Hughes Lumber

A CENTURY OF REINVENTION

1925 – 2025

ROBERT HUGHES WITH MICHAEL OVERALL


100
YEARS
1925–2025
Hughes®
LUMBER

Hughes Lumber

A CENTURY OF REINVENTION

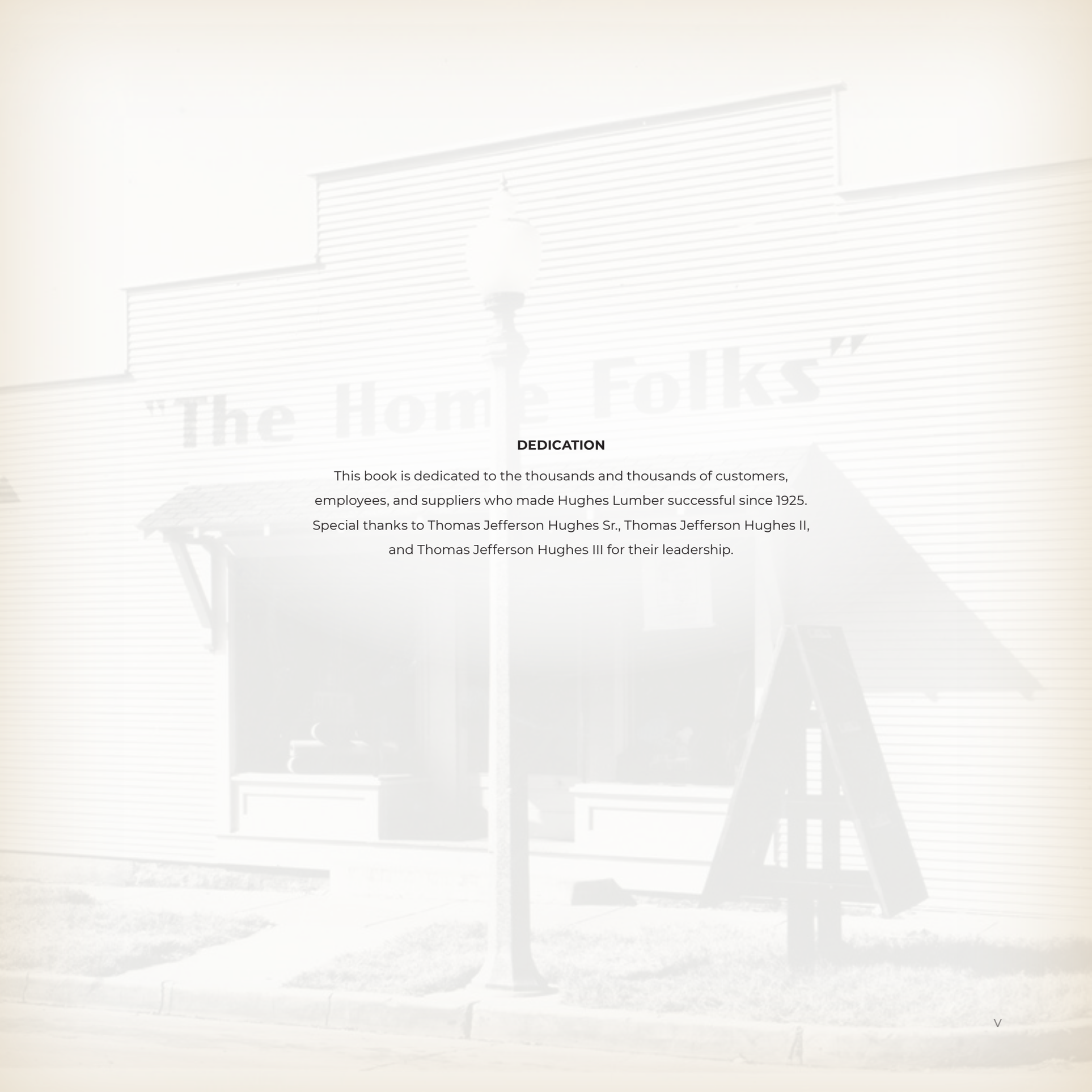
1925 – 2025

ROBERT HUGHES
WITH MICHAEL OVERALL

müllerhaus
[LEGACY]

TULSA


T. J. HUGHES LUMBER
DEVOE PAINT
BIRD'S ROOFS



DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the thousands and thousands of customers, employees, and suppliers who made Hughes Lumber successful since 1925. Special thanks to Thomas Jefferson Hughes Sr., Thomas Jefferson Hughes II, and Thomas Jefferson Hughes III for their leadership.

“We were fortunate to survive. Looking back, it’s a pretty amazing story that we did survive really because a lot of companies that were similar to us didn’t.” – ROBERT HUGHES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

WHAT IT WAS ALL ABOUT

"You need to find something to do this summer," Tom Hughes told his teenage son Robert in the early 1980s. That did not necessarily mean working at Hughes Lumber. Tom never pressured Robert to go into the family business. He must have been pleased, however, that Robert wanted to work there.

"I was really curious about the whole thing," Robert remembers. "I wanted to see what was going on and what it was all about."

Starting that summer and continuing for the next few summers until Robert graduated from high school, he worked at a Hughes Lumber yard near 42nd Street and Memorial Drive in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he unloaded freight, stocked shelves, and filled customers' orders. The work was mere entry-level manual labor, but he enjoyed the camaraderie

with co-workers and felt a lot of satisfaction from making customers happy. As the summers passed, Robert began to think that maybe he would like to carry on the family tradition. As Robert approached graduation from the University of Kansas in the late 1980s, he told his father that he might come home to Tulsa to be the next generation at the Hughes company.

On paper, Hughes Lumber started in 1925, when Tom's grandfather incorporated the company in Cushing, a small town about halfway between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. In reality, the company's roots stretch back to the late nineteenth century, not long after the Land Run of 1893, when the Hughes family came to Oklahoma Territory and opened a hardware store.

Tom, the third generation to run the company, surprised Robert by telling him to consider other options.

"I don't know what the future is going to be like," he told his son.

The Oil Bust of the 1980s devastated Oklahoma's economy. The population was shrinking in many of the small towns that Hughes Lumber served. National competitors were moving into the area, luring away many of the customers who were left.

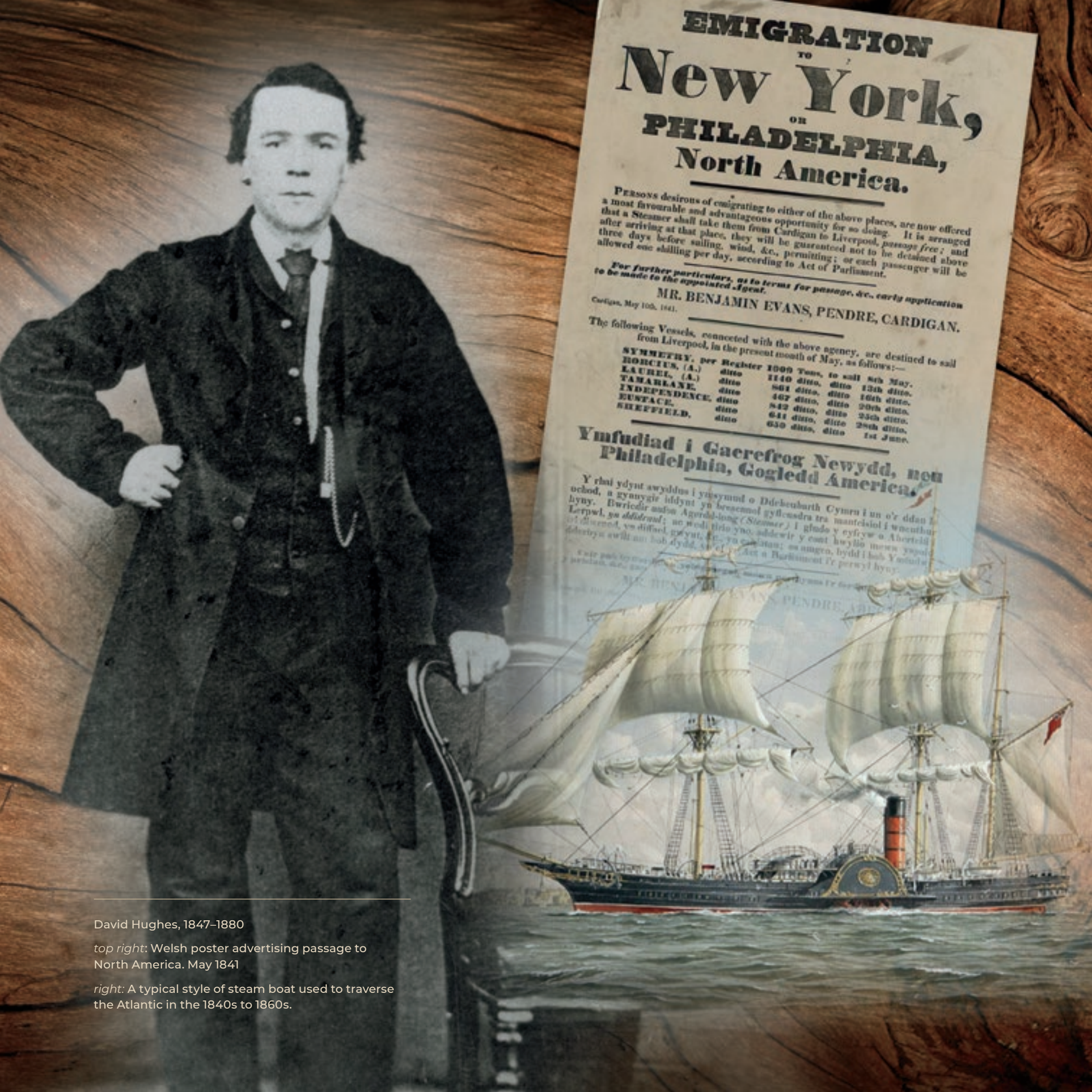
"He was discouraged and not overly optimistic," Robert remembers. "I don't think he was scared for himself. He was established enough that, even if he had to sell off the business, he would have been fine financially. But he was hesitant for me to come into the business."

Instead of coming back to Tulsa, Robert went to graduate school at Northwestern University and settled into a career at an advertising firm in Chicago.

Tom, however, was not giving up on the family legacy. His grandfather had gone into business nearly a century earlier to find a level of financial stability that the Hughes family had never known before. Now Tom wanted to give the next generation the same opportunities that he had received. So, while his son gained experience elsewhere, Tom devised a plan to reinvent Hughes Lumber for the twenty-first century.

Muskogee Location

Tom wanted to give the next generation the same opportunities that he had received. So, while his son gained experience elsewhere, **Tom devised a plan to reinvent Hughes Lumber for the twenty-first century.**



David Hughes, 1847–1880

top right: Welsh poster advertising passage to North America. May 1841

right: A typical style of steam boat used to traverse the Atlantic in the 1840s to 1860s.

CHAPTER 01

YOUNG MEN FULL OF ENERGY

Several families from North Wales gathered in Liverpool, England, in the summer of 1845 with plans to sail to the United States, but with no specific destination in mind. “Westward,” they would say when asked where they were going. Just “westward.”[1]

These families had experienced a tumultuous decade in Wales, where waves of violent protests had swept across the countryside as farmers and coal miners rioted against expensive highway tolls that were pushing rural families into poverty. This particular group, like thousands of other Welsh families in the 1840s, set out to find a more prosperous and peaceful place to live. By the end of August, they had reached New York.

By late September, they had passed through Milwaukee, on the western shore of Lake Michigan.

Another 90 miles westward brought them to the banks of Duck Creek in central Wisconsin, where the dark soil reminded them of the rich farmland back home. The soil, and the approaching onset of cold weather, convinced them to finally stop and build cabins for themselves. They called the new village Cambria, from the old Welsh word for Wales. That first winter Cambria had a population of fifty-three.[2]

If David and Catharine Hughes were among those first settlers, they would have only been children. Perhaps, instead, they came with one of several later waves of immigrants from Wales to the area. Either way, they were married and living in Cambria by the time their first son, Hugh, was born in 1869.[3]

David, Catharine, and young Hugh moved to Osage City in east-central Kansas sometime after 1870, when the first of several coal mines opened in the vicinity and attracted a large number of Welsh settlers. Many Welsh immigrants had worked in quarries and coal mines before coming to the United States, and they left Wisconsin for the same reason their families had left Britain—to find better lives.[4] Compared to the little

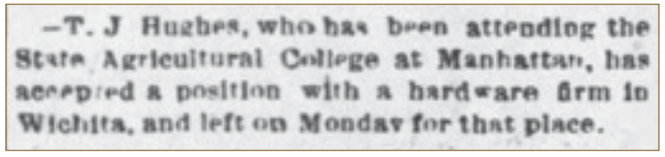
Cambria, Wisconsin, 1869—the same year David and Catharine Hughes's son, Hugh, was born.

village of Cambria, Osage City must have seemed like a bustling metropolis with a prosperous business district and a population of more than 3,400 people at the time.[5]

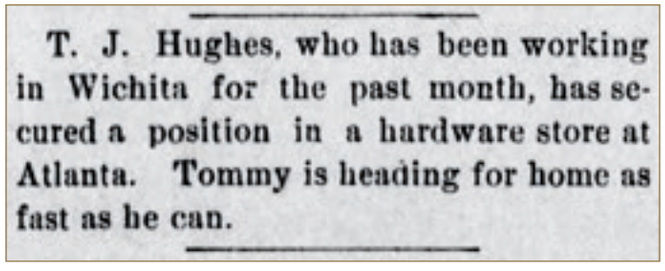
Within ten years of moving to Osage City, however, David Hughes had died, leaving Catharine with four boys to support. It's not clear how Catharine supported the family. Hugh's younger brother, T.J. Hughes (born August 24, 1873) was seven years old,[6] his brother Robert was four, and his brother Jack two when their father died.

To ease the burden on his mother, T.J. spent much of his childhood living with an older cousin on a Kansas cattle ranch. As a teenager he worked briefly as a Wells Fargo stagecoach driver.[7] By age twenty, however, T.J. had moved back Osage City to work at Rapp Brothers Hardware and had managed to save up enough money to enroll at the Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan.[8]

Higher education was a rare privilege in the 1890s, when only three percent of the U.S. population went to college. But T.J. abruptly left Kansas State in March 1894 to take a job at a hardware store in Wichita.[9] He had become the de facto head of the family, despite not being the eldest sibling. And T.J. couldn't support the family and go to college at the same time.


—T. J Hughes, who has been attending the State Agricultural College at Manhattan, has accepted a position with a hardware firm in Wichita, and left on Monday for that place.

Osage City Free Press, Thursday, March 8, 1894


T. J. Hughes, who has been working in Wichita for the past month, has secured a position in a hardware store at Atlanta. Tommy is heading for home as fast as he can.

Osage City Free Press, Wednesday, April 11, 1894

The hardware job helped make ends meet, but T.J. was not satisfied. He was perpetually restless and apologetically ambitious, always looking for new opportunities. Barely a month passed before T.J. quit his job to take a higher-paying position at a hardware store in Atlanta, Kansas, a tiny community about fifty miles southeast of Wichita.[9]

He made plans to re-enroll in college that winter, but T.J. changed his mind again and stayed in Atlanta, apparently because the Hughes family counted on his income.[10] Some evidence suggests that his brothers joined him in Atlanta while their mother remained in Osage City, but T.J. never intended to make the town his permanent home.[11] He saw no chance for a prosperous career there.

Sometime in the spring or summer of 1895, T.J. decided to head south to Oklahoma. The territorial border was less than thirty miles from Atlanta. Less than two years prior, more than 100,000 settlers had raced across seven million acres of prairie to stake claims to homesteads[12] in the massive Land Run of 1883. New towns were blossoming across the old Cherokee Outlet, stretching from the Arkansas River to what is now the Oklahoma Panhandle. And the growing population needed supplies. T.J. saw an opportunity.

