

42-years on job here

It's been a long three weeks for popular barber Ray Whitby

By Susan Smyth
Courier-Record Intern

Ray Whitby first came to Blackstone as temporary help for Sanitary Barber Shop.

He had planned to stay only a few weeks, since he lived and worked in Broadnax, some 40 miles away.

That was 42 years ago.

"It's been a long three weeks, hasn't it?" Mr. Whitby chuckles as he carefully trims Steve Rowlett's hair.

Mr. Rowlett of Blackstone has been coming to Mr. Whitby for a clean cut since 1960.

"As long as Ray's been cutting hair in Blackstone," says the satisfied customer, as he leans back in the barber chair.

Sanitary Barber shop is small, but very comfortable. There's even a television in front of the barber chair. Most of the time, faithful customers enjoy good conversation with Mr. Whitby.

Whitby says he came to Sanitary Barber Shop when it was still located on North Main Street. Brothers Moke and Claude Daniel were running the shop, but when Claude passed away, Moke was in need of help.

"I wasn't sure I would stay," says Whitby, recalling his first few days in Blackstone. "But come to find out, I liked the community, I liked the people, and I've enjoyed it. I've enjoyed every bit of it."

Mr. Whitby was born in Marion, Virginia, his mother's hometown. When he was 8-years-old, his family moved to Broadnax, where he attended grammar school.

Whitby then went to Brunswick High School, and then joined the Naval Air Transport Service in 1944.

Mr. Whitby was injured on the island of Guam while serving in World War II, and returned home on Hospital Ship USS Haven. That trip home was a bit of a bumpy ride.

"We were trying to come around a typhoon," Whitby recalls, "and water was just coming over the

ship...it was going up and down, and up and down...you couldn't lie down, you just had to hold on."

"It was a terrible storm," he added. "A scary experience."

Thankfully, Whitby made it home safe and sound. He attended Richmond Barber School in 1958.

He began working as a barber in Broadnax, and even made a few trips to Danville.

When Whitby first came to Blackstone as temporary help, he was still working nights in Broadnax. At the recommendation of his doctor, he gave up working nights.

Although he's commuted from Broadnax all these years, Mr. Whitby still feels like a part of Blackstone.

"I've enjoyed working in town," says Mr. Whitby, rinsing out a comb and wiping his scissors. "I've met so many nice people."

"One person I think about quite often is Mr. Henry Tucker," he continues, being sure to move the scissors away from Rowlett while his attention is on a newspaper interview and not his work. "He'll be 103-years-old in December. He's in a rest home in Richmond, but he still comes back to get his hair cut here. He's a favorite person I remember a lot."

Mr. Whitby's work does not stop in his shop on Maple street.

"I've had customers that are sick, and I go out to their homes to cut their hair," he says. "All that comes with enjoying what I do...being able to give that service to somebody, I'm glad I've been able to do it. I still do it today."

Mr. Whitby and his wife, Louise, have two sons, five grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. Six of those 12 are his faithful "customers."

"The girls go to the beautician," Mr. Whitby says, smiling.

Whitby has seen a great deal of change throughout the years, and has been able to share his experiences with customers, who quite often are his good friends.

In fact, he was cutting hair on September 11, and watched the terrorist attacks on television with a customer.

"We even saw the second plane go into the building," he recalls. "I'll never forget that as long as I live."

Although he probably hears more than anyone about Town politics and events, Mr. Whitby seems content with Blackstone's recent growth.

"I'm glad to see progress in town," he says. "It's nice to have the new things come in, but I guess everyone would like to see more industry."

After seeing so much, what sort of advice would Mr. Whitby offer to young people?

"Go to school or learn a trade," he says. "I still think we need trade schools."

"You know, we don't have a barber school in Virginia anymore?" he adds. "If we had a barber school in Virginia, maybe it would be easier for me to find a barber to help me here. But it's true with any profession, I guess."

Mr. Whitby is in the shop most mornings at 7:30. He opens the shop from 8 to 5, Tuesdays through Saturdays.

"No ma'am, I don't plan to leave," he says, folding a towel and finishing Rowlett's trim.

Mr. Rowlett looks relieved to hear his long-time barber say that.

"I'm not retiring yet," Whitby says laughing. "Still working hard."

"I love it, I sure do," he continues. "I plan to work as long as I feel good. But we never know how long we can be on the job, if ya know what I mean."

Now finished with Mr. Rowlett, he turns to help his faithful customer out of the chair.

"But I love it," Whitby smiles. "I really do."