

Johnny Faulconer holds his companion of the past 20 years, the "jimmy-jawed" Jack Russell, named Bud Light. Bud, who was the Faulconer Hardware mascot, died the week before last.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Jimmy-jawed Bud Light

He had a serious under-bite problem, "jimmy-jawed" they called it. He had one ear that sort of stuck straight up. To some he was a foul-tempered little cuss, greeting customers at the door with a snarl instead of a tail wag. And he was known to go after people, although he never drew blood.

But despite all that, it was a sad day at Faulconer Hardware when Bud Light passed away the week before last. "It was tough around here for a couple of days," says John Y. Faulconer sadly; Johnny had raised the Jack Russell since it was a pup.

Bud Light had just turned an astonishing 20 years old this past Independence Day, but lately had been tottering around the store, a mere shadow of his former self. Right up to the day he died he would not permit anyone to touch him other than John Y., Conway or young Johnny. And, it seems he had this thing about handled tools, such as shovels, hoes, rakes, that sort of thing. When he was

in his prime, they would just set him off.

Once, John Y. took him to a hardware distributor in Lynchburg to introduce Bud Light to a renowned coon hunter by the name of Johnny Abbott. "I got a coon dog here, Bud Light," Johnny challenged as he walked in the room. "That doesn't look like a coon dog to me; that looks like a possum dog," drawled Mr. Abbott. Johnny spied a bamboo rake in the corner. "I hit the floor with it and said 'Coon.' And Bud just grabbed that rake, growling and snarling. I was holding him off the ground," he laughs. "They loved it." After that, Abbott would call with some cockamamie proposal for buying Bud Light. "I've got a 600-pound silverback ape in the back I need tamed. Is Bud ready to come get him?"

Johnny looks at Bud's empty snoozing spot on the lone beat up drop-bottomed easy chair in his windowless office at the back of the store. "He was a great one, I'll tell you that."

store does not shut its doors until almost 12 hours later. "The first person I see every morning is my Dad," says Johnny. "The second person I see is my sister...every day. I start off every morning with 'Mornin' Mr. Faulconer.' And he goes, 'Mr. Faulconer, how are you?' 'Fine sir.' And that's how I start my day. Can't beat it." Big grin.

After this greeting ritual, Johnny's Dad totals up the previous day's receipts, hangs out with his "jimmy-jawed" Jack Russell, Bud Light, and takes his kids out for an early lunch ("we work for food"). "In the afternoon, I try to get out and hit the little round ball."

Seven years ago, son Johnny either made the mistake or had a stroke of genius when he introduced his Dad to golf as a Father's Day present. "And he's played every day since then, literally every day." He rolls his eyes.

Asked about the future of Faulconer's, both Johnny and Conway grow uncharacteristically quiet. "It all depends

whether this Wal-Mart comes in or not," mutters Conway. "If they come in, we're going to have to change something." She's not sure what.

Sometimes Johnny will bring his two kids, six and four years old, to the store, perhaps to groom interest in the next generation of Faulconers. "They come in here; they love it." He points to a tricycle. "That's why we started carrying Radio Flyer stuff, so they could ride bikes all around the store."

Conway relates a story. A longtime customer told of her grandfather taking her as a child to Faulconer Hardware. Old Mr. Faulconer would see her coming; he'd take a tricycle down from the top shelf, so she could ride around while her grandfather shopped. "I'll always remember that. I always loved that about the place," the woman said. Conway pauses a beat and adds, "When I heard about that, I kept a little tricycle out for little kids to ride around on."

Betcha they won't do that at Wal-Mart.



Johnny Faulconer combined sporting goods with hardware at the store on Perry Plaza. Kneeling in front are Mark Tyree and Marvin Miller. Standing from left are Pete Furr, Bettie Miller, John Y. Faulconer, William Argabright and Cal Kean.

Review file photo

A hoe...

Right, a sample of the numerous folks that work at Faulconer Hardware. From left to right: G.W. Plumb, Billy Fitch, Susie Hart, Conway Faulconer, Lewis Byram, Erin Roop, Johnny "Stock Boy" Faulconer, Muncie Bryant, and John Y. Faulconer.