THE LAND RUN OF 1893

At noon on September 16, 1893, a canon shot was supposed to signal the start of a massive race to stake out claims for new homesteads. Instead, a shot rang out across the vast open prairie four minutes before noon. Who fired it, nobody was ever able to determine.[1]

The U.S. Army blamed rambunctious settlers. Settlers blamed the Army. Troop C of the Third Cavalry, with a mere second lieutenant in charge, had only forty soldiers to patrol a seventy-mile stretch of the frontier west of Arkansas City, Kansas.

About 115,000 men had lined up along the border between Kansas and Oklahoma Territory for the Cherokee Outlet Land Run.[2] Hundreds, if not thousands, of Sooners cheated by sneaking across the border early.1 The Boomers, waiting for the official start of the land run at noon, grew increasingly frustrated.

John R. Hill and several other settlers had lined up just across the Kansas border fourteen miles north of the new townsite for Blackwell in the Oklahoma Territory. They mistook the early gunshot as the signal to go and raced across the tall grass at full gallop.[1]

Sgt. W.R. Willard and Private Claes Hallencreutz yelled for the settlers to halt, but the group either did not hear them or ignored the order. The sergeant dismounted and opened fire. Hill, who had come from New Jersey for the chance to obtain a homestead in the land run, fell off his saddle, dead.[1]

Chaos and controversy surrounded the Cherokee Outlet long before and after the Land Run itself. Stretching roughly 150 miles from the Arkansas River to what is now the Oklahoma Panhandle, and fifty-eight miles south from the Kansas border, the Outlet was set aside for the Cherokee Nation in 1836 along with the Cherokee Reservation in what is now northeastern

One minute before the start of the Land Run on September 16, 1893.
Photographer L.D. Hodge, Arkansas City, Kansas

Oklahoma.[2] After the Civil War, the tribe gained a major source of income from leasing parts of the Outlet to cattle ranchers, but only a few Cherokees actually lived there. The sparse population led to calls for opening the Outlet to settlers.[3]

In June 1884, a former Union soldier named David L. Payne led more than 1,500 pioneers across the Kansas border in an effort to forcibly open the Outlet.[2] Tribal authorities protested vigorously, and the U.S. Army chased the settlers out of the territory in early August. Outside the Cherokee Nation, however, public sentiment sided with the settlers, and the Boomer Movement gained political momentum.

In February 1890, President Benjamin Harrison banned all cattle grazing in the Outlet, eliminating tribal profits from leases and effectively ending any reason for the Cherokee Nation to hold on to the land.[2] The tribe reluctantly agreed in 1891 to sell the Outlet to the U.S. government for as little as $1.40 per acre.

By the time the Land Run began, Sooners had already grabbed some of the best locations. Fewer than one out of three settlers managed to stake a claim that day. Then many of them had their claims stolen at gunpoint or taken away by counterfeiters. At least ten Boomers died of heat strokes.[2]

When the dust settled, however, Oklahoma Territory had eleven new counties and dozens of new towns that would continue to attract settlers for years to come, including businessmen like T.J. Hughes and his brothers.

N.W. corner Chilloco Reserve – Land Run on September 16, 1893.
Photographer William S. Prettyman, Arkansas City, Kansas

1. Letter to Congress from Secretary of War Daniel Lamont, 2 November 1893, University of Oklahoma College of Law Library, accessed 11 August 2023: https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9799&context=indianserialset
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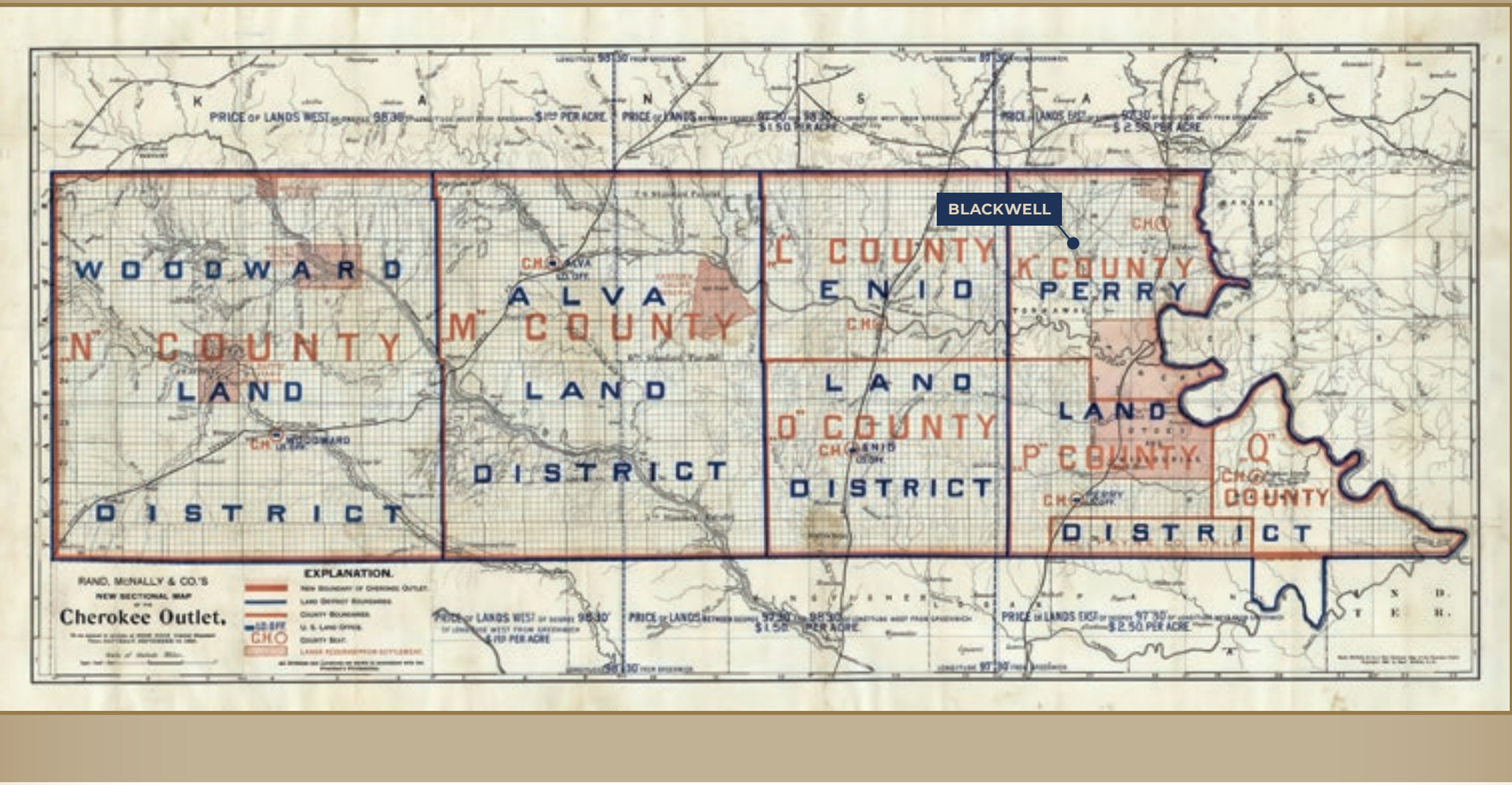

A COLLECTIVE EFFORT

Blackwell got a head start on other towns in the Cherokee Outlet. The founder, a former Confederate Army colonel named A.J. Blackwell, came to Oklahoma Territory in 1882 after spending time in federal prison for counterfeiting.[13] He was always looking for a way to make a quick fortune, and the Land Run of 1893 gave it to him.

Col. Blackwell married a Cherokee woman and had two children with her, which allowed him to obtain three allotments when tribal lands were divided before the territory opened for white settlement.[14] Altogether, Col. Blackwell owned 240 acres of prime agricultural land sixty-five miles straight south of Wichita, Kansas. But instead of starting a farm, he laid out streets and plotted neighborhoods, then waited for the Land Run.[15] As settlers arrived, Col. Blackwell offered hundreds of residential lots for free, sparking rapid grown in the town's population.[16] Then he got rich developing the town's business district.

Photograph of the day the H&S Railroad entered Blackwell, Oklahoma Territory. Photo by William S Prettyman, Blackwell, Oklahoma Territory, February 28, 1898. Oklahoma Historical Society metadc1621088

In the late 1800s, Blackwell became a significant commercial hub for north-central Oklahoma.[17] T.J. Hughes came to town in the summer of 1895, when he was twenty-two years old, and purchased a small stock of hardware.[18] He wanted to start his own business but needed more inventory. So, toward the end of August, T.J. attended a sheriff's sale where officials auctioned off hardware supplies that belonged to a businessman named Ray Warren, who had defaulted on a debt. T.J. probably knew Warren, who had previously lived in Atlanta, Kansas, and went back often to visit family members.[19] In fact, T.J. had probably heard about Warren's financial trouble and knew that his stock of hardware would be for sale at a bargain price. Warren's stock might have even been what gave T.J. the idea of moving to Blackwell. Either way, when T.J. took possession of Warren's stock, the receipt was made out to all of the Hughes brothers.[20] T.J. was the leader, but this venture was a collective effort.

Hughes Brothers Hardware opened in September 1895 in a corner building near the business center of Blackwell. The merchandise included tinware, stoves, pumps, barbed wire, cutlery, tools and, according to early newspaper advertisements, "anything usually kept in a hardware store."[21]

After only two years in existence, Blackwell had a population of 1,200 and was growing faster than any other town in north-central Oklahoma Territory.[22] The growth accelerated even more in 1897, when the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway began building an east-west line through the community, followed shortly afterward by a north-south line on the St. Louis and San Francisco Railway. Together, the railroads made Blackwell a center of trade for all kinds of agricultural goods, from wheat and corn to hogs and cattle.[23] By the start of 1898, the town's population had more than doubled to 2,500.[24]

The Hughes family seemed to be settling down for the long term. That January, one of the brothers, Hugh, went back to Osage City for a ten-day visit with old friends and to help their mother move her belongings to Blackwell.[25]

SUCCESS

The store thrived. After just two years in business, Hughes Brothers had six full-time employees and kept $6,000 worth of merchandise on the shelves, or more than $220,000 in today's money.[26] The inventory even included two brands of bicycles, Sun and Crescent, to bring the national cycling craze to Blackwell. Residents had to travel more than thirty miles to Arkansas City, Kansas, to find a similar selection of goods, which helped Hughes draw customers from all across Kay County. The store managed to sell seven freight cars of barbed wire in just twelve months and went through three freight cars of coal-burning stoves in a single winter, "an unprecedentedly large sale," according to the *Blackwell Times-Record*.[27]


WHAT? CHRISTMAS IS COMING!

With a Bold, Determined, Money Making Move.

THIS MONTH WILL BE THE RECORD BREAKER!

AT PRICES TO SUIT THE TIMES!

HUGHES BRO'S., - - BLACKWELL.

Blackwell, *The Times Record*, Thursday, December 24, 1896

Blackwell, *The Times Record*, Thursday, December 28, 1899

All combined, the sales floors offered more than 5,000 square feet of retail space, a veritable mega store by the standards of the time.

The business grew even larger in August 1899 as it relocated to North Main Street, where Hughes Brothers Hardware spread out across four separate showrooms, two downstairs and two upstairs, in two adjacent buildings.[28] All combined, the sales floors offered more than 5,000 square feet of retail space, a veritable mega store by the standards of the time. Plus, the new location included the luxury of a separate warehouse and a large storage yard, which allowed display shelves to appear less cluttered.

For more than a week the brothers worked to move all of their inventory from the old location, but to fill the new space they had to order more goods. A local newspaper described the inventory as one of the largest stocks of hardware in Oklahoma Territory and claimed the inventory

could even rival the selection customers might find at a store in Kansas City or Chicago.[29] As well as hardware and lumber, the merchandise included buggies and wagons along with farm implements and machinery, including windmills and pumps.

In fact, the store had grown so large that T.J. and his brothers began to worry that some customers might find it intimidating. "Do not think because we have a large and well filled store, and you wish to make only a small purchase, that we do not want your trade," they said in an advertisement in the August 24, 1899, issue of the *Times-Record*, just days after opening the new location.

Jack Hughes took charge of the tinning section on the second floor, which not only sold materials but also could provide roofing and guttering work.[30] Hugh Hughes oversaw the farm machinery department while Robert Hughes helped T.J. with the hardware, vehicle, and implement departments. Near the end of 1899, the *Times-Record* described the four of them as "young men full of energy and imbued with those high business principles that are respected and appreciated by the people."[31]

Blackwell, *The TimesRecord*, Thursday, September 28, 1899

The move to Oklahoma and the risk of starting a business had paid off. T.J., only twenty-six years old, had found a way to provide a comfortable living for himself and his entire family. At the start of a new century, however, he was once again looking for new opportunities.

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6. HFG
7. Clara Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Archives
8. *Osage City Free Press*, 8 March 1894.
9. *Osage City Free Press*, 11 April 1894.
10. *Osage City Free Press*, 3 October 1894.
11. (Blackwell) *Times Record*, 22 August 1895.
12. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Cherokee Outlet Opening, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CH021
13. Herringshaw's Encyclopedia of American Biography of the Nineteenth Century; American Publishers Association, 1902, Chicago, Illinois
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16. (Blackwell) *Times Record*, 25 December 1897
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20. (Blackwell) *Times Record*, 22 August 1895.
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27. (Blackwell) *Times Record*, 25 December 1897.
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31. (Blackwell) *Times Record*, 28 December 1899.

PART FIRST

The Times-Record.

PAGES 1 TO 8

Republican in Principle, But Devoted to the Upbuilding of Blackwell and the Development of Kay County.

VOL. 7. BLACKWELL, KAY COUNTY, OKLAHOMA, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28. 1899. NO. 15.

CHAPTER 02

THE RESPECT AND REGARD OF EVERYONE

Traveling twenty miles by horse and buggy on dusty country roads, T.J. Hughes went to the little town of Lamont, Oklahoma, in mid-April 1900 to consider opening a second hardware store.[1] Technically, Lamont had sprung into existence at the same time as Blackwell. Two settlers from Kansas, W. F. Shamleffer and W. W. Dunaway, established the townsite on the day of the Cherokee Outlet Land Run, September 16, 1893.[1] Unlike Blackwell, however, Lamont had not been planned and did not have an eccentric landowner to lure new residents by giving away free lots.

While Blackwell developed into a commercial hub, the entire town of Lamont consisted of little more than a one-room school and a few scattered farmhouses, which, nonetheless, could be seen from miles away on

the open prairie.[2] At the beginning of 1900, however, the Frisco Railway began building an extension from Blackwell. The mere promise of rail service to Lamont sparked tremendous interest from investors even before construction crews had finished clearing a right of way for the tracks.[3]

After scoping out potential sites for a new store, T.J. returned to Lamont on May 1, 1900. This time he was not alone. As many as 2,000 people converged on the tiny community from across Oklahoma Territory in hopes of obtaining a small parcel of land where they could build a store or a house. Lamont had 700 lots available for as little as $25 each.[4] But with demand far exceeding supply, the town organized a series of random drawings to determine who would get to buy the properties.[5]

T.J. either did not enter the drawings or was not lucky enough to win a chance to buy a lot. Nonetheless, he secured a contract to lease space from M.M. Tierney, the owner of Blackwell's Silver Dollar Saloon, who drew one of the most prominent locations in Lamont's business district.[6] Martin Brothers, a Blackwell construction company, built the new Hughes Hardware showroom, which measured twenty feet wide by eighty feet long.[7] Three stores of that size could have fit easily inside the Blackwell location, but of course Lamont had only a fraction of Blackwell's population at the time. T.J. no doubt expected both the town and the store to grow.

