My dad had a grocery store at one time but he got drafted in WWII just two months shy of the draft cut-off age of 36, and he had to sell his business. He ended up in the Provost Marshal Office. They had him tracking down deserters and black marketeers all over the country. He was only in a little over a year because it was near the end of the war," Leroy said. "I remember riding the train, mom and I, to Sheppard Air Force Base. I was about 11. Dad's commanding officer gave me an H R Stevens 22 rifle that had been in Pearl Harbor when it was bombed by the Japanese. I'll never forget that. I still have it today. When Dad came back after the war, he went to work for P.L. Hargett in Frederick. He worked there for years. After that, he went to work for Frederick Trading Company."

His father died in 1970 at the age of 59 after years of dealing with arteriosclerosis and aneurisms.

"I'm pretty sure an aneurism is what killed him. The amazing thing about it is, he had a premonition. He was in the hospital before he died, and he told the doctor, 'I want to go home to die. I don't want to die in a strange bed.' We poo-poo'd it, saying 'Come on, Dad...' But he came home that afternoon and died that evening. He got his wish."

His father had planted the seeds of owning a hardware store. "We were going to open it together," Leroy said.

Not long after his father's death, Leroy started a conversation with Melvin Taylor, one of his bank employees. Melvin was born and raised in Brunswick. His father was a railroader.

"I was talking to Mel and I said, you know, I'd like to open a hardware store. What do you think about Brunswick? He said, 'I think that would be a good place.' So I come over to Brunswick, and this building was for sale."

Mel and Leroy met building owner Harry George Jr. "It was a hardware store but caught on fire in 1968. It had been closed from '68 to '73," Leroy said. "Mr. George decided not to reopen it. He had plenty of money so he figure he didn't have to worry with it. I made arrangements for financing to buy it and he said, 'I can't take all that money at once!' I told him what arrangements I'd made. He said, 'Well, I'll finance it for ya.' He did it under a contract for sale so he could spread it out for taxes." Leroy chuckled. "He was pretty sharp!

"He was a nice man, though. He got all excited when we tore the furnace out and put in these heaters" (gestures to wall units on the back wall of the store) "instead of having a coal furnace down in the basement. He said to me, 'Now I want to be sure if you don't make it that these heaters stay in here.' We had to sign some papers saying this."

They bought the building in January 1973, then Mel and Leroy went to work on it. "We did some remodeling and put a floor in, got all the gondolas [free-standing shelves] in, set up, and had Frederick Trading come in to merchandise it. We opened for business on April Fools' Day, 1973.

"The upstairs was an apartment when we first opened. The downstairs was nothing but a dirt cellar. We remodeled that in the 70s. Dug it out and put drain fields in it, put a floor in, set it up. We made that the sporting goods part of the store." In '94, Leroy bought out his partner and ran the store on his own.

After 45 years, the hardware side of the business officially ceased operations this past spring. Today, the spacious, newly cleared main floor of the old is open for business and stocked with sporting goods merchandise.

The interior is in transition. "They're going to make banners in the rear," Leroy said. "In fact, they have the equipment for that already. They'll make banners and signs—vinyl signs like what you put on the side of your car and truck. That kind of stuff. The grand opening will happen as soon as we get the new floor installed and we finish painting."

The "they" Leroy refers to is his daughter Abbie and her team. She's worked for Brunswick Hardware upwards of 20 years.

"She come to work for me when her children grew up and she was looking for a job," Leroy said. "She's been here ever since. She took over the sporting goods side of the business for me and when I told her I was going to retire, she said she didn't think she could handle the hardware store along with the sporting goods by herself, so we decided to sell out the hardware. I retired February 3rd of this year. I'm here helping Abbie until she gets situated down here, and then I'm outta here. I'm gone!" He laughs.

The store remains a family affair. Leroy talks of family, especially his wife, the former Peggy Lou Koontz of Jefferson.

Leroy smiles broadly saying Peggy's name. "I always tell everybody this. I was walking down the street and I saw this skinny little 'ol girl sittin' on the front porch and I thought, damn! She looks like she could stand a decent meal. So I invited her out to dinner and I've been feeding her ever since! We were married in 1956. I

graduated UMD on June 9th and got married on June 10th. Peggy was a registered nurse."

Leroy and Peggy have four daughters: Abbie, Pam, Denise and Margie. "I named Margie after my grandmother who was Pennsylvania Dutch. We used to go to the family reunions in Dover, Pa. and I'd say, 'Granny, I think I'm in a foreign country!' When they all got together, they spoke Pennsylvania Dutch."

It was Leroy's grandfather who left the greatest impression.

"My grandfather traveled around the country opening stone quarries. He'd landmine and do the initial blasting to get them started. He used to go to Ellis Island and get trainloads of immigrants and bring them back into Pennsylvania to work the quarries and of course, they had homes there for them. I'd kid him because my grandfather was a little bit of a fire brand. He had a temper. I'd say, 'Pap-pap, how'd you get along with all those immigrants?' He said, 'I picked the biggest, ugliest and meanest looking one and kicked the living shit out of him. Then I had no trouble with the rest!' He was something.

"He was a good-natured soul but had a terrible temper. Now my grandmother had him right under her thumb. She could fuss him up one side and down the other and he'd just hang his head and say, 'Aww, now Marg...' If somebody else said something to him wrong, they'd have a fight on their hands. Boy, was he something. But he took me places all the time when I was a kid. I miss him."