Photo by Phil Audibert



What Johnny Faulconer loves most about the hardware business is problem-solving... when a customer comes in with a project in mind and needs help figuring it out.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Conway Faulconer came home from college to help run the family hardware store.

Photo by Phil Audibert

and a whole lot more...

"If we don't have it, you don't need it," might be considered a cheeky slogan for a local business, but in this case it's just about true. "It's not ALWAYS true," admits John Y. Faulconer of his family-owned and operated business. "You can always find something we don't have, but it's pretty hard." He looks to his daughter Conway and son Johnny. They both flash matching grins and nod in agreement.

Just about then, right on cue, a woman approaches hesitantly, apologizing for the interruption. She's looking for a special size neon light

bulb that illuminates warmly like an incandescent bulb. Yup, they have it. As Conway clicks numbers into the computer her brother, reassures, "We'll keep this in stock for you." The woman brightens visibly and says those words the Faulconers so love to hear... "I'm so happy I don't have to go to Lowe's today." Johnny flashes that game-winning grin, adding that he hears success stories like that "a bunch of times every day."

Welcome to Faulconer Hardware, a hardware store that stocks just about everything, including the kitchen sink.

"The first person I see every morning is my Dad," says Johnny. "The second person I see is my sister...every day." "I start off every morning with, 'Mornin' Mr. Faulconer.' And he goes, 'Mr. Faulconer, how are you?' 'Fine sir.' And that's how I start my day. Can't beat it." Big grin.

In fact, there's a story about employee Billy Fitch; his first week at work he was warned that he would encounter some bizarre requests. "Two days later, a guy came walking in literally with the whole kitchen sink in his hands, pipes hanging off the back of it, to get stuff for his sink, and Billy started laughing," recalls young Johnny. "Yup, even the kitchen sink came in."

Bizarre requests. How about the woman who wanted to buy a halter for a plastic, life-sized horse head? Or how about the murder weapon for that HBO bomb "Hush?" Members of the film crew were wandering around the store one day when they spotted a floor nail puller. Once they learned what it was for and how it worked, they had to have it. That nail puller gave the performance of its life.

And if you come in here with a project in mind or a problem to solve, well...Johnny's eyes light up. "I love it when they say, 'What I'm trying to do is...'" and then you try to figure it out. I LOVE that. That's the fun-nest part of it all." Recently, he helped a grandfather rig a tiny toy fishing pole for his two-year-old grandson using a dowel and a thread spool. "It probably took us 45 minutes and when it was all said and done, that'll be \$1.25." He flashes that million-dollar grin again.

This is one helluva hardware store, folks. Consider this. To the best of my memory, I have personally bought the following items at Faulconer Hardware over the years: an iron skillet, a winter hat, Red Wing work boots, a smoker grill, vegetable seed, a brand new, old-fashioned, human-powered reel mower, PVC pipe, joints and elbows of all sizes and dimensions, a birdhouse, a pocket knife or two, a halter, several axe handles, those little thingies that you hammer into the end of an axe handle to keep the head from falling off, a splitting maul, wedges, (pause to catch my breath), keys, hinges, door sweeps, caulk, brushes, polyurethane, halogen light bulbs, drill and

router bits, saw blades, tape measures, cotter pins, lynch pins, hair pins, and a hoe and a whole lot more!

The nuts and bolts department is unparalleled. "We have people who come from all over and they are just blown away," confirms "Stock Boy," Johnny Faulconer who refers to his sister, Conway, as "the boss." "That's how we end up with most of our stuff; three or four people ask for it. If we don't have it, we try to get it in for you."

Let's say you're looking to replace that little spring in a screen door latch. Man, they've got bins of springs in all sizes, lengths, diameters, and tensions! And they've got fasteners and clips and screws and... and ...just...stuff! As one woman said to Conway one day, "God, y'all got a lot of **** in here!" Jeez, how do they even know what these things are called? It's almost like you want to go in and play, "Stump the Chumps," with these guys.