He moved to Lamont in May 1900, taking his youngest brother Jack with him to open the new store while their oldest brother, Hugh, stayed behind to run the business in Blackwell.[8] By then, T.J.'s other brother, Robert, had quit the hardware business to become a farmer in Grant County, west of Blackwell.[9]

Rail service between Lamont and Blackwell began October 1, 1900, with two trains per day making a round trip.[10] The trains allowed T.J. to travel back and forth easily, and newspaper articles described him as "the head of the company" in charge of both locations.[11]

Lamont was booming. Only a handful of farm families had lived there when the year started, but more than 400 people moved into town before the end of 1900. At least fifty new buildings were under construction that autumn, adding to a business district that had sprouted seemingly overnight in the spring.[12] The various enterprises included two banks, two mills, a livery, and several general stores, and a second hardware store competing with the Hughes brothers.[13]

As a Christmas promotion in 1900, Jack Hughes sat a decorative lamp in the front window and promised to give it away to “any man, woman, or child” who came nearest to guessing the number of shotgun pellets in a glass bottle.[14] Until then, newspaper articles had always called the store Hughes Hardware or specifically named T.J. as the owner. The publicity in Lamont that December, however, called the store J.B. Hughes Hardware, suggesting that Jack had taken over the business.

If the Christmas promotion was successful, it did not keep Jack in business long. Tucker & Son, a retailer from the small town of Waukomis, south of Enid in western Oklahoma, bought a double-wide lot in Lamont and began building a new location that was going to be twice the size of Hughes Hardware and occupy a more prominent street corner.[15] Jack did not see much hope of competing with the newcomers and sold his entire stock to Tucker in January 1901. He then used the proceeds to invest in the Hotel Lamont, becoming a part owner with his brother Robert after the hotel’s original developer retired.[16] T.J. was not involved.

TRAINS IN INDIAN TERRITORY

A a total of 52,900 miles of railroads existed in the United States by 1870, with 1,350 miles in Missouri and 660 in Kansas, but none lay within Oklahoma. Only then did the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway Company (MK&T, or Katy, originally known as Union Pacific, Southern Branch) start building its line from Kansas toward Denison, Texas.

By the 1880s Indian Territory was seen more and more as a barrier to commerce and traffic between the neighboring states. Congress now took measures to allow further railroad construction through Oklahoma. The great boom in railroad building only started circa 1897 when regional companies, generally sponsored by the existing mainline companies, started new construction. Between 1897 and 1907 Oklahoma was covered with a dense network of branches, often paralleling each other.

This network of trains in Indian Territory provided a crucial means of transportation for settlers and businesses, enabling them to access the region's resources and markets more easily.

The Blackwell, Enid & Southwestern (BE&SW) #3, stopped at station for photographs, Blackwell, Oklahoma, 1902. *Oklahoma Historical Society 2300710. Sylvan R. Wood.*

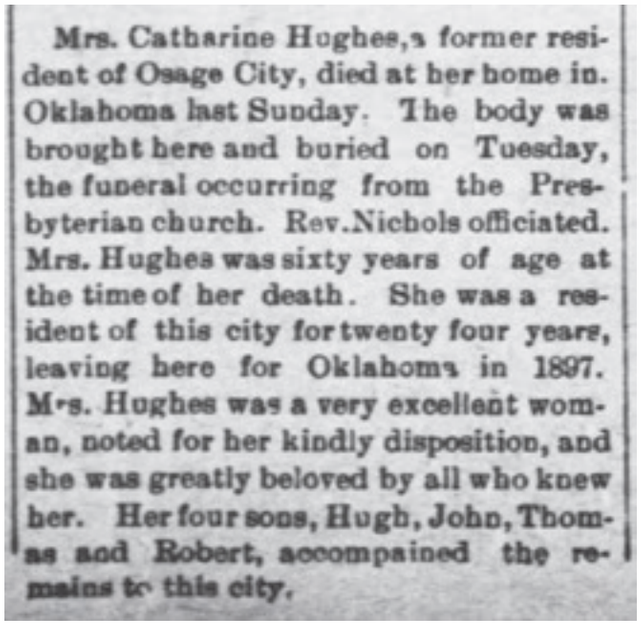
After expanding Hughes Hardware to Lamont, T.J. rather suddenly and mysteriously stepped aside. In fact, after the autumn of 1900, T.J. all but disappeared from the historical record for more than a year. Without him, the store in Lamont languished and Jack might have seen little choice but to join his other brother in the hotel business.

Meanwhile, advertisements for the Blackwell store stopped appearing in the local newspaper after March 1901. Hugh, nicknamed "Smiling Brady" for his sunny disposition, briefly ran a hardware store of his own in the tiny community of Nardin, ten miles west of Blackwell.[17] But he soon traded the business for a nearby farm, where he would spend the next four decades.[18]

As for T.J., his activities that year are not reported. Most likely, he spent the time caring for his ailing mother.

STARTING OVER AGAIN

In early February 1901, T.J.'s younger brother Robert took their mother back to Osage City, Kansas, ostensibly for medical treatment but perhaps in reality to say farewell to old friends. She had lived in Osage City for twenty-four years and still considered it home.[19] Her health required "immediate attention," according to a note in the Blackwell newspaper, but the family hoped the trip would be reinvigorating. If it helped at all, however, the recovery did not last long after she returned to Lamont. Catharine Hughes, who had left her birthplace in Wales to live in a procession of small frontier towns, first in Wisconsin, then Kansas, and finally Oklahoma Territory, died March 8, 1902.[20] She was sixty years old.



Mrs. Catharine Hughes, a former resident of Osage City, died at her home in Oklahoma last Sunday. The body was brought here and buried on Tuesday, the funeral occurring from the Presbyterian church. Rev. Nichols officiated. Mrs. Hughes was sixty years of age at the time of her death. She was a resident of this city for twenty four years, leaving here for Oklahoma in 1897. Mrs. Hughes was a very excellent woman, noted for her kindly disposition, and she was greatly beloved by all who knew her. Her four sons, Hugh, John, Thomas and Robert, accompained the remains to this city.

Osage City, Kansas, *Osage City Free Press*, Thursday, March 13, 1902

All four of the Hughes brothers accompanied her body back to Osage City, where the local newspaper's obituary described her as "a very excellent woman, noted for her kindly disposition."[21] By that point, his mother's health may have been all that was keeping T.J. in Lamont. After the funeral, he almost immediately rented a storefront in Cushing, about eighty-five miles southeast of Lamont.[22] In April 1902, T.J. and Jack arrived in town with a small load of hardware supplies, apparently left over from the old Hughes Brother store in Blackwell.[23]

Cushing, similar to Lamont a few years earlier, was attracting new businesses in anticipation of railroads coming to the area. The Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad, known as the "Katy," had been delayed for years because of a dispute over where to build a depot.[24] The railway even threatened not to come to Cushing at

all if local officials could not end the bickering between property owners, who were refusing to help pay the bonus that railroads expected from every town before tracks were laid. The Katy, however, reluctantly sent a surveying crew to Cushing in June 1902 and began construction soon afterward, even though a site for the depot had not yet been decided.[25]

Meanwhile, the Eastern Oklahoma Railway Company, an extension of the massive Santa Fe Railroad, was adding up to two miles of track per day as it approached Cushing.[26] Daily service to Guthrie and Pawnee began in late July 1902, while Katy trains didn't arrive until the next year.[27, 28]

With train deliveries driving down the cost of doing business in Cushing, several new shops came to Main Street in the summer and fall of 1902, from the aptly named Price General Store to Mrs. Caldwell's Ice Cream Parlor.[29] Hughes Hardware faced at least two direct competitors.

The Cushing Hardware Company, known for its wide selection of pocket knives and firearms, promised to meet any other store's price, even from out of town, if it had the same item in stock.[30] Even without such a

The Missouri, Kansas & Texas (MKT) "Katy" #75 on a passenger train stopped at an unidentified station, crew posing, 1903. *Oklahoma Historical Society 2300172 Sylvan R. Wood.*

A Leading Store.

Hughes Bros., Dealers In Hardware, Stoves, Implements, Etc.

A MAMMOTH STOCK.

Specially Selected for the Trade of This Section That Finds Many Purchasers Among those who are Looking for Reliable Goods.

In the course of a continuous hunt, you cannot the leading merchants will stand in the front of the progressive class as all view stove water. Time, that wonderful worker, belongs much to the front in the business world, and nowhere is this more true than in the ranks of our retail merchants, for they are as proverbially ahead of their competitors in stock, prices and progress, that the facts stated in the most casual observer.

In this connection the TIMES-RECORD would direct the attention of its readers to the establishment of Hughes Bros., which was established in August 1895. This is a concern that deservedly earns a liberal share of patronage from the people of Kay county. The premises occupied consist of two salesrooms each 25x100 feet in size, a second floor salesroom and tin shop 50x70 feet, a warehouse 25x80 feet and a large storage yard. As will be seen by the above 1000 square feet are devoted almost exclusively to the display of the extensive stock carried. This includes shelf and heavy hardware, stoves and ranges, edge tools, cutlery, guns, ammunition, fishing tackle, light and heavy vehicles, farm implements and machinery, windmills, pumps, bicycles, sewing machines and the various other goods found in an extensive and progressive establishment of this kind.

The mention of such leaders as the Moline implements, Champion mowers and harvesters, Jewel, Hoe Ribbet and H. H. Booth buggies, Fish Bros. farm wagon, Jewel, Comstock-Castle, and Riverside stoves and ranges, Quick Meal steel ranges, and gasoline stoves are sufficient evidence of the high standard of the large and varied stock. Wheeler & Wilson sewing machines, Crescent and Imperial bicycles, appeal to those looking for articles in these lines. The line of farmers' hand tools has been selected from the most reliable and the best known makers.

There is a special department in charge of John Hughes devoted to the tinning business and the firm is prepared to make estimates and execute all kinds of cornice work, roofing, guttering, etc., also repairing and altering. Thomas and Robert Hughes have charge of the hardware vehicle and implement departments, and Hugh, the fourth brother, looks after the windmill, pump and farm machinery department. Each brother being unusually well posted and proficient in his respective line.

Special mention should be made of the fact that this establishment carries large stock of best and hard wood for vehicles and implement repairs and supply many dealers, blacksmiths and wagon shops at wholesale prices throughout a large range of territory.

Thomas, Robert, John and Hugh, the four brothers who constitute the firm of Hughes Brothers, are of Welsh descent and were reared, educated and received their business training in Kansas. They came here from Gunge City, in that state, in August 1895 and opened a small hardware store from which the present MAMMOTH establishment has grown. They are all young men full of energy and imbued with those high business principles that are respected and appreciated by the people, and they remarkable business success

---

IS THIS YOUR WIFE?

You say: "No!" But she should remind you of a duty you owe your wife! You can end all her kitchen troubles by buying her a "Quick Meal" Stove. If your wife attends to the cooking, she will get a vacation every day, when formerly she was a slave. A "Quick Meal" Stove will save her more work and steps than any hired girl she ever had. The "Quick Meal" Stove will cook a meal in less time than it takes a coal fire to start, and it will do it without raking or shaking, without soot or smoke, without dirt or ashes—but quicker, better, cleaner and with less expense, and your wife and the kitchen will be cool. Your wife will love you more if you buy her a "Quick Meal" to-day.

We can make anything that can be made out of tin or zinc.

We carry a full line of shelf and heavy HARDWARE.

Get our prices on fruit jars.

A full line of everything handled in a hardware store.

HUGHES H'DW' CO.

The Majestic manufacturing company of St. Louis, Mo. will have a man at Hughes Hardware store Oct. 8 to 13 who will show you how to bake biscuits brown top and bottom in three minutes. Don't miss the chance of seeing the great cooking wonder.—Hughes Hardware Co.

Fall & Winter Goods.

The successful man is always looking ahead and preparing for the future. At present he is engaged in preparing for winter.

Don't Wait

Until you are frozen up before buying your Axes, Saws, Hammers, Wedges, Cook-stoves, Air-tight Oak-stoves, Box Stoves, Stove-pipe, Ranges, Elbows, Dampers, Steel Cooks.

Prices.

While we don't advertise our goods to be the lowest priced on the market, we do guarantee their quality and durability and invite inspection and comparison as to prices.

HUGHES H'DW' CO.

The Times-Record.

HUGHES BRO'S.

The Times-Record.

HUGHES BRO'S.,

For Stoves and Hardware.

HUGHES BRO'S.

Hughes Brothers ran many advertisements in the local papers and their business and family doings were often the subject of news stories.

guarantee, store manager L.H. Owen claimed his prices were already twenty-five percent lower on big-ticket items such as stoves and heaters.[31] Nonetheless, Cushing Hardware had a relatively small sales floor and shared space with a shoemaker, which made it difficult to compete with a larger store like Hughes Hardware.[32]

For T.J. and his brother, the bigger challenge came from E.B. Kendall's Hardware, which claimed to have "one of the most complete stocks of goods in this part of Oklahoma."[33] One of Kendall's newspaper advertisements ironically boasted that the owners did not have time to write an advertisement because "every spare moment of our time is used in unpacking new goods."[34] Maybe it was a subtle jab at the Hughes store, which seemed to advertise every day.

Like Cushing Hardware, Kendall's promised to meet any competitor's price, and on top of that offered free delivery to any address in town.[35] If that was not enough to lure customers in the summer of 1902, everyone who stepped through Kendall's door received a free ticket for a drawing to win a new cooking range.[36]

Perhaps worst of all for the Hughes brothers, Kendall's became one of the first stores to open in Cushing's South Addition, a stylish retail development designed by prominent Stillwater architect C.C. Cook, who was behind some of the earliest buildings on the campus of what is now Oklahoma State University.[37, 38] Kendall's stood near the new Santa Fe depot on Broadway Street and featured an impressive brick-and-stone storefront at a time when most buildings in town were still made of wood.[39, 40]

By the end of the summer of 1902, the South Addition had replaced Main Street itself as Cushing's most popular shopping district and provided nearly everything a resident might want, from stylish hats at the M.J. Hervey Millinery to a stiff drink at N.H. High's saloon.[41, 42] A prosperous residential neighborhood began to grow up around the addition too.[43]

Hughes Hardware, in contrast, occupied a small wooden building along a dusty stretch of East Main Street that people in Cushing began to call Old Town.[44] While competitors advertised low prices and a broad selection of merchandise, T.J. and Jack tried to sell "carefulness," "experience," and "honorable business methods."[45]

> While we don't advertise our goods to be the lowest priced on the market, we do guarantee their quality and durability.
>
> – HUGHES HARDWARE ADVERTISING

"While we don't advertise our goods to be the lowest priced on the market," one newspaper advertisement admitted, "we do guarantee their quality and durability."[46] Another Hughes advertisement described the company's philosophy this way: "In how we mark our price on each article we sell, the entire business will be conducted on a fair and square basis."[47]

Apparently, that was not enough to keep customers from going to stores in South Addition. In early October 1902, only six months after opening the store on Main

Street, the Hughes brothers moved to a new stone building on West Broadway, near Kendall's.[48] Of course, the new location did not change their approach to doing business. "Customers will be accorded the same hearty cordial and fair treatment," the brothers promised, "which characterizes the past business methods of Hughes Hardware Co."[49]

Around the time that T.J. and Jack were moving merchandise from the old store to the new one in South Addition, their brother Robert visited from Lamont.[50] Probably he came to help set up the new location, but it's possible that he just happened to be in the vicinity, given that he had taken a new job. No longer involved with the Hotel Lamont, Robert was crisscrossing Oklahoma as a salesman for Blish, Mize & Silliman, a hardware firm based in Atchison, Kansas.[51] Whatever T.J. thought about his brother's new job at the time, the connection would turn out to be important for him in the future.

