

Callaway's close shop

After 73 years serving farming, gardening needs

By Randall Franks
Staff writer
franks@catocountynews.com
(706) 935-2621

After serving Catoosa for nearly 73 years, the Callaway Garden Center has closed its doors.

While the family-run business has shared different focuses since its opening as a cotton gin in 1929 in Ringgold, Richard and Jim Callaway say it is the people of Catoosa that made what they did enjoyable.

"I will miss my regular people, my regular customers," Richard said. "I have five or six regulars that come every day. We had people who would come once or twice a year."

Jim Callaway said their customers have crossed generations.

"We have had customers whose last names stay the same, but the faces change — fathers, sons and grandchildren," he said.

Richard, who has been operating the business on a day-to-day basis, has decided to retire due to health problems.

"It has been a real good business. We have sold a lot of feed and fertilizer in the past 50 years," he said.

The early years

According to John's widow Ethel Callaway, the cotton gin was started by her husband John B. Callaway and brother-in-law Harry Callaway. Eventually the business would become J.B. Callaway and Sons.

She remembers the early days as a lot of hard work.

"We put the gin up in time for the ginning season that year," Ethel said. "We truck-farmed before we got in the ginning. My husband decided he wanted a cotton gin. They were having to haul their cotton other places."

She said when her husband had things to do, he wanted them done then.

"We always had time to go to church on Sunday," she said. "It is really a lot to remember, but I do remember the hard work."

Jim said his grandfather had a cotton gin in Tunnel Hill. "I think dad, in a way, was following in his dad's footsteps," Jim said.

Ethel said she always had meals on the table to feed the family.

"We had a busy time in the gin season. (John) stayed busy all the time," she said. "He would take time to run over to the house and eat, but I think he just swallowed it whole."

"Mom never knew how many would be at the table," Jim said.

Jim said he started working with his dad and his brothers J.W. and Richard, at age five.

"People came to the gin in wagons and some had trucks," Jim said. "They would line up down what is High Street now and up to Tennessee Street, almost all the way to Ringgold. And they would line up down Depot Street. My job was to walk from one block to another, and when people would come I



Richard Callaway



Jim Callaway



Ethel Callaway

put a number on them. That was my first job — making sure people did not get in front of other people when they went to the gin."

As the years passed, the brothers shared various duties in the gin, as their father added the sale of seed and fertilizer to the business.

"I went from there to work in what they call the overflow, when the cotton came through the four gin stands," Jim said. "What the gin stands could not take, it went into an overflow, and then you just had to pull back up and run it through the gin stands. Then I started working at the press — when I was 10 or 11 — that ties the bales of cotton."

"As you look back over the years, J.W. was 19, I was 15, Jim was 13," Richard said. "We ginned 92 bales of cotton one Saturday. That is a whole lot of cotton for three teenagers."

While duties varied, the objective remained the same.

"My older brother J.W. ran the front and I ran the press," Jim said. "We had a fellow named Mr. Scruggs that ran the overflow. Richard primarily drove the truck in those days. He carried cotton to Rome, Trion, Gainesville and wherever we were to sell the cotton."

Richard remembers those early road trips as not so easy before the days of the interstate.

"I'd be in Atlanta before 7 a.m. and we would unload (fertilizer)," he said. "Mama would have dinner ready. By the time I got through eating dinner, I would go back again. We'd unload 400 bags in 45 minutes and be ready to do it again."

Jim said cotton farmers bought a lot of feed and fertilizer.

"A lot of days we would sell over 100 tons of fertilizer to the farmers in the 50's and 60's," he said.

Even Ethel would travel the highways as they delivered cotton around the area.

"I remember riding the truck to Dalton and J.W. went with me to Loopers, (a cotton broker)," she said. "We dumped it off there and went back home, ate, got a load and went back in the afternoon. I remember the day I lost a bale of cotton near the Old Stone Church. I didn't know until I got to Dalton."

"There were a lot of small dairies in the area at that time," Jim said. "Most of them fed cot-

ton seed meal and cotton seed hulls. We would carry the cotton seed to Rome, then pick up cotton seed meal and cotton seed hull in lieu of payment. Then the farmer would come by and buy a few bags and mix it and feed it to their dairy cows."

Callaway Feed and Seed

According to Richard, in 1946 John B. Callaway and Bob Rollins went into business together and opened Callaway Feed and Seed on Nashville Street in Ringgold.

Richard said they operated that business for about four years.

"I remember working in the store," Jim said.

"We learned to skate in that building," Richard said. In 1950, Richard said their father upgraded the gin equipment and sold the store on main street to Rollins and moved back to the High Street location.

What was once a Catoosa lifestyle has now faded with the passage of time.

"It was kind of a way of life that people would come in and buy their fertilizer and seed, and then when they brought cotton in the fall they would pay for it," Jim said. "Everybody in the county had a cotton patch of some kind or another. We raised a lot of cotton. They did not make a lot of money."

End of an era

Richard said the cotton gin business came to an end for them in 1970.

"We quit ginning in 1970; cotton had more or less played out," Richard said. "That year we did about 400 bales. We had a diesel motor that pulled the gin. It had its 16th birthday and it started shaking all over just like that. Daddy said it was time to quit, so we shut her down, and never ginned another bale."

Richard said their best cotton ginning years were 1948-50 when they processed around 2,200 bales per year.

"The next year the boll weevil hit us pretty hard," he said. "We went down to about 1,400 bales a year after that."

"I guess the gin was the biggest thing through our life time," Richard said. "Daddy would come up and grab us by the big toe and say 'time to get up.' Mom would have breakfast ready for us. We would go and start."

"Sam Greeson was one of



The Callaway cotton gin stands in Ringgold as a remembrance of days gone by. Jim Callaway said he hopes the family may be able to set the building up some day so people can tour and see what a cotton gin operation was really like. (Staff photo by Randall Franks)



From left, John B., Richard, Jim and J.W. Callaway stand outside the Callaway cotton gin on High Street in Ringgold around 1954. (Contributed photo)

the best customers we had, but if he came up at four in the morning, he would want you to wait on him," Richard said. "We would get up his fertilizer and seed and let him go. Same thing at night."

"They would pick until dark," Jim said. "You couldn't plan to go anywhere 'cause you did not know when they were coming."

Jim reflected that running a family business like they did meant they were always on call.

"One of the worst times for me was when a farmer from Okefenokee came over on Christmas day," Jim said. "We had to go over and gin that bale of cotton on Christmas."

Callaway Garden Center

Richard said following the close of the gin, the Garden Center became the focus.

"Up until 1960, we had 60 something dairies in the county and we served most of them," he said. "They started dwindling away. We mixed a lot of feed and sold a lot of feed and fertilizer across the state line 'cause in the 50's our fertilizer and seed were cheaper than they could buy in Tennessee."

Jim Callaway said he and his brothers bought the business from their father in 1972.

Richard said as the needs of the farmers changed and declined, their business also changed in the types of products they offered so that they could serve a variety of customers. After a fire in 1975, which took several buildings at the current site but spared the old cotton gin, the Callaway's built the current facility.

When asked what he was going to do now, Richard said, "I

am going to help Jim; we are going to farm."

Richard said he wanted to thank all the people who had worked with them through the years.

"We have had some great help through the years," he said. "We especially want to thank the people of Ringgold, Catoosa and the surrounding counties for their support over the many years we have been in business."

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The Callaway Garden Center is now closed. Jim Callaway says future plans for the building are not yet finalized. (Staff photo by Randall Franks)

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