#### **Brunswick Hardware taught generations how to fish**

"The Lions Club approached me wanted to know if I would help with their fishing derby. I said, 'Yeah, I'd be glad to help. I ended up doing it every year they had it. I supplied all the rods and reels, tackle boxes and other prizes for the kids. We've done it for over 20 years now, out at Merryland Park, off Petersville Road down in that hollar on the right. That was originally Izaak Walton property—a chapter of the conservation club owned it.

"Anyhow, I provided prizes for the fishing derby. We divided it into three age groups. We were having a lot of trouble getting a good crowd in, and I told the Lions club, 'You know, you have to compete with Little League and some of these other sports. Did you ever consider having it on Sunday instead of Saturday?' They said, 'Let's try it.' Boy, when they did that, that place got packed with kids. The last one this past April was very successful. We had a lot of kids and they caught a lot of fish. "I always kept my fingers crossed— all those kids lined up swinging their rods and reels— that no one would get a hook driven in them. But it didn't happen, thank God. And they were cute to watch.

"The DNR would stock the pond with bass, then in the last eight or nine years, they'd put trout in the pond before the derby so the kids would have something to catch. We used to get so upset because the locals here would get at the stocked fish, go down there, fishing like crazy before we had the tournament.

"Brunswick Hardware also supplied uniforms for the Little League and high school since 1977. We'd buy 'em and embroider them with names or whatever needed to be done. Abbie handled the embroidery part."

#### **Brunswick memories**

"I remember Roelkey's Market and Mr. Harrington's shoe shop that burnt down. I can't remember what year. A little boy lived there. His parents were very poor. He'd come out in the winter to play in the snow and he had no gloves or anything. We constantly gave him gloves. Stump Brightwell, who had the Berlin Restaurant (now King's Pizza) bought him a sled. We couldn't find him when the building caught fire— we were scared to death he was in there when it blew up but he wasn't, thank God! He showed up later.

"The guy who lived in the basement was refinishing furniture and he had paint remover, paint thinners, and all those volatile materials. They caught fire and all that blew up. In nothing flat the whole building was involved. The fire company was right across the street and there was not a thing they could do about it.

"We had lots of stores when we first started. We had a Woolworths, Katz Jewelry and People's Home Furnishings...

"Brunswick used to get wild, though, when the track gangs came in. Track gangs were the men who repaired the railroad tracks. They'd come in on the train cars they lived in. They'd pull the train into a certain section and the track gangs would come into town for entertainment and of course, get to drinking and carrying on. They kept the local police pretty busy. We had a beer bottle thrown through the front window of the hardware once. They'd get a little rambunctious. They didn't have anything else to do. They drank, played cards and got into fights.

"Nowadays, all of that is mechanized and the railroad doesn't need the old gandy dancers, as they called them: the guys who swung the sledges that drove the spikes. It's been a long time since they had track gangs."

The talk turns to local politics.

"We had a few mayors in my time. Mayor Orndorff, he was around for a long time. He was always dressed in a suit and tie and looked the part. I remember Mayor Susan Fauntleroy; they impeached her. It was actually no fault of her own. The EPA got after Brunswick to do something about the water system or they would shut it down and bring water to Brunswick in tankers and trucks. Of course, she had to spend a lot of money and they had to raise the sewer and water rates. Everybody got hot about that. It was out of her control but they recalled her. She wasn't a bad Mayor.

"My fondest memories are the people of Brunswick. I just went to visit one of my old customers. He's 91 years old. His name is Leonard Brooks but everybody calls him Mud. He always came in the hardware and talked about his 'child bride.' I think he was five years older than his wife. I spoke to her recently. She says she's 86. Well, I'll be 85 here shortly. I said, 'You know, Betty, we're getting old.' She said, 'Ain't that the truth.'

"I remember Mr. Smallwood. He was the sexton for the Catholic church. He made the altar wine. He told my daughter, Abbie, 'I'll bring you a bottle of that wine I made for the church. I call it the Seven Angels.' So he bought her a bottle. She'll remember that until the day she dies! That's the kind of people we have here."

Leroy paused and shook his head. "I hate to see Brunswick get so people-populated. I'd like to see the new people coming in respect Brunswick traditions. We locals always remarked when someone moved here from another county that they were always so distrustful. They didn't trust any of the businesses and thought we were

out to get them. Funny thing, it always took us about six months to make country folk out of 'em. We'd win them over. They'd come into the hardware and say, 'My faucet's leaking. I need a new faucet.' I'd say, 'You probably only need washers.' I'd sell them washers instead of a whole new expensive faucet. They appreciated that. After a while they'd say, 'I trust that guy. He's not out to gouge me.'

"I just hope Brunswick doesn't lose its character."

Leroy had little time outside of the hardware store, but what time he had he spent fishing. He traveled the bass tournaments and fished in the Potomac. He has two mounted prize bass. They hung on the wall at the hardware and now they'll be going home. He hopes in retirement to visit Germany to see his family heritage.

"The city of Brunswick gave me a plaque for 45 years of service to the community and I really appreciate that. The people here give back so much. When I was going through chemo treatments, twelve years ago for lung cancer, I had customers from every faith imaginable coming in saying, 'We're praying for you.' Leroy's eyes misted up. "I had a good word put in everywhere, I guess, and I'm still here today. I know Brunswick has the reputation of a rough railroad town, but the people of this town are nice. They're railroaders. Tough yet kind."

CAP

Peggy Lou and Leroy Strawsburg on their wedding day 1956.