KINDRED SPIRITS

Clara Strader came to Cushing in 1902, not long after she graduated high school in Odessa, Missouri. She was only nineteen when she became assistant postmaster, one of only a handful of federal jobs that were available to women at the time.[55] The post office shared space with a candy store in the heart of the business district not far from the new Hughes Hardware. Clara, working behind the counter, soon became acquainted with almost everyone in town. Customers appreciated her tireless work and efficiency, and young men could not help noticing her good looks and perpetual smile.[55]

Clara might have met T.J. at the post office, but their relationship almost certainly blossomed at church. Both were devout Presbyterians. Clara became part of Cushing's First Presbyterian, originally known as Cumberland Presbyterian, as soon as the church opened in September 1904.[58] Gifted with a remarkable voice, she sang a solo of the hymn "Holy City" and a duet of "Love Divine" at the dedication ceremony for the original church building, a simple clapboard structure with a two-story bell tower over the entrance.[59]

Cupid's Caperings.

Thursday morning two of our popular young people stole quietly away to Guthrie and were married, namely Thomas Hughes and Clara Strader. We understand the happy couple then went to Oklahoma City where they will remain a few days, returning home Sunday. Their numerous friends are already planning the things they will do to them when they get home.

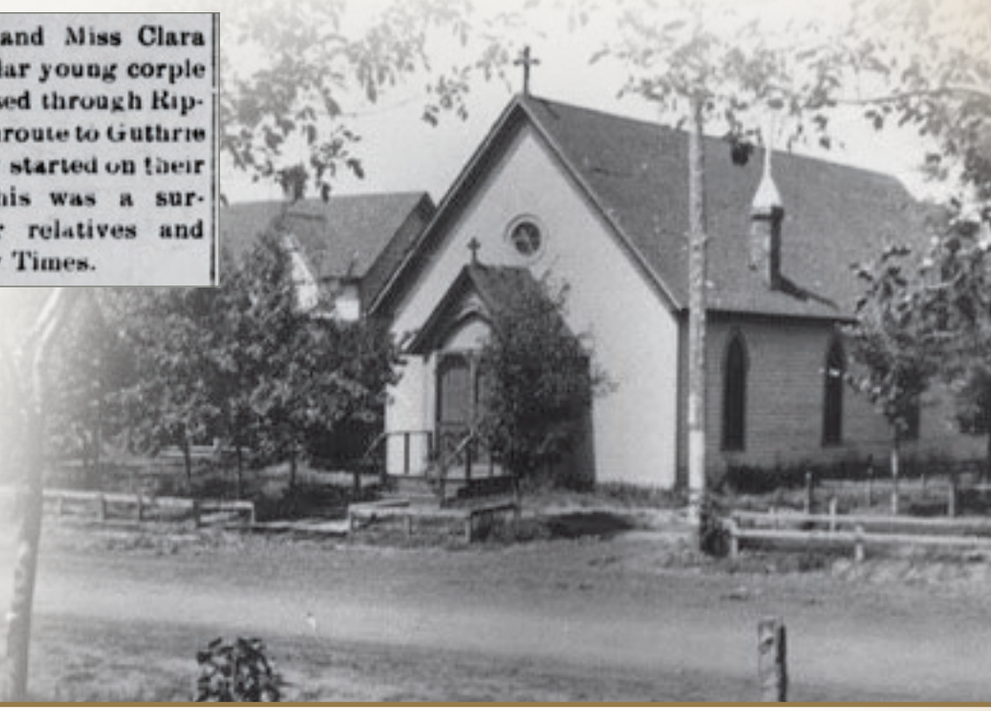
– CUSHING OKLAHOMA, *THE STATE HERALD*
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1906

Tom Moffat, formerly clerk in the post-office here, returned last week from Altone Kan. bringing his family with him, and on Jan. 1st resumed his old position in the post office, which was left vacant by the resignation of Miss Clara Strader. Miss Strader has made us a good and efficient postal clerk, and her many friends will miss her smiling face from the window.

Friday, January 5, 1906

T. J. Hughes and Miss Clara Strader, a popular young corple of Cushing, passed through Ripley yesterday enroute to Guthrie from where they started on their honeymoon. This was a surprise for their relatives and friends. —Ripley Times.

Friday, February 9, 1906



above: Excerpts from *The State Herald* (Cushing, Oklahoma) .

right: **Trinity Episcopal Church, Guthrie, Oklahoma, 1895.** The church was established the first Sunday after the April 22, 1889 Land Run. The wooden church was built in 1890 and moved to its new location at 310 E. Noble in 1893. A new brick structure was added on to the original in 1913.

Although T.J. was eleven years older, Clara saw him as a kindred spirit. He was ambitious, like her, and not afraid of hard work. The romance deepened over the course of 1905, when Clara was twenty-one years old, and T.J. was thirty-two. On February 1, 1906, they slipped away quietly to nearby Guthrie and eloped at Trinity Episcopal Church, surprising their friends and families who were expecting a more elaborate wedding.[60]

Meanwhile, the hardware store grew steadily in South Addition. The Hughes brothers initially offered only a limited selection of merchandise, but the stock gradually expanded to include a full range of shelf and heavy hardware, including a wide selection of stoves, cutlery, sporting goods, and farm implements.[52] T.J. and Jack gained a reputation as "thorough hardware men" who could answer any question a customer might ask about any item in the store.[53]

By the time they had been in business for three years, the brothers were "among the most responsible and influential merchants" in Cushing, according to the *State Herald*, a weekly newspaper that circulated across Oklahoma Territory.[54] "By strict adherence to business principles and courteous treatment of all customers," the *Herald* said, "they have won the respect and regard of everyone."

OUT OF BUSINESS

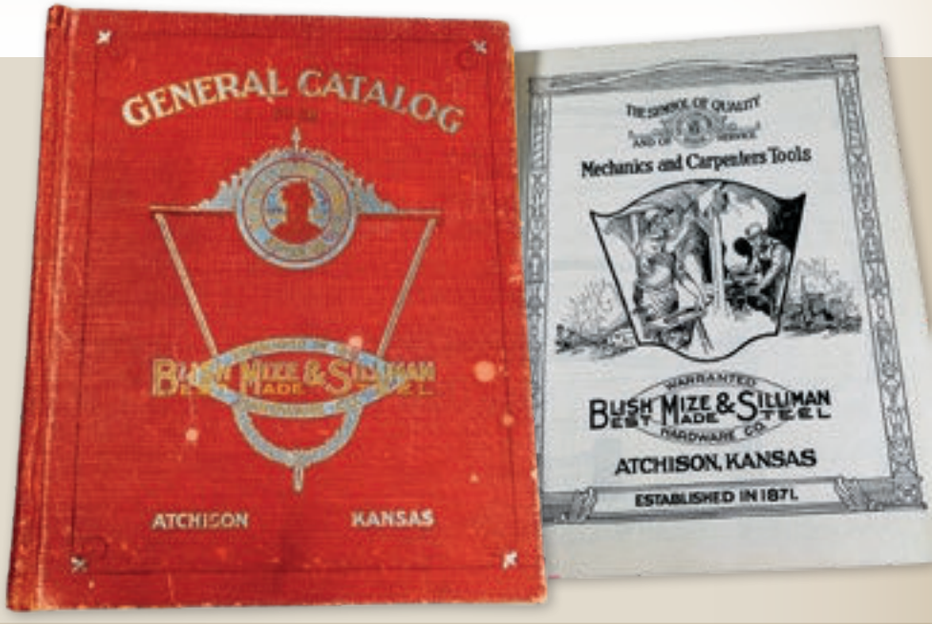
Despite being a newlywed in the fall of 1906, T.J. spent so little time in Cushing, even on weekends, that his brief visits home warranted a mention in the local

newspaper's society column.[61] At some point during this time, T.J. had taken a job as a traveling salesman for Blish, Mize & Silliman, the same hardware company that had hired his brother Robert five years earlier.[62]

The reason T.J. took the job is unclear. Perhaps Hughes Hardware was no longer generating enough profit to support both T.J. and his brother Jack, who by then was starting a family of his own. (Jack had married Lena Oder, the daughter of one of Cushing's first pioneer settlers, Robert Oder.)[63] Or maybe T.J. was just getting restless again and wanted a new adventure.

At first, Jack ran the store with Clara's help since T.J. was on the road almost every day. However, near the end of January 1907, Jack sold his share of the business to T.J., telling people at the time that he had not yet made up his mind what to do next.[64] Before long, however, Jack became a traveling salesman, known colloquially in the early 1900s as a "drummer," whose job was to drum up business for his employer.[65]

With Jack on the road, too, Clara had to run the store by herself when T.J. was out of town, which was virtually all the time.[66] Whether she was happy with the situation or not, the arrangement did not last long. T.J. reached an agreement in mid-February to sell the entire business to a retired farmer, William Dodson, who had only recently moved to Cushing.[67] Indeed, the sale came so quickly after Jack's departure that T.J. might have planned all along to sell the store and devote himself entirely to working as a traveling salesman. Either way, T.J. spent the first week of March 1907 taking inventory of the store's remaining stock. When he finished the last invoice, T.J. handed the keys to Dodson.[68]



Blish, Mize & Stillman Catalog

DANGEROUS TIMES

Alone at home for long stretches of time while T.J. was traveling, Clara kept a shotgun in a closet near the front door. Cushing was still a frontier town with a streak of lawlessness.

One night a stranger, staggering drunk, came up the sidewalk. Clara warned him to go away or she would shoot, but the man tried to force his way inside. She pulled the trigger, blasting a hole through the screen door. When the smoke cleared, the man was gone. But he left a bloodstain on the porch.

Traveling all the time carried risks for T.J., too. He was aboard Train No. 409, westbound on the Eastern Oklahoma Railway, when the train derailed early on the morning of April 10, 1907. The steam locomotive and several cars overturned in a ditch a mile and a half east of Stillwater.[69] Fortunately, T.J. and the other passengers

emerged without a scratch. But they had to wait several hours, until another train picked them up and took them to Guthrie, the territorial capital.[70]

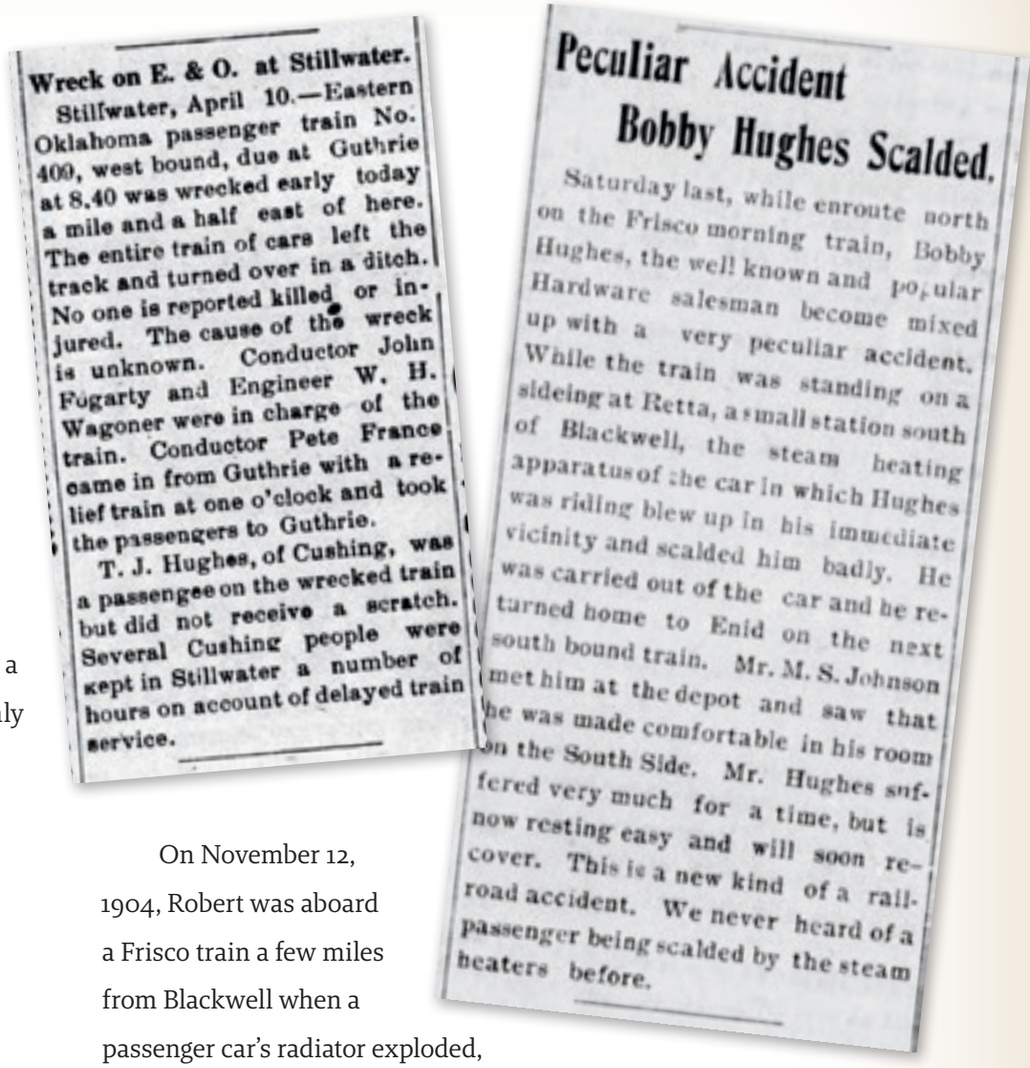
While waiting for the next train, T.J. must have spent time reflecting on the recent changes in his life. He had a good reason to feel even more shaken up than the other passengers. One of his brothers had barely survived a train wreck just a few weeks earlier.

LIFE-LONG SCARS

Rock Island Train No. 12, running two hours late on March 6, 1907, approached Enid from the south at thirty miles per hour. The engineer did not notice that a switch had been left open until the locomotive suddenly swerved off the main track and onto a siding.[71]

Meanwhile, a freight train had stopped in Enid to wait for the long-overdue passenger train to pass. The two steam engines collided head-on. The impact flung 200 passengers on the Rock Island train out of their seats, but none of them suffered life-threatening injuries. Aboard the freight train, however, a fireman died, and an engineer emerged from the wreckage with bloody wounds.[72]

Several businessmen were riding in the freight train's caboose, a common practice at the time for frequent travelers.[73] They were all hurled violently to the floor, suffering bruises and concussions.[74] One of the businessmen was Robert Hughes, still working for Blish, Mize & Silliman. Remarkably, this accident was the second time in less than three years that he had been badly injured on a train.



Wreck on E. & O. at Stillwater.

Stillwater, April 10.—Eastern Oklahoma passenger train No. 409, west bound, due at Guthrie at 8.40 was wrecked early today a mile and a half east of here. The entire train of cars left the track and turned over in a ditch. No one is reported killed or injured. The cause of the wreck is unknown. Conductor John Fogarty and Engineer W. H. Wagoner were in charge of the train. Conductor Pete France came in from Guthrie with a relief train at one o'clock and took the passengers to Guthrie.

T. J. Hughes, of Cushing, was a passengee on the wrecked train but did not receive a scratch. Several Cushing people were kept in Stillwater a number of hours on account of delayed train service.

Peculiar Accident

Bobby Hughes Scalded.

Saturday last, while enroute north on the Frisco morning train, Bobby Hughes, the well known and popular Hardware salesman become mixed up with a very peculiar accident. While the train was standing on a sideing at Retta, a small station south of Blackwell, the steam heating apparatus of the car in which Hughes was riding blew up in his immediate vicinity and scalded him badly. He was carried out of the car and he returned home to Enid on the next south bound train. Mr. M. S. Johnson met him at the depot and saw that he was made comfortable in his room on the South Side. Mr. Hughes suffered very much for a time, but is now resting easy and will soon recover. This is a new kind of a railroad accident. We never heard of a passenger being scalded by the steam heaters before.

On November 12, 1904, Robert was aboard a Frisco train a few miles from Blackwell when a passenger car's radiator exploded, blasting him with scalding-hot steam. "His hands, wrists and ankles are in a terrible condition," one news correspondent wrote.[75] Another report described the side of Robert's face as "a mass of burns."[76] He bore scars for the rest of his life and limped for at least several months afterward.[77]

Remembering Robert's experience must have made T.J. feel even more fortunate to survive his own train wreck unscathed. After the accident and Clara's alarming encounter with a drunk stranger, T.J. seemed to regret the decision to sell Hughes Hardware.