And you know what? It used to be all in their head! Conway tells a story about when they went to a convention in Atlanta, and it wasn't all that long ago either. The Faulconers had just taken the plunge and were setting themselves up with...tah-dah...computers--for the first time! Johnny and Conway ran into another hardware store owner from over in the valley. "You look like you're in shock," he said. When he heard they'd just bought a computer system, the man guffawed, "'You've been operating out of a cigar box the whole time.'" The man looked at his bewildered fellow travelers on the airport shuttle bus. "Now they're going to computers and you don't understand how funny that is." Conway cracks up. "Literally, we went from a cigar box to a computer overnight."

But, Johnny hastens to add that when the computer guy came to set it up, "Dad went back in the office and came back out and said this is how much inventory we have. And I think we were within a thousand

bucks. He knew what we had." And to this day, Conway confirms, "all our orders are done by hand. We write it down on a piece of paper and then enter it in the computer."

If you want to find out where all this started, you have to go back to the Civil War when John Y's grandfather walked... just like the guy in Cold Mountain...he WALKED home to Rhoadesville from Richmond! "Nobody had food, nobody had nothing. It was absolutely desolate," says John Y. By 1870, he had set up a sawmill and later a mercantile store beside the PF & P railroad tracks. Johnny leans over and picks up a foot-long section of that track, which he keeps as a memento. He points to the antique farm implements that adorn the walls of the store. "A lot of these are my granddaddy's tools from Rhoadesville," he says pointing to oxen yokes, a corn-sheller, and a "cradle" (a scythe and a basket device for holding cut grain stalks). "Can you imagine leaning over and doing that all day?"

By the mid 1930's, Johnny's father had bought an interest in a hardware store on Main Street in Orange. Johnny grew up playing baseball at OCHS and Woodberry and Randolph Macon, where he...uh...shall we say, took his time earning a degree. "He was a heckuva baseball player," shrugs Conway.

Anyway, Johnny started out by buying a sporting goods business in 1963. Then he combined it with a hardware store business from across the street and bought out his father's inventory. The sporting goods business came to an abrupt halt when "I got robbed twice of guns. So that's when I got out of the gun business and stuck strictly with hardware." That was at Perry Plaza. Later they moved to their current location in the Orange Park and Shop

Like everything else, the hardware business has changed. "It's entirely different than it was when I first started," he grouches. "Then, a hammer was a hammer

whether it was today, the next year or after that. It's something that's changing all the time now. Everything now is made to throw it away and get another one. It's not the same quality as it was back then." Asked who makes the best hand tools nowadays, Johnny points to a display rack with the name Klein on it. "They are one of the few companies that still makes stuff in this country."

Some time ago, Johnny was considering an offer to buy Faulconer Hardware. He called his daughter Conway who was playing soccer and swimming at Salisbury State on the Eastern Shore. "Well, Dad that's kinda what I wanted to do," she remembers saying. "Well c'mon." he said. "So, every weekend I'd come down and ask "Buck" (Otis Southard) how to do such and such, show me how to do everything, swept floors and straighten shelves. I learned from Buck and Pete (Dowell)."

At about the same time, while she went on a three-month bike trip to the Grand Canyon, her brother looked up from his job at a huge tropical fish store in East Carolina and called his Dad to say he was coming home. The much-revered and missed William Argabright met Johnny at the door. "Before you walk in this damn door you'd better have an application filled out and a resume. I'm not hiring just anybody." The following summer, Johnny pulled a similar stunt to his sister's and drove to Alaska and back with his cousin. Both brother and sister have worked at Faulconer Hardware ever since. "We both have never taken a real vacation," says Conway.

