

E. R. Porter Hardware Company, 1889 to 1979: A Brief History
By H. T. Scarborough

Transcribed by his Granddaughter, Dianna S. Rogers, Dec. 1, 2004

1979 is the 90th year of the operation of this business. In 1889 a young man Edwin Russell Porter, left Troy Alabama on the Alabama Midland Railroad for Dothan Alabama to start a hardware store in the then new town of Dothan. The above railroad was later named the Atlantic Coast Line. On Mr. Porter's arrival, they were burning stumps in the area where the court house now stands, preparing to open a street or road going west, now West Main St. Joel D. Murphree another young man from Troy was a partner in the opening of the store and at its opening it was call Murphree and Porter. Mr. Murphree was married and soon his wife died leaving him an infant son, Lucas Brooks Murphree. Mr. Murphree sold his interest to Mr. Porter and moved back to Troy, Alabama so that his sister, Mrs. J. S. Carroll could take care of his child. This child later died when about 12 years old. Two of Mr. Murphree's other sons Tom & Sam now operate the Murphree Bridge Corp. of Troy.

At that time this wiregrass area was new, Dothan just beginning and the settlers needed tools, axes, saws, wedges, guns, shot and powder and other items usually carried in hardware stores. So the need for such a store was great. Mr. Porter was a tinner and had a tinner's shop in the back of the store. The store opened at 110 E. Main St., one door west of its present location 112 E. Main St. Mr. Porter bought the lot for \$300.00. Towns in this area at that time were: Geneva, Columbia, Gordon and Eufaula, Alabama and Campbellton and Marianna, Florida.

Most houses in the area were built from pine logs, split in half and covered with boards also split from yellow pine. Few stores were here at that time, one or two general stores, a liquor store, a drug store, but no bank. As the town and area grew rapidly, so did the hardware store. By 1900 the First National Bank opened up here. Land was plentiful and very cheap, selling for

as low as \$1 per acre. The town was rough, lots of fights and they held City Court on the corner where Young Building now stands at E. Main and S. St. Andrews. The hardware Store outgrew its building at 110 E. Main St., and Mr. Porter erected the present building at 112 E. Main St, which was outstanding at that time. A copy of an early financial statement of E. R. Porter Hardware showed a net worth of about \$2000, that was about 1892.

As time went on the demand for hardware grew and Mr. Porter went into the wholesale hardware business, with his retail department yet going strong. At that time lots of sugar cane was planted in the area and making syrup was a big thing. The store bought cane mills, syrup kettles and evaporators in car load (railroad box car load) lots. Mules and wagons were a big item in those days and the store bought cloth mule collars by the carload. They also bought carloads of one and two horse farm wagons. When the store started there was no stock law and all farm land had to be fenced. There was no wire fence then and all fields were fenced with wood rails eight and ten feet long split from long logs of yellow pine timber. At that time the turpentine business was great and the store did a tremendous business in setting supplies such as turpentine hacks, etc. Many of the new settlers did not cook on stoves, but cooked in open fireplaces. The store stocked lots of large spiders (three-legged iron skillet with a lid that accommodated hot coals on top) as the women did their baking in these ovens. Fire was put under the spider and lots of coals of fire on top of the spider so the bread would bake under the bottom and on the top. Stories of that day one yet hears of how good the biscuits were that were so cooked. Kitchen items then sold were: cast iron dinner pots and tea kettles. Tinware was another item in big demand: tin dish pans, pudding pans, pie plates, dippers and milk pails. Another item of that day was NoJo coffee mills: all coffee was sold green the ladies then parched it to a dark brown and then ground it as needed in the coffee mill to make coffee in a

pot. Another item of those days was the sifter since all cornmeal and flour was sifted before cooking. From about 1925 on, business continued to be good to fair. Credit was very easy but collections began to get slow. The accounts of the business got so high, by the fall of the year a full time collector was hired, but he collected very little. As Mr. Porter became more and more aware of the condition of the business, he took over the store himself and on August 6, 1928 made H. T. Scarborough the manager. Money was borrowed from 3 banks to pay off the debts of the business and a rule made that from then on, all bills of the company must be paid off each Monday and therefore all discounts taken then. Practically all buying was stopped, only really needed items were bought. A tight rein on credit was begun and soon things began to improve. By August 1929 the Great Depression started and everywhere the crash was felt. So slow was business that some days the cash sales of the store was not over \$10. By 1930 it was yet getting worse and Mr. Porter owning all stock in the Malone Hardware Co., closed it up brought the stock and accounts to the main E. R. Porter Hardware store and brought the manager Mr. P. L. Thornton and made him and H. T. Scarborough co-managers. Things continued to rock along just fair till Roosevelt was elected and the New Deal started. About that time Mr. Thornton went on the road as a salesman for the business, taking orders from the hardware stores and making delivery the third day by trucks. Things in general were soon some better and by 1933 the business began to show a profit again. Business continued good and little change was made.

July 4, 1944, Mr. Porter died but left his will so the business continued in the same way. In his will he named his wife Annie Porter, his son-in-law J. T. Thrower and H. T. Scarborough trustees of his estate. Mr. Thornton had a severe heart attack and sold his claims on the business to J. T. Thrower. Mr. Thrower began with the business as co-manager with H. T. Scarborough

Jan 1, 1946 and the business prospered. In July 1976, H. T. Scarborough retired and Julian Kirkland an employee as a salesman for many years was named in his place.

As of this date all other stores have either closed up or moved out but E. R. Porter Hardware Co. remains at 112 E. Main St. doing business as usual. It is noted that sales each year have been raised even beyond inflation levels and in this its' 90th year of operation in the same family, 1979 bids fair to be its biggest year.

The above facts have been compiled by H. T. Scarborough who started with the business Nov 3, 1919 as a retail salesman and in that place he remained until August 6, 1928. At that time, Mr. Porter named him the manager and in that capacity he remained till his retirement May 31, 1976.

An outstanding feature of this business has been the length of years employees remained with the company. Doubtless not a business in Dothan can go beyond its record. Even today when you enter the store, some man who has been with the business for many years will likely greet you with, "May I help you?"

Written this year 1979 by Mr. H. T. Scarborough.