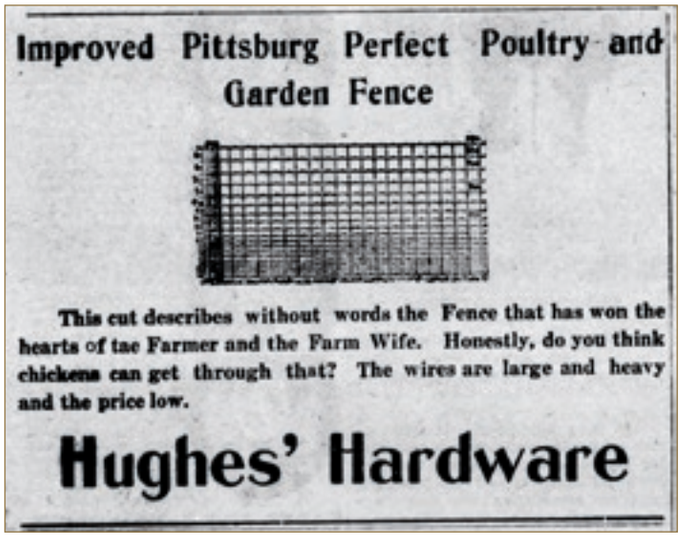
BACK IN BUSINESS

When T.J. Hughes sold his hardware store in early 1907, the new owner, William Dobson, had already been suffering for several months from dropsy, an old term for the swelling of soft tissues due to the accumulation of excess water in the body.[78] Today these symptoms are known to be an indication of the potential for heart failure.[79]

Dodson may have thought running a hardware store would put less strain on his health than farming, so he sold his property along the banks of the Cimarron River and moved to Cushing.[80] The store, however, operated under his name for less than four months. Dodson died June 20, 1907, at the age of fifty-six.[81]

Dobson left behind seven grown children, a widow, and considerable debts. Dodson's Hardware never reopened while a court-appointed administrator took control of the estate's assets and spent the next several months trying to settle with creditors.[82, 83] Meanwhile, the darkened windows made the store an easy target for burglaries, and thieves repeatedly busted through the plate-glass doors to steal large amounts of merchandise.[84]

Finally, in late December 1907, the court administrator put the store up for sale, along with what was left of the inventory. No records indicate how much Dodson had paid for the business less than a year earlier, but T.J. paid $3,325 to buy it back.[85] This time, going into business without any of his brothers to share the risk or the workload, T.J. quit his job as a traveling salesman to devote his full attention to the reborn Hughes Hardware Company.[86]



Hughes hardware advertising resumes within a couple months of T.J. buying back the store and its inventory. *The Cushing Independent*, March and April 1908.

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T.J. Hughes Sr.

CHAPTER 03

A LEVEL-HEADED, CONSERVATIVE BUSINESSMAN

On a Monday morning in mid-November 1908, less than a month after Thomas Jefferson Hughes Jr., was born, T.J. Sr. went to his barn to find his horse and buggy missing, along with several harnesses and other items.[1] Naturally, T.J. hurried to report the theft to the town marshal, Bert Trowbridge.[2] But T.J. was not about to go back home and wait for someone else to handle the situation. He went with the marshal to pursue the criminal. Or rather, a more accurate description might be that the marshal went with T.J.

Unlike most buggies in Cushing at the time, T.J.'s had rubber tires, a luxury that provided a smoother ride. The rubber tires also made the tracks easy to identify on the dirt roads.[3] T.J. and Trowbridge followed the

trail as far as Stroud, more than twenty miles away, before the tracks became entangled with other rubber-tired buggies. From there, they had to rely on witnesses, who recognized the description of T.J.'s horse and buggy, to point them in the right direction.

At two o'clock in the morning they finally spotted the stolen buggy near the small town of Sparks, almost another twenty miles from Stroud, where the thief had pulled off the road and was unhitching the horse, apparently getting ready to bed down for the rest of the night.[4]

"When told to consider himself under arrest, he submitted very quietly," according to a newspaper report, without specifying who told the thief he was under arrest.[5] Another newspaper account attributed the arrest to both T.J. and Marshal Trowbridge, but the article notably mentioned T.J. first.[6] He rehitched the horse to the buggy and drove home while Trowbridge took the accused thief to jail.[7]

BEYOND HARDWARE

Not yet forty years old, T.J. had become a wealthy and respected businessman. Hughes Hardware had grown from a small operation in a ramshackle building to a thriving business with a well-tended storefront. Although T.J. wielded considerable influence in Cushing, he kept looking for new opportunities.

In early September 1910, a routine business statement from Farmers State Bank caught an editor's

Broadway & Cleveland Ave., Cushing, Oklahoma, about 1915.

attention at the *Cushing Independent*. The bank's list of directors included a new name: T.J. Hughes.

"Mr. Hughes is recognized as a level-headed, conservative businessman," the newspaper informed readers, noting that T.J. had recently acquired a significant stake in the bank.[8] The stake in the bank was his first major venture beyond the hardware business but not the last. T.J. would soon delve into oil.

A freshly drilled well began producing more than 400 barrels of oil a day on a farm just twelve miles east of Cushing in March 1912.[9] The discovery remained a closely guarded secret for several days while those in-the-know grabbed as many oil leases as possible in what became known as the Cushing-Drumright Field. By early April, however, wildcatters from all over Oklahoma were scrambling to drill, drill, drill.

Cushing offered the nearest rail connections and the only significant commercial district in the area, making it the most convenient supply hub for the new oil field. No doubt the Oil Boom generated a tremendous boost for the hardware store with a massive influx of new residents and businesses. However, real estate offered T.J. an even bigger opportunity.

Hughes Hardware ran its final advertisement in the *Cushing Citizen* on the day after Christmas 1912.[10] By the second week of January 1913, the store had changed names to Raedeker-Lumley Hardware.[11] One of the new partners, Mel Lumley, had taken charge of the business by January 10, 1913, moving to Cushing so abruptly that his wife and young son remained behind in Prague, forty miles away, for at least a few months.[12, 13] The other partner, John Raedeker, previously owned a hardware business in Chandler and did not move permanently to Cushing until near the end of April 1913.[14] For months to come, if only out of habit, people still occasionally called the store Hughes Hardware.[15]

HEATING STOVES

OF course you want a heating stove to save fuel, to hold fire over night and all that sort of thing, but the most important thing is that they heat the room properly and that they are built so that they will last.

We don't want to sell our stoves on the claim of fuel saving alone. In the first place, most people don't keep any record of the fuel burned so that a far away cata-logue house is pretty safe in making exaggerated claims in this direction.

They have your money, you can't be without a stove a month while you are sending it back to get another one, and if it wears out it is never the fault of "defective material or workmanship" which their guarantee (?)

covers. So when you get right down to the bottom, what are their claims of guarantee but a clever ruse to get your order?

We are right here where we have to make good what we claim; compare the sizes of our stoves, the weights and you will find we give you fully as much for your money, to say nothing of seeing what you get, of delivering your stove the day you order it and saving you freight charges.

THERE is a good deal of difference between a guarantee covering "defective material and workmanship" and our guarantee of perfect satisfaction. We are willing to leave the decision to your judgment, but we want you to see our stoves and make the comparison before you buy. It will pay both of us.

HUGHES' HARDWARE
A FULL LINE OF
Gas Cook and Heating Stoves

Final advertisement
for Hughes Hardware in 1912.
The Cushing Citizen, December 26, 1912

THE OTHER HUGHES HARDWARE

In October 1934, Jack Hughes Hardware proudly declared itself to be the oldest retailer in Cushing, a claim that was often repeated over the next several years.[1] The store's history could indeed be traced back to 1902, but it was not exactly a straight line.

Jack, or "J.B." as he was sometimes called, sold his share of the original Hughes Hardware store in January 1907 and began working as a traveling salesman, not long before his brother T.J. sold the rest of the business and went on the road himself.[2] When T.J. reopened Hughes Hardware less than a year later, however, Jack was not part it.[3]

Instead of rejoining his brother in Cushing at the hardware business, Jack moved to the small town of Yale, about thirteen miles north of Cushing. By December 1908, he had opened a store of his own, J.B. Hughes General Hardware.[4]

Jack returned to Cushing, however, in September 1910 and bought the old Cushing Hardware Company, which had been a rival to Hughes Hardware when both stores originally opened.[5] In that sense, Jack's claim to operating the oldest retail outlet in town did not depend entirely on his connection to Hughes Hardware. The Cushing Hardware Company dated back to 1902 as well.[6] Jack continued operating the store under that name until after T.J. got out of the hardware business[7], apparently to avoid confusion with his brother's business.

The store began advertising itself as Jack Hughes Hardware in March 1914, but most customers simply called it Hughes Hardware, a long-familiar name in Cushing.[8, 9]

Cushing Hardware 1909. Cotton workers bring the harvest to Cushing for processing. The photo captures Cushing Hardware on Broadway.

1. *The Cushing Daily Citizen*, 28 October 1934
2. *Cushing Independent*, 24 January 1907
3. *Cushing Independent*, 2 January 1908
4. *Payne County Farmer*, 16 December 1908
5. *Cushing Independent*, 15 September 1910
6. *Cushing Herald*, 14 February 1902
7. *The Cushing Citizen*, 2 January 1913
8. *The Cushing Citizen*, 26 March 1914
9. *The Cushing Citizen*, 13 April 1916
10. *Cushing Citizen*, 7 September 1922
11. *The Cushing Daily Citizen*, 21 November 1931
12. *The Cushing Daily Citizen*, 21 November 1931
13. *The Cushing Daily Citizen*, 8 October 1939

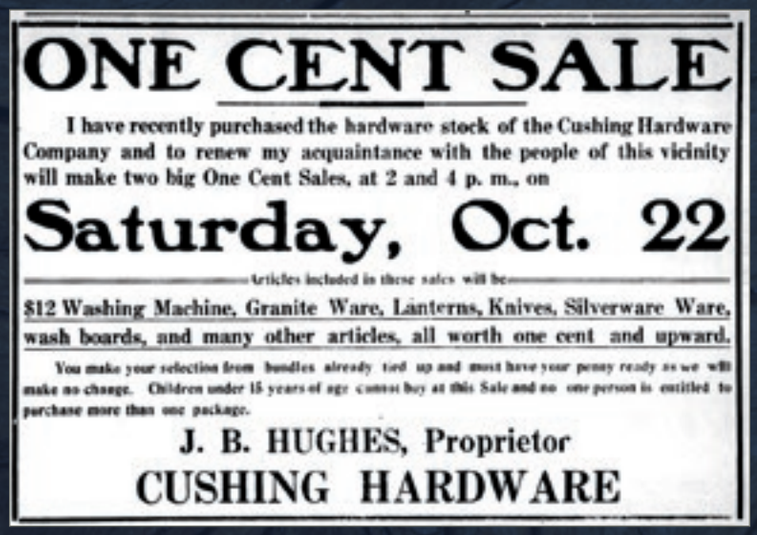
A year later, Jack moved into a larger building at 103 West Broadway, where he remodeled and expanded the sales floor in 1922.[10]

Gregarious and always smiling, Jack relished working directly with customers and kept himself up-to-date on all the latest products.[11] While the store continued to offer a full range of traditional hardware, it became just as well known for its wide selection of radios.[12]

"We believe we have the most unusual line of merchandise," Jack told the *Cushing Daily Citizen* in November 1931.

The store survived the depths of the Great Depression but finally closed with an "Everything Must Go" sale when Jack retired in October 1939.[13]

The Cushing Independent, Thursday, October 13 and 20, 1910.



ONE CENT SALE

I have recently purchased the hardware stock of the Cushing Hardware Company and to renew my acquaintance with the people of this vicinity will make two big One Cent Sales, at 2 and 4 p. m., on

Saturday, Oct. 22

Articles included in these sales will be

$12 Washing Machine, Granite Ware, Lanterns, Knives, Silverware Ware, wash boards, and many other articles, all worth one cent and upward.

You make your selection from bundles already tied up and must have your penny ready as we will make no change. Children under 15 years of age cannot buy at this Sale and no one person is entitled to purchase more than one package.

J. B. HUGHES, Proprietor

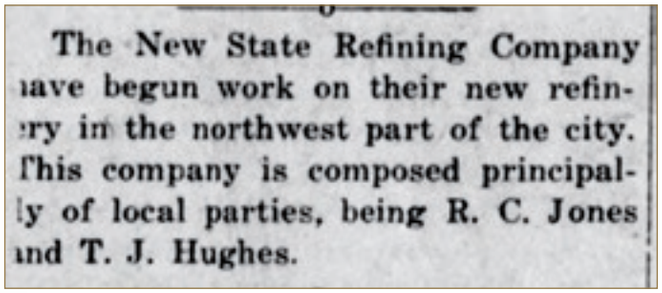
CUSHING HARDWARE

MONUMENTAL PROFIT

Before the Oil Boom, Cushing's main shopping district stood along the 100 block of West Broadway, part of the old South Addition that had pulled traffic away from Main Street in the early 1900s.[16] In January 1913, however, T.J. began construction on a new retail building on East Broadway, which had seen relatively sparse development until then.[17] Although, perhaps not coincidentally, the few businesses that had already opened on East Broadway included T.J.'s own Farmers State Bank.[18]

The Hughes Building at Broadway and Harrison Avenue filled up almost instantly with some of the most popular shops in town, including a trendy men's fashion store called The Hub.[19] Cushing had always been a farming community, where a man was more likely to wear dingy overalls than a tailored suit in the latest European style, but oil brought new wealth and a new type of customer. T.J.'s project, along with other retail developments that came soon afterward, pulled the commercial center of town toward the east.[20] By the summer of 1914, T.J. was working almost full-time in the real estate business with a partner, R.G. Boatright, who had come to Cushing several years earlier as a Santa Fe Railroad agent.[21]

That summer, T.J. also formed a separate partnership to begin working on one of his most lucrative investments, the New State Refinery.[22] Cushing already had five refineries but that still was not enough to keep up with the sheer volume of oil being produced



The New State Refining Company
ıave begun work on their new refin-
ry in the northwest part of the city.
This company is composed principal-
ly of local parties, being R. C. Jones
ınd T. J. Hughes.

The Cushing Citizen, Thursday, July 16, 1914

by the ever-expanding number of wells.[23] Cushing-Drumright had become the most productive oil field in the United States, generating more than 58,000 barrels a day in August 1914, and its output would nearly double by the end of the year.[24]

To finance the new refinery, built along the Santa Fe tracks in the northwest corner of the city, T.J. worked with R.C. Jones, who had come to Cushing in 1907 to buy a cotton gin.[25] By the time they went into business together, they were two of the richest men in town.[26] The refinery would make both of them a lot richer when they sold it in December 1915, only nine months after the plant went into production.[27]

The New State Refinery cost $50,000 to open.[28] T.J. and his partner sold it to the Illinois Oil Company for $500,000, a monumental profit that one Oklahoma newspaper described as "the biggest deal framed in this country in many a day."[29]

After the windfall, T.J. served on the board of directors for the Cushing Investment Company, one

Gusher in Cushing oil field, 1910s
Oklahoma Historical Society 1595340

of the town's largest developers.[30] And in February 1917, he partnered with R.C. Jones again to buy a controlling interest in Farmers National Bank, where T.J. became president.[31] A college dropout who had gone to work behind the counter of a small-town hardware store just to support his mother and brothers, T.J. had become a remarkably successful entrepreneur. By the time he reached his mid-forties, he controlled a complex web of business interests with investments in oil, real estate, and banking. But, as always, T.J. was still looking for new opportunities.