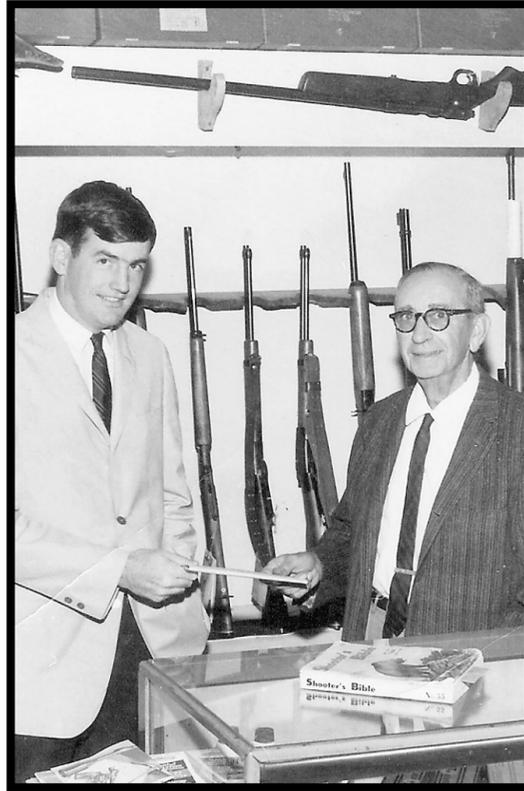
Nowadays, "We pretty much run it," says Johnny, as Conway adds in deference to her father, "We still ask his advice on things." John Y. shrugs. "I used to be an asset; now I'm a liability." He still shows up every day, however; the kids won't let him retire.

A typical day at Faulconer's starts around 6 or 6:30; whenever two of the three arrive, they open up. The



Johnny Faulconer collects many different things including old postcards of Orange County, pocket watches, knives, and old milk bottles. Some of the farm implements on the walls at Faulconer Hardware belonged to his grandfather.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Johnny Faulconer's first retail enterprise was a sporting goods store that he bought from Vernie Hess.

Review file photo



George W. Plumb, known to all as "G," points out the location of cotter pins along the extensive hardware aisle at Faulconer Hardware. "G's" knowledge of the stock and inventory has proved invaluable.

Photo by Phil Audibert

“What are all these people working in here for?”

Conway Faulconer remembers her grandfather, Ray Faulconer, kept all the lights off at his old hardware store. If you wanted something, he'd lead you there in the dark and then turn on the nearest bare bulb until you'd made your selection. Then he'd turn it off. If he were alive today, she'd imagine he'd say, "First of all you've got all these lights on and second of all, what are all these people working in here for?"

All these people...25 or so at last count...some of them 20+ year veterans, some of them 20-day wonders, from high school kids to senior citizens, they are all employed to some degree at Faulconer Hardware. The only true full-timers are Conway and her brother Johnny. "Everybody sets their own schedule and then we fill in," says Conway. "It's very flexible."

Take the veterans for example: Lewis Byram, Otis "Buck" Southard, Muncie Bryant, Billy Fitch. One day they might be here; another they might be doing something else.

Take the young kids, "because nobody else here in town will hire them. It gives them something to do," says Conway. They learn by observing. "Most of the people who come in here, 99 percent of them, are very understanding," says Johnny of customer reaction to inexperienced teenagers. "I tell the customers, 'they just started, help 'em out,' and within about a two-week period, most of the kids learn."

How about Erin Roop? Conway says, "I taught her how to swim. She was finned, but actually has hands now. They built them." Despite her handicap, about the only thing Erin can't do is "reach the top shelf." Johnny has

watched her cut glass, carry the glass to the counter and add it up. "When we get real busy some people get impatient," observes Johnny. "She'll put the item on the counter and turn it around to read the bar code, and you'll see them slow down. You watch them just change," he nods sagely. "The next thing you know they're turning the item around, 'there you go sweetie.' And at the end they say, 'thank you so much.'"

Just about then G.W. Plumb wheels noiselessly down the nuts and bolts aisle, a good-natured grin on his face. "G," as everyone knows him, suffers from progressive muscular dystrophy. Conway admits in the beginning they hired "G" as a favor to his grandfather, William Argabright.

"Now I can't live without him," she says matter-of-factly. She watches "G" shine a small laser pen light to point out an obscure hardware item to a customer. This knack for knowing where everything is located, runs in the family. "G's" younger brother Ben, who suffers from the same disability, is the parts manager at Gibson Equipment on Madison Road.

A young high school kid comes in with a question. "Go ahead and get Erin to show you how to straighten shelves, then mark it off on the list so we can get all that done and get the rest of the store straightened up before the end of the week," instructs Conway. She then raises her voice and says to everyone and no one in particular. "All the shelves straightened? All the floors been swept? All the backstops been kicked?"

She doesn't wait for an answer as she and her father and brother head out the door for lunch, leaving Faulconer Hardware in numerous capable hands.