FROM OIL TO LUMBER

Oil fields of the 1920s demanded a tremendous amount of lumber—lumber to build oil derricks, platforms, storage sheds, and field offices. And, of course, as the nearby oil field expanded, Cushing continued to grow and needed more lumber for itself—lumber for new homes, new schools, new churches, and commercial projects. As T.J. already knew, money could be extracted from oil in more than one way.

The T.J. Hughes Lumber Company was created on February 5, 1925, with T.J. and his wife Clara both signing the incorporation documents.[32] Clara had always taken an active role in her husband's business pursuits, going back to the first year of their marriage, when she had helped run Hughes Brothers Hardware. She was no doubt involved in the decision to invest $25,000 in the new lumber business, which included building several storage sheds and new offices at the site of a former livery stable on the corner of Central Avenue and Cherry Street in Cushing.[33–35] Construction took only three months, and the first Hughes Lumber yard was open for business by mid-May.[36]

The new company promised "good service and fair dealing," harking back to the customer-first philosophy that had made Hughes Hardware successful.[37] T.J., however, continued to pursue other investments that demanded his attention.

"It wasn't his passion, necessarily. He was well diversified," says Robert Hughes, T.J.'s great-grandson who serves as president of Hughes Lumber today. T.J. was certainly passionate about work, about starting and growing new businesses, but not specifically about the lumber industry. That would come from a later generation of the Hughes family. Nonetheless, T.J. started something "pretty neat," Robert says.

"It may not have been his passion," Robert says, "but it became his legacy."

1. HFG
2. *Cushing Independent*, 19 November 1908
3. *Cushing Independent*, 19 November 1908
4. *Cushing Independent*, 19 November 1908
5. *Cushing Independent*, 19 November 1908
6. *The People's Press*, 19 November 1908
7. *Cushing Independent*, 19 November 1908
8. *Cushing Independent*, 8 September 1910
9. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Cushing-Drumright Field, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU008, accessed 24 August 2023
10. *Cushing Citizen*, 26 December 1912
11. *The Cushing Citizen*, 13 March 1913
12. *The Chandler News-Publicist*, 10 January 1913
13. *The Cushing Citizen*, 13 March 1913
14. *The Cushing Citizen*, 24 April 1913
15. *Cushing Citizen*, 28 August 1913
16. *The Cushing Citizen*, 7 September 1922
17. *Cushing Citizen*, 30 January 1913
18. *The Cushing Citizen*, 7 September 1922
19. *The Cushing Citizen*, 17 February 1916
20. *The Cushing Citizen*, 7 September 1922
21. *Cushing Independent*, 30 March 1907
22. *The Cushing Citizen*, 16 July 1914
23. *Cushing Citizen*, 11 June 1914
24. Wertz, Joe. "What the Glut? Why Cushing is Bursting and Texas is Waiting for Oil," State Impact, National Public Radio, 17 April 2012
25. *Cushing Independent*, 20 June 1907
26. *Cushing Citizen*, 11 June 1914
27. *The Muscatine Journal*, 15 December 1915
28. "Independent Refineries," Annual Reports of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Volume 2, 1916
29. *Yale Democrat*, 9 December 1915
30. *Cushing Citizen*, 8 April 1915
31. Cushing Independent, 2 February 1917
32. HFG
33. *American Lumberman*, 12 February 1925
34. *The Cushing Citizen*, 5 March 1925
35. *The Cushing Daily Citizen*, 4 December 1925
36. *The Cushing Citizen*, 14 May 1925
37. *The Cushing Citizen*, 5 March 1925

THE CUSHING OIL BOOM

Only two months after drilling began, work suddenly stopped and all the roughneck crews disappeared from Frank Wheeler's farm, about twelve miles east of Cushing.[1] Ripples of disappointment swept across the whole community. Cushing had seen other Oklahoma towns strike it rich virtually overnight: Tulsa in 1905, Kiefer in 1906, and Ponca City in 1911. In January 1912, when a wildcatter named Thomas B. Slick and his financial backer, C. B. Shaffer, began drilling on Wheeler's farm, Cushing thought its turn had come.[2]

The well reached a depth of 2,300 feet, but after drilling stopped in early March, rumors spread that it had proven to be a bust.[3]

"People were restless under the doubt," Cushing's local newspaper reported. "However, many still had faith that there was something there and unverified reports strengthened their faith."[4]

Those "unverified reports" included a widely circulated but never confirmed story that Slick had rented every available horse, mule, buggy, and motorcar in Cushing to stymie any efforts to get a closer look at what was happening at the Wheeler farm.[5] If a few residents did manage to reach the farm, they invariably ran into armed guards and barbed wire, which of course only seemed to confirm suspicions that the well had not been a bust after all.

The secret got out on March 14, 1912, when a banner headline in *The Daily Cushing Citizen* declared "No Longer Doubt–Absolute Certainty." The pause in drilling operations had been a ruse, giving Slick and Shaffer time to secure other oil leases before the price of land began to skyrocket. Not only had they found oil, they had brought in a gusher that could produce 400 barrels a day.[6]

Meanwhile, a second well east of Wheeler's farm confirmed that Cushing was sitting on top of a major oil field.[7] Actually, the town of Drumright would sit much closer to the new wells, but it was not founded until December 1912, after the discovery of oil.

Cushing, at the start of the Oil Boom, offered the nearest rail connections and the most developed commercial district in the vicinity.[8] Slick and Shaffer

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1. *The Daily Cushing Citizen*, 14 March 1912
2. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Cushing-Drumright Field, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU008, accessed 29 August, 2023
3. *The Daily Cushing Citizen*, 14 March 1912
4. *The Daily Cushing Citizen*, 14 March 1912
5. Tuttle, D. Ray. "100-year-old Wheeler No. 1 still producing Oklahoma crude," *The Journal Record*, 16 March 2012
6. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Cushing-Drumright Field, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU008, accessed 29 August, 2023
7. *The Daily Cushing Citizen*, 14 March 1912
8. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Cushing-Drumright Field, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU008, accessed 29 August, 2023
9. *The Daily Cushing Citizen*, 14 March 1912
10. *The Daily Cushing Citizen*, 14 March 1912
11. Tuttle, D. Ray. "100-year-old Wheeler No. 1 still producing Oklahoma crude," *The Journal Record*, 16 March 2012
12. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Cushing-Drumright Field, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU008, accessed 29 August, 2023
13. *The Cushing Citizen*, 26 December 1925
14. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Cushing-Drumright Field, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CU008, accessed 29 August, 2023
15. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Petroleum Industry, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=PE023, accessed 29 August 2023
16. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Petroleum Industry, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=PE023, accessed 29 August 2023

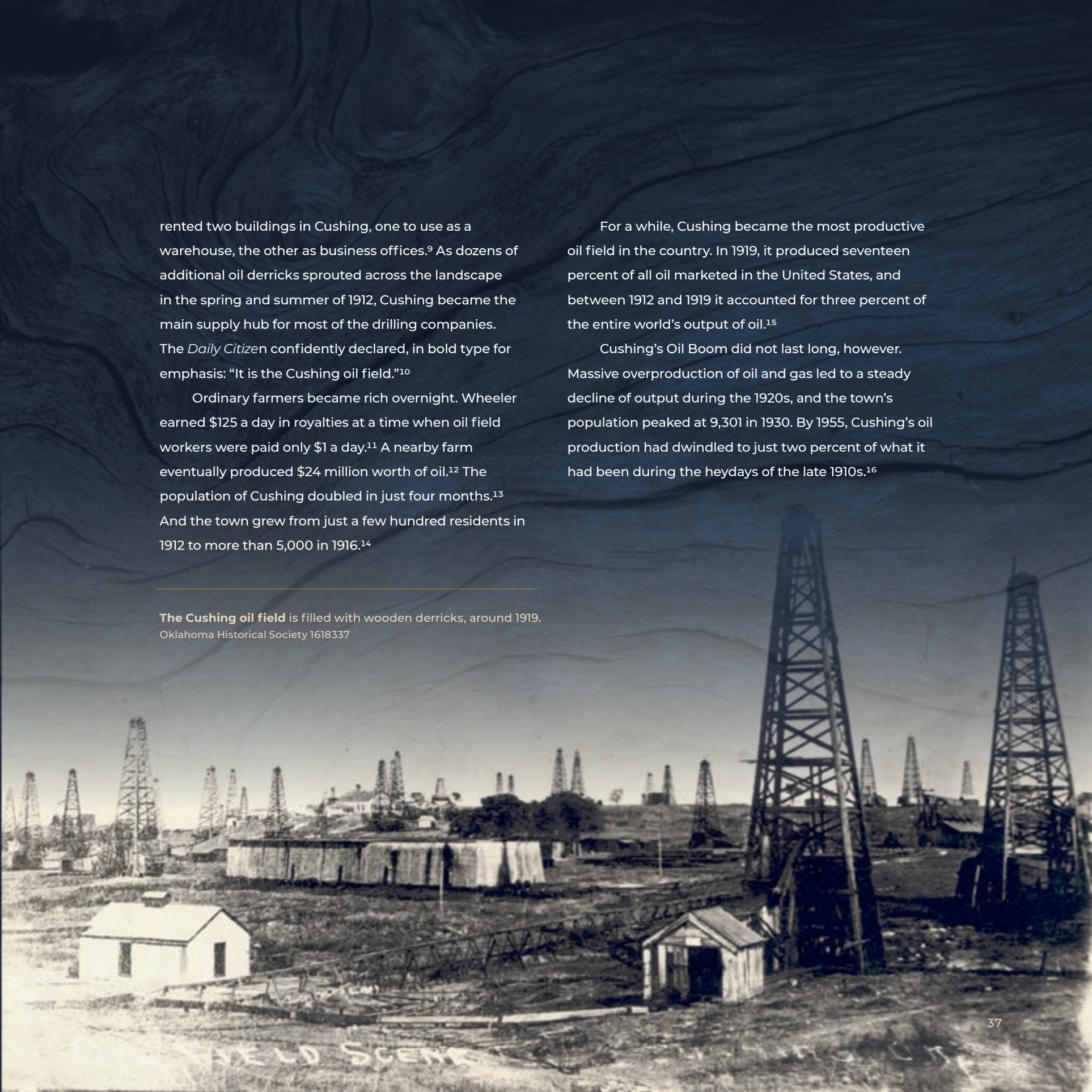
rented two buildings in Cushing, one to use as a warehouse, the other as business offices.[9] As dozens of additional oil derricks sprouted across the landscape in the spring and summer of 1912, Cushing became the main supply hub for most of the drilling companies. The *Daily Citize*n confidently declared, in bold type for emphasis: "It is the Cushing oil field."[10]

Ordinary farmers became rich overnight. Wheeler earned $125 a day in royalties at a time when oil field workers were paid only $1 a day.[11] A nearby farm eventually produced $24 million worth of oil.[12] The population of Cushing doubled in just four months.[13] And the town grew from just a few hundred residents in 1912 to more than 5,000 in 1916.[14]

For a while, Cushing became the most productive oil field in the country. In 1919, it produced seventeen percent of all oil marketed in the United States, and between 1912 and 1919 it accounted for three percent of the entire world's output of oil.[15]

Cushing's Oil Boom did not last long, however. Massive overproduction of oil and gas led to a steady decline of output during the 1920s, and the town's population peaked at 9,301 in 1930. By 1955, Cushing's oil production had dwindled to just two percent of what it had been during the heydays of the late 1910s.[16]

The Cushing oil field is filled with wooden derricks, around 1919.
Oklahoma Historical Society 1618337



The late '30s and early '40s brought expansion and prosperity to Hughes Lumber. The family continued their involvement with the Cushing community and invested in different ways like building new homes and serving in leadership roles.

General Air View of Cushing

Good Start Made In Home Building For Fall Season

E. C. Webb to Start New Home 833 East Moses Street; Hughes House Progresses

Good progress is being made upon construction of the Jack Hughes home being built upon the lots in the 900 block East Broadway which have been owned by Mr. and Mrs Hughes for some time.

The Hughes home has an inte esting and unusual floor plan. includes one large living-room, large bedroom, an unusually la sleeping porch, kitchen, dinette bath. It features large rooms ra than number. Ernest Mill building this house.

Announcement of the E. mar home on Broadway is t larger residence in the $10.0 to be built here in some ti

The Harley D. Strong new nearing completion an ready for occupancy soo several of the half dozen es now under const city.

T. J. Hughes, Jr. Starting Work On Modern Home

Lumberman is Building Modified Colonial, Seven Room Dwelling

Excavation has been made and work begun on a new two-story modernized colonial home for Mr. and Mrs. T. J. Hughes, Jr., to be built at the intersection of Fourth street and Highland avenue. Mr. Hughes is with the Hughes lumber company.

The sit includes four lots and the plans for the attractive seven-room dwelling with three baths, double garage and screened-in porch, indicate that it is to be one of the outstanding new homes to be built in 1941 in Cushing.

Corner Windows

The architectural design follows the lines of colonial except for the modern corner windows and the recessed doorway. The exterior will be painted white. It is to have a north

J. Hughes, Jr. uys Lumber Yard n Bartlesville

T. J. Hughes, Jr. concluded ransaction last week in Bartle ville for the purchase of the Cla Lumber Company. The yard invoiced and T. J. Hughes, representing the new owner assumed charge.

W. E. Blackburn who has manager of the Clark yard number of years past will c ue as manager under the ownership. It will be opera a branch yard, making th to be so operated out of C The other yards are at right, Hydro, Weatherf Cushing.

T. J. Hughes Buys Two Lumber Yards In Custer County

Announcement is made of the completion of a deal by T. J. Hughes for the purchase of two lumber yards in the western part of the state at Weatherford and Hydro, Okla., in Custer county.

The yards were the property of the Albert Munn estate which owned seven lumber yards known as The Standard Yards. T. J. Hughes, jr., has been in Weatherford and Hydro all this week invoicing the stock of the two yards.

Within the last year, T. J. Hughes also bought a yard in Drumright. He now owns, with the last two purchased, four yards. They are to be operated by the T. J. Hughes Lumber company of this city.

Hughes Lumber's locations in Oklahoma at the end of 1943.

CHAPTER 04

A MORE COMFORTABLE PLACE TO LIVE

On the first Wednesday evening of September 1925, instead of carrying supplies, several delivery trucks left Hughes Lumber loaded with noisy teenagers.[1] About fifty young people rumbled into the countryside for a picnic and wiener roast hosted by the always affable and gregarious Thomas Jefferson Hughes Jr. He was not yet seventeen years old but T.J. Jr. was already a well-known local socialite, frequently mentioned in Cushing's daily newspaper for attending this or that event or welcoming some notable guests to his parents' home. This outing to the countryside, however, became a bittersweet occasion, a going-away party for him and several of his friends who would be attending various schools across the country to that autumn.

T.J. Jr. went to the New Mexico Military Academy before attending Washington and Lee University in Virginia, where he was due to graduate in the spring of 1929.[38] Not long after the start of the fall semester in 1928, or what should have been the beginning of his senior year, T.J. Jr. abruptly withdrew from classes and returned home to Cushing. His father, at age fifty-four, had become seriously ill.[39] And while T.J. Sr. would fully recover and live another two decades, the concern over his health prompted the younger Hughes to cut short his college career to help his father run the family business. He started working at Hughes Lumber in September 1928.[2]

A brand-new venture when T.J. Jr. left town to go to the military academy, Hughes Lumber had doubled in size by the time he came back to Oklahoma.[3] The warehouses and yards measured 100 by 140 feet, twice their original footprint. The inventory included every imaginable type of building material at a wide range of prices, from least expensive to the very finest quality.

A building boom had helped fuel the company's growth in the late 1920s, with Hughes Lumber providing materials for some of the most notable Cushing landmarks of the era. Hughes helped build the Hotel Cushing, Dunkin Theater, the Jeske Building and, of course, the T.J. Hughes Building at the corner of Noble and Broadway, where notable tenants included the Gayley-Buick car dealership.[4]

Homebuilders, however, provided the bulk of customers for Hughes, and the company began marketing itself as "The Home Folks."[5] The slogan had a double meaning, of course: The "home folks" provided the best materials for building a home but were also the familiar locally owned company that called Cushing home.

With the lumber company and other investments paying off handsomely in the spring of 1929, T.J. Sr. built a new house for himself on Cushing's East Moses Street and owned a farm outside of town, where the family liked to entertain.[6] July Fourth celebrations at the farm that year included an outdoor steak fry for nearly thirty guests, who listened to music on portable phonographs—expensive high-tech gadgets in small-town Oklahoma at the time—before heading into town that evening for a dance.[7]

MAKING NEW FRIENDS

Elizabeth Hatfield loved to dance and play bridge. As a vivacious young woman in the late 1920s, she developed an active social life in Cushing despite the fact that she did not even live there.[9] Elizabeth had spent most of her childhood in Pawhuska, a town roughly the size of Cushing in the rolling hills of Osage County near the Kansas border. Her parents sent her to high school in Wichita, Kansas, where she could get a more cosmopolitan education with classes that included aesthetic dancing and expression.[10, 11] After that, she attended Lindenwood College in St. Charles, Missouri, before spending a year at the University of Oklahoma—none of which made it likely that Elizabeth would ever cross paths with the Hughes family.[12]

Her aunt and uncle, however, lived in Cushing and had two daughters close to Elizabeth's age. Elizabeth and her mother would visit for weeks at a time, especially after her father's tragic death in a car accident in late 1928.[13] Elizabeth was twenty-four years old and her circle of close friends in Cushing offered a welcomed distraction during the long months of mourning. Soon, however, Elizabeth found an even better reason to spend time in Cushing. Her cousin Edwina Blank hosted

Elizabeth Hatfield, 1929. Photo from Elizabeth and T.J. Jr.'s wedding announcement in *The Wichita Eagle*, December 11.

a group of friends for a night of bridge and dancing not long after New Year's 1929.[14] The guests included twenty-year-old T.J. Jr.

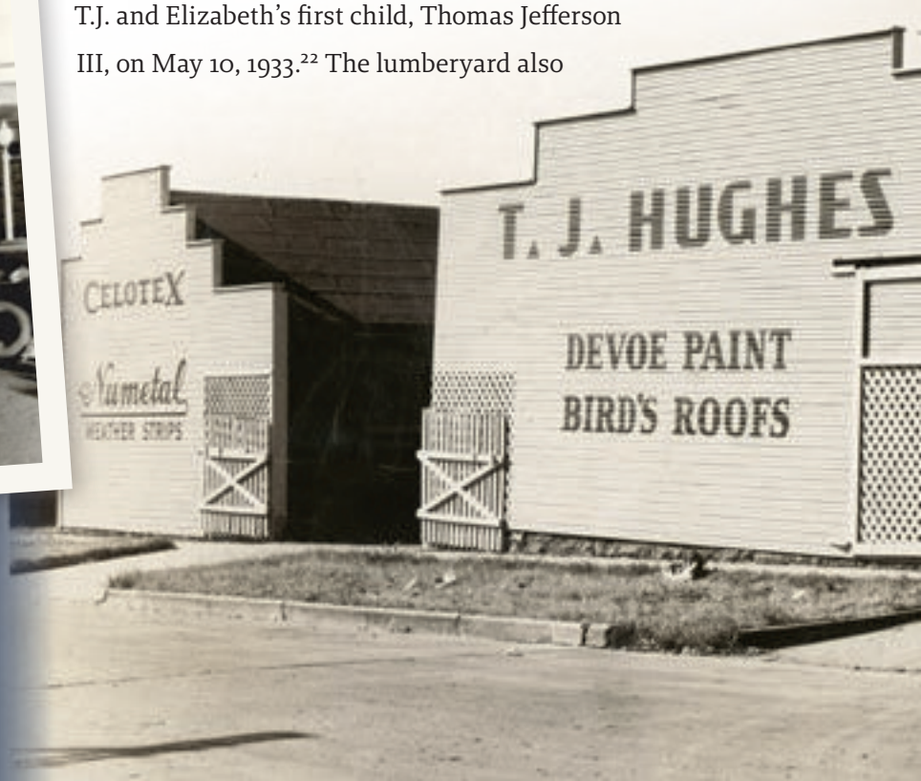
They had probably met each other before. Two people who so relished making new friends were destined to meet eventually in such a small town. No one seemed surprised that Elizabeth and T.J. hit it off. Both were friendly and gregarious, the life of every party. They were officially a couple by the middle of January 1929, when Elizabeth's aunt and uncle drove them to Oklahoma City to see a picture show.[15]

The romance continued to blossom with T.J. and Elizabeth getting engaged in mid-December 1929, then marrying a month later.[16, 17] If anything, marriage only enhanced their social lives. The couple liked to entertain and often welcomed guests from out of town, sometimes even organizing large events, such as a banquet for the Kappa Alpha Phi fraternity.[18] Cushing's local newspaper, the *Daily Citizen*, described Elizabeth as "one of the younger matrons" of the community and lightheartedly teased T.J. for gaining weight from her excellent cooking.[19] He looked "considerably like a walking testimonial of someone's culinary art," it said. The newspaper even published Elizabeth's Spanish omelet recipe, calling it one of Cushing's favorite dishes.

In another sign of T.J.'s popularity, not only in Cushing but also in business circles across Oklahoma, he became state director of the Jaycees in the spring of 1932, at age twenty-three.[20] Meanwhile, he dabbled in the oil business. But T.J. seemed to have a special passion for Hughes Lumber and worked tirelessly to learn all he could about the industry.[21]

NEWLY MODERNIZED

The Hughes family expanded with the birth of T.J. and Elizabeth's first child, Thomas Jefferson III, on May 10, 1933.[22] The lumberyard also



right: Original Cushing, Oklahoma, Store, 1936

above: Looking east on Broadway, Cushing, Oklahoma, 1939

expanded that spring with new construction and an extensive remodeling.[23] Changes included moving the company offices to the back of the facility, creating a larger showroom up front. Open shelves replaced enclosed glass cases to offer more convenient access to merchandise. Freshly painted light-green walls, trimmed in white, established a bright, homey atmosphere. Hughes Lumber, after the renovation, looked more like a retail store and less like a traditional lumberyard.

T.J. Sr., still firmly in charge of the company despite T.J. Jr.'s growing role, wanted to focus on individual homeowners instead of catering to builders and contractors[24] because home construction had slowed to a trickle during the Great Depression.

"Needless to say, we have done away with the old stove and chairs for loafers," T.J. Sr. told *American Lumberman* magazine, "and are endeavoring to conduct our business on the same principles that any other modern merchant would use."[25]

While describing the changes at Hughes, the magazine suggested a motive for T.J. Sr. making a significant investment in the business while the national economy remained in such poor condition.

"A lumberyard newly modernized and repainted is a standing invitation to owners of old homes and other buildings to give similar attention to them," the magazine wrote. "If the lumber dealer, who sells modernizing materials and paints, does not use some of them on his own buildings . . . he cannot with very good grace tell other people that they ought to modernize and brighten up their buildings."

I will do all I can to make this a better city and a more comfortable place to live. — T.J. HUGHES JR.

After making improvements at Hughes Lumber, T.J. Sr. plunged into a thorough renovation of the Hughes Building, a retail-office development that remained one of his biggest investments and one of Cushing's most prominent landmarks.[26] He poured money into the building not in spite of the Great Depression, T.J. Sr. told the *Cushing Daily Citizen*, but because of it.

"The remodeling of the Hughes Building came at a time when work for local labor was most needed," he said, "and at a time when the government was seriously requesting that its people express their confidence by doing things."

TAKING CHARGE

With a vacant seat on the city commission in early February 1937, the remaining four commissioners voted unanimously to appoint T.J. Jr. to the seat, a sign of his growing prominence in Cushing's business community despite being only twenty-eight years old. "I will do all I can to make this a better city and a more comfortable place to live," T.J. Jr. told the commission.[27] He would serve on the board until 1941.[28] In the meantime, however, he continued taking on more responsibilities at Hughes Lumber and, for the first time, the company would begin growing beyond Cushing.[29]

Two weeks after T.J. Jr. joined the city commission, Hughes Lumber announced plans to open a location in Drumright, about nine miles east of Cushing. The new yard opened March 1, 1937, in the 400 block of East Broadway, taking over a site formerly occupied by Pickering Lumber.[30]

Pages from the T.J. Hughes Lumber Co. price list, 1936

T.J. Hughes's business card, 1936

A year later, in March 1938, Hughes finished negotiations to buy two more lumberyards this time moving to the western part of the state in Weatherford and Hydro, more than a hundred miles from Cushing.[31] The locations had been part of a large chain of lumber retailers known as The Standard Yards, and news coverage made it clear that T.J. Sr. was the one who sealed the deal. The publicity, however, also made a point of mentioning that T.J. Jr., not his father, had traveled to western Oklahoma to inventory the stock at the two lumberyards and oversee the transition to Hughes management.[32]

T.J. Sr. was gradually entrusting his son with more and more responsibility. As T.J. Jr.'s role at the company grew, so did his income. T.J. and Elizabeth began building an impressive new house for themselves in September 1941.[33] Only eight months later, in May 1942, they hosted an art show for the local Hypatia Club, giving Cushing socialites their first chance to see inside the new home.[34] The exterior offered a modern interpretation of the traditional Colonial style, according to a newspaper's description. The interior, however, made an "unusual and artistic" impression. The living room featured a mauve, burgundy, and blue color scheme with flowered drapes and muted orchid walls, but guests seemed most impressed by the plate-glass mirrors above the mantel. The den included pine paneling while the dining-room was decorated with delft blue. "Comments were many upon the discriminating taste this house displays," the *Cushing Daily Citizen* noted.[35]

A year later, in May 1943, T.J. drove nearly 100 miles late at night in the pouring rain to attend an urgent business meeting in Bartlesville and was stranded there for several days after the roads out of town flooded.[36] The reason for his trip remained a secret until T.J. finally made it home and announced that he had bought the Clark Lumber Company in Bartlesville, giving Hughes Lumber its fifth location in the state.[37] This time, however, T.J. had not gone to the new location merely to oversee the property's transition to Hughes ownership. He negotiated the deal from beginning to end while T.J. Sr. played no part in it, at least not publicly. A new generation had taken charge.

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2. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 4 September 1928
3. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 30 November 1928
4. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 30 November 1928
5. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 9 April 1929
6. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 28 March 1929
7. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 5 July 1929
8. Richardson, Gary; Komai, Alejandro; Gou, Michael; and Park, Daniel, "Stock Market Crash of 1929," Economic Research, November 2013.
9. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 16 December 1929
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11. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 16 December 1929
12. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 16 December 1929
13. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 26 June 1928
14. Renoff, Greg. Elizabeth Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
15. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 14 January 1929
16. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 16 December 1929
17. HFG
18. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 4 February 1930
19. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 24 July 1931
20. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 20 May 1932
21. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 16 December 1929
22. HFG
23. *American Lumberman*, 4 March 1933
24. *American Lumberman*, 4 March 1933
25. *American Lumberman*, 4 March 1933
26. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 17 December 1933
27. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 2 February 1937
28. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 2 April 1941
29. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 18 February 1937
30. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 18 February 1937
31. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 18 March 1938
32. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 18 March 1938
33. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 29 September 1941
34. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 3 May 1942
35. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 3 May 1942
36. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 21 May 1943
37. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 25 May 1943
38. 1927 Washing and Lee yearbook
39. Robert Hughes correspondence, 17 October 2023

Life In South Pacific Contrasted With Here

★★★★ ★ ★ ★ ★★★★ ★★★★

Captain Hugh Hughes Tells of 'More Blood and More Hardships'

BEFORE I get into the meaty part of this letter I shall make apologies (which is the wrong way to start a letter) for this typewriter. It has been over seas, in all manner of climates, has had all types of mistreatments and countless persons have ruined the 'Cushion touch' that was its selling point. Tuesday, day before yesterday when we cur and don't be too critical of my own, for like the mahchine, I've been over here 18 months myself.

The last time that the metropolis of Cushing was blessed with my presence was the last day of June, 1942. At that time sugar was the only thing rationed, gasoline was plentiful—people were still eating meat, my still in the air, the pleasant, pleasing hum of cordiality and good neighborism so familiar to the place. The war wouldn't last long—we'd lick them in a year and life would go on as usual—that was the Cushing I left on that June morning on my way to a Fort of Embarkation.

AFTER a very tedious and tiring boat trip, I landed at my first of many places." That was August 7th—remember the day the Marines made a landing 600 miles to the north of me that first few days and followed were dark No troops. we don't understand yet. Supplies began coming in, we received magazines that weren't four or five months old and then came the Memorial day when the first P-38 landed. That one airplane could have knocked tojo out of the sky as far as we were concerned. Then the news came of the North African Invasion and then we knew why we hadn't been getting supplies and it was alright. Shortly after we got a break and things began rolling our way again. Then I moved on—the offensive in this theater was going to begin. I had a month of rest on the mainland".

WHEN I went north,—took part combat operation. got out of me. lived torrential

War With Japan in Pacific Remains Limited Offensive

Invasion of New Britain by MacArthur Is Firs Operation Leading to Massive Strokes

By HAROLD STREETER
Associated Press War

Where ARE THE Yanks?

NEW BRITAIN—TYPICAL OF THE SOUTH SEAS

NEW BRITAIN. 300-mile crescent island lying northeast from New Guinea's Huon Peninsula, was shaped by volcanic action, has fuming craters, frequent earth tremors. Chief town is heavily-bombed Rabaul, key base in the South Pacific from September, 1942, until March, 1944. Yanks seized their first positions on New Britain at Arawe and Cape Gloucester in December, 1943.

Soldiers of the 112th Cavalry invade Arawe on the coast of New Britain, 1943.

CHAPTER 05

A LOT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

News reached Cushing in mid-December 1943 that U.S. Army troops had landed on the Japanese-occupied island of New Britain in the South Pacific. T.J. Sr. and Clara Hughes held out hope that their youngest son, Hugh, had somehow avoided being sent to the battle. But his regiment, the 112th Cavalry, had gone ashore and news bulletins specifically mentioned a Lt. Hughes.[1]

The first wave of amphibious landing craft hit the beaches just after dawn on December 15 and First Lt. Hugh Hughes led a platoon across the sand toward the limestone cliffs of Arawe, a boot-shaped peninsula on the south coast of the island.[2, 3] New Britain, about the size of Massachusetts, sits fifty miles east of mainland New Guinea. During World War II,

the U.S. military wanted to take control of the west end of the island to secure shipping lanes in the Dampier Strait. Invading Arawe, further east, was supposed to be a mere distraction to lure Japanese forces away from the real objective.[4]

U.S. Navy destroyers spent the previous night firing more than 1,800 rounds of artillery at the peninsula, and B-25 bombers pounded Japanese positions at daybreak. At first, Hughes's platoon and the rest of the regiment encountered little resistance as they moved inland through a gap in the cliffs. Then Japanese troops, hiding among the trees of a sprawling coconut plantation, launched a dogged counterattack. After forty-seven consecutive days of fierce combat for the 112th Cavalry the area was finally secure.[5] And Lt. Hughes had been promoted to captain.

"Neither I nor anyone else can describe the things we have gone through," Capt. Hughes wrote in a letter to his hometown newspaper after the battle.[6] The *Cushing Daily Citizen* published it on the front page.

"I am a troop commander and I'm charged with a lot of responsibilities," Hugh continued. "It's not easy to see men you have commanded for over a year carried away to be buried and still have to go on with the rest and do the job. It's hard to keep the morale of the men from slipping when you have nothing to offer them but more blood and more hardships."

A SENSE OF DUTY

Eleven years younger than his brother, Hugh was a late-in-life baby for T.J. Sr. and Clara. He seemed less social than T.J. Jr. but bore a quiet confidence that made him a natural leader even as a teenager. Like his older brother, Hugh attended public schools in Cushing until ninth grade, when he left home in 1935 to enroll at the New Mexico Military Institute.[7]

He excelled immediately. The military school named him "Most Progressive New Cadet" his very first year. When he graduated in 1937, Hugh received a commission in the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant in the officers' reserve corps. Despite his aptitude for the military, however, Hugh once again followed in his older brother's footsteps and attended Washington and Lee University before transferring to the University of Oklahoma. He seemed likely to follow T.J. Jr. straight to Hughes Lumber if the war had not interrupted his college career.[8]

Hugh was twenty-two years old when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in early December 1941. He had just finished his first semester at OU and, after a lavish wedding at First Presbyterian Church, had been married for less than two months to a Cushing High School teacher named Caroline Erickson. Nonetheless, as a member of the Reserve Corps, Hugh realized he would be among the first men called to active duty. He immediately began packing and withdrew from school.[9]

After a short stay at Fort Riley in Kansas, Hugh made one last visit home and left Cushing on June 30, 1942.[10] His wife and parents would not see him again

MONDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1941

SOCIETY

News of Society Should Be Phoned to The Daily Citizen Before 11 o'clock in the Morning. Phone 334

Miss Erickson, Lieutenant Hughes To Wed October 19

Wedding Will Take Place At Two O'clock At First Presbyterian Church; Bride-elect Selects Her Wedding Attendants

Newlyweds. Hugh Hughes and his wife Caroline. *right: The Cushing Daily Citizen*, October 6, 1941.

for two years and then only on a flickering screen at Cushing's Dunkin Theater. A packed crowd came in July 1944 to watch a documentary film, "Attack! The Battle of New Britain."[11] If they did not glance away at the wrong moment, moviegoers caught a brief glimpse of Hugh standing on a South Pacific beach with a group of other officers listening to the legendary Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

Attack! The Battle of New Britain is a documentary film produced by the U.S. military and released in June 1944. It details the New Britain campaign, which was part of the New Guinea and Solomon Islands campaigns during World War II. The film featured General Douglas MacArthur and the 112th Cavalry, among other troops.

Three months later, in October 1944, Gen. MacArthur fulfilled his famous promise to the Philippines "I shall return!"—by wading ashore at Leyte Gulf. Footage of MacArthur walking knee-deep in the surf became one of the most iconic images of the Pacific war, but Capt. Hughes made no appearance in that film. He was at Leyte that day, however, and endured two months of grueling combat during the U.S. invasion of the Philippines.[12]

His sensitive nature revealed itself in a letter home to his wife and mother, asking them to collect "little dresses and pants," preferably "white or summer clothes," that he could give to the desperately poor children he saw at Leyte. "Send them to me," Hugh wrote, "and I'll take a picture and send you one."

His family finally got to see Hugh in-person again

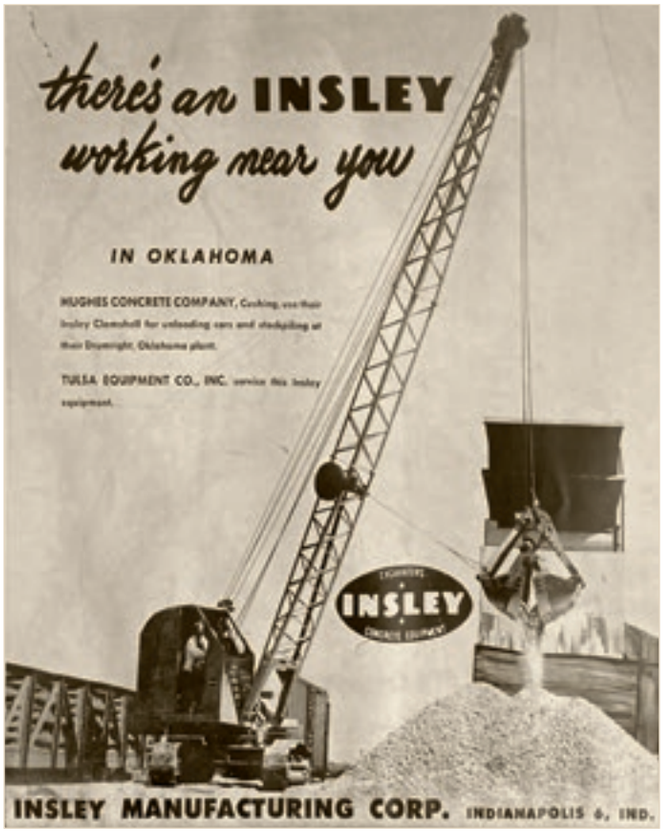
in February 1945, when the Army sent him back to Cushing to recuperate from malaria.[13] He looked thin and frail.[14] His hair had started turning gray, even though he was still in his mid-twenties.[15] He showed little interest in talking about his experiences in the South Pacific. The people of Cushing greeted him as a hero, but Hugh had fought for his country out of

The people of Cushing greeted him as a hero, but Hugh had fought for his country out of a profound sense of duty. He felt sickened by those who thought the war was glorious.

profound sense of duty. He felt sickened by those who thought the war was glorious.[16]

Hugh left active duty in November 1945, two months after Japan surrendered. After some well-deserved time off, he went to work at Hughes Lumber in January 1946.[17] His brother had gradually assumed more and more responsibility from their father, and, by the end of the war, T.J. Jr. was fully in charge of day-to-day operations at the company. Hugh, however, did not want to spend the rest of his civilian career serving under his brother. Four years in the Army had left him accustomed to being in command himself.[18]

T.J. Sr. (age 71) and Clara Hughes (age 60) in 1944.



Expanding business. This Insley Manufacturing advertisement features Hughes Concrete Company in Cushing.

By the summer of 1946, Hughes Lumber had begun building a $30,000 ready-mix concrete plant on West Cherry Street, adjoining the Santa Fe Railway tracks in Cushing. The plant initially operated as a division of the lumber company, but the T. J. Hughes Concrete Company became a semi-independent subsidiary on July 1, 1948.[19] Hugh, just twenty-nine years old, took charge.

T.J. Sr., now in his mid-seventies, was doing for his sons what he had done earlier in life for his brothers. He set them up in business, taught them how to succeed, then watched with pride as they flourished on their own.

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2. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 13 February 1944
3. Shaw, Henry I.; Douglas T. Kane: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II, Volume II: Isolation of Rabaul. Historical Branch, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C. Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps. 1963
4. Rickard, J: Battle of Arawe, 15 December 1943-16 January 1944. historyofwar.org. 15 April 2015
5. Rickard, J: Battle of Arawe, 15 December 1943-16 January 1944. historyofwar.org. 15 April 2015
6. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 13 February 1944
7. Renoff, Greg: Hugh Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
8. Renoff, Greg: Hugh Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
9. Renoff, Greg: Hugh Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
10. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 13 February 1944
11. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 11 July 1944
12. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 17 December 1944
13. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 9 February 1945
14. Renoff, Greg: Hugh Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
15. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 13 February 1944
16. Renoff, Greg: Hugh Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
17. *Daily Oklahoman*, 28 August 1960
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19. HLR

THE DUST BOWL

The first wave of finely ground dust descended like a gritty fog and swept across town shortly after 3:30 p.m. on April 10, 1935. Cushing, like the rest of central and western Oklahoma, had seen several dust storms in recent years, and, especially, that spring. But not like this one.[1]

Leafy green trees turned gray. Darkness fell hours before sunset. And the dust kept falling, wave after wave, through the night. Residents slept with their windows closed, unusual in such warm weather, but still woke up covered in grime. Residents could write with their fingertips on tabletops that had been spotless the day before.[2]

The Panhandle and northwestern Oklahoma suffered the most during the Dust Bowl, but the devastation affected the entire state. The Joad family came from Sallisaw in far eastern Oklahoma in The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck's iconic novel about the plight of sharecroppers during the Dust Bowl. Steinbeck could have just as easily put the Joads in Cushing, roughly halfway between Tulsa and Oklahoma City in the central part of the state.

The mechanization of farming in the early twentieth century had helped farmers turn millions of acres of prairie into newly plowed fields. When a severe drought hit the southern Great Plains in the early 1930s, however, crops withered and the topsoil blew away with the inevitable high winds that sweep across the region. Dust storms peaked in the spring of 1936 but continued sporadically until 1939.[3] By then, thousands of farms in Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas, and Colorado had been virtually stripped of topsoil. Other farms faced the opposite problem—newly planted crops choked under thick layers of freshly deposited dust.[4]

Magnifying the economic damage, the Dust Bowl coincided with the depths of the Great Depression. Oklahoma's unemployment rate approached forty percent in the winter of 1932–33 and farming revenue fell sixty-four percent.[5] Nearly one in five rural families left the state.

Cushing's population peaked at 9,301 in 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression, and lost sixteen percent of its residents over the next several years.[6] Hughes Lumber, however, played a role in keeping Cushing from shrinking even further. In March 1935, the company supervised the town's first construction project under the federal government's Better Housing Program, part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agenda.[7]

Property values had dropped by one-third nationwide and half of the country's mortgages were in default when the Better Housing Program began offering loan guarantees to revive the homebuilding industry.[8] The company's first Better Housing project created eight full-time jobs in Cushing, and Hughes Lumber continued to participate in the program for several years, giving the local economy a much-needed boost.[9] In May 1938, T. J. Hughes Jr. was even appointed to a local Better Housing committee to help plan construction of moderately priced homes for low-income families.

1. Cushing Citizen, 11 April 1935
2. Cushing Citizen, 11 April 1935
3. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Great Depression. Oklahoma Historical Society https://www.okhistory.org/learn/depression2#:~:text=People%20were%20desperate.,hit%20hardest%20by%20the%20drought
4. Cushing Daily Citizen, 19 April 1933
5. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Great Depression. Oklahoma Historical Society https://www.okhistory.org/learn/depression2#:~:text=People%20were%20desperate.,hit%20hardest%20by%20the%20drought
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7. Cushing Daily Citizen, 29 March 1935
8. Crawley, Jasmine Crawley; Casey Fonville; Charkira Langford; and Elena Botello: "The Great Depression and New Deal," Old Dominion University, March 2019. https://sites.wp.odu.edu/great-depression/2019/03/06/national-housing-act-1934/
9. Cushing Daily Citizen, 29 March 1935

Dust storm damage in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936
Library of Congress; Rothstein, Arthur; 2017760345

T.J. Hughes Jr.

CHAPTER 06

CONSERVATISM, AS WELL AS PROGRESSIVE THINKING

A single photograph, a large portrait of T.J. Hughes Sr. in a heavy wood frame, decorated the otherwise plain walls of the new Hughes Lumber corporate office that opened in April 1954.[1] The company's founder had died four years earlier on February 17, 1950, at the age of seventy-six.[2] While he had been involved in hardware, banking, oil, and real estate development, the first line of his obituary mentioned only lumber. The photo on the wall reminded everyone that T.J. Sr. and his ideals remained very much a part of the family business. Hughes Lumber had become T.J. Sr.'s biggest legacy, and his portrait served as a sort of memorial to him. The office itself, however, was a testament to the next generation.

T.J. Jr. had gradually assumed control of day-to-day operations during the war years and officially became president after his father's death. More than just taking over the company, he embraced the role of family patriarch and worked tirelessly to grow Hughes Lumber because he believed that what was good for the business was good for his loved ones.[3] His brother Hugh served as vice president and secretary while their mother remained a board member, deeply involved in business decisions, if only behind the scenes.[4]

A post-war building boom was propelling rapid growth in the lumber industry nationwide. Housing starts in the United States went from 114,000 in 1944 to an all-time high of 1.7 million in 1950, helping lumber sales more than double.[5] Cushing, after shrinking during the Great Depression, saw a growth spurt in the decade after World War II and needed hundreds of new homes.[6] Hughes Lumber was racing to keep up with demand.

In April 1954, the company opened a new 7,000-square-foot store at 209 W. Broadway, around the corner and half a block west of its old location at 117 S. Central, in the heart of Cushing's main commercial district.[7, 8] The new location quadrupled the store's size, and T.J. insisted on giving the building a distinctly modern look. Concrete block construction, adorned with rough-textured bricks and horizontal windows, created a streamlined appearance and contrasted sharply with the more traditional-looking shops along the street.

Inside, wide aisles, uncluttered shelves and bright lighting made the sales floor seem even larger than it was. During the housing slump of the Great Depression, Hughes Lumber had begun to cater more to individual home-improvement shoppers rather than to high-volume contractors. Now, even with a housing boom bringing more business

Hughes Opens $150,000 Building Saturday

Lumber Firm Housed In New Modern Quarters

Public Invited To View Store

T.J. HUGHES LUMBER CO.

A New Modernistic Face on Broadway

One Picture, A Photograph

from contractors again, the new store aimed mainly to impress do-it-yourselfers.

"Such mundane items as hammers, saws, levels, and hand tools look almost glamorous," the *Cushing Daily Citizen* reported, adding that the store had been laid out so intuitively that customers could easily find whatever they wanted even if they had never been there before.[9]

T.J.'s executive office included a bare concrete wall stained magenta red while the other three walls were covered with wood paneling, creating a bold contrast between modern and traditional elements. His desk followed the same design philosophy—a sleek contemporary shape built from a very traditional shade of walnut. Guests sat in an Eames chair, an icon of mid-century modern style. The overall effect of the interior design seemed "indicative of conservatism as well as progressive thinking," according to the *Cushing Daily Citizen*.[10]

Balancing the old with the new, the space reflected T.J.'s approach to management. He sought to grow and modernize the company while honoring and preserving its pioneer roots. Proud to be part of Cushing's history, Hughes Lumber promoted the grand opening of the new store as the company's fiftieth-anniversary celebration.[11]

Technically, the business was not even close to being that old. Hughes Lumber was incorporated on February 5, 1925. The family, however, considered the lumber company to be a continuation of the hardware store that

Balancing the old with the new, the space reflected T.J.'s approach to management. He sought to grow and modernize the company while honoring and preserving its pioneer roots.

Oklahoma Lumbermen's Association (OLA)
The OLA was established in 1947 to serve independent lumber and building material suppliers in Oklahoma. T.J. Hughes Jr. served as president in 1956. His grandson, Robert Hughes, would carry on the legacy as president in 2003. In 2024, OLA merged with Construction Suppliers Association and no longer exists.

T.J. Sr. and his brother Jack Hughes opened together in 1902. By that reckoning, the golden jubilee actually came a couple of years late. Of course, the anniversary was not meant to be literal. The new store's grand opening became a symbolic celebration of a hugely successful and now multigenerational effort. Hughes Hardware had started as a small operation in a ramshackle building with only four employees, including Jack and T.J. Sr. themselves. By the mid-1950s, Hughes Lumber counted twenty-eight staff members and had expanded beyond Cushing with locations in Fairfax, Bartlesville, and Drumright.[12]

The *Cushing Daily Citizen* described the company as not only one of the oldest but also "one of the city's most progressive industries."[13] The new store was the company's way of declaring that it was only getting started.

'JUST LOOK AROUND'

While Hughes Lumber continued to grow in the 1950s, Hughes Hardware made a brief comeback as well. The reincarnated store, however, opened in Tulsa instead of in Cushing, and it had a slightly longer name—Hughes Hardware and Building Supplies. A new concept for the company, the store stocked more lumber than a typical hardware store but offered more hardware than most lumberyards, making it a sort of hybrid.[14]

The store opened January 15, 1958, in the brand-new Northland shopping center near 36th Street North and Hartford Avenue, close to new suburban housing developments.[15] Northland was Tulsa's largest retail center at the time, with more than five acres of floor space under one roof and a parking lot big enough for 1,000 cars.

The Hughes brand was new to Tulsa, but at Northland the store would sit alongside some of the

T.J. Jr. (fifth from the right) poses for a picture in 1960 with the other past presidents of the Oklahoma Lumbermen's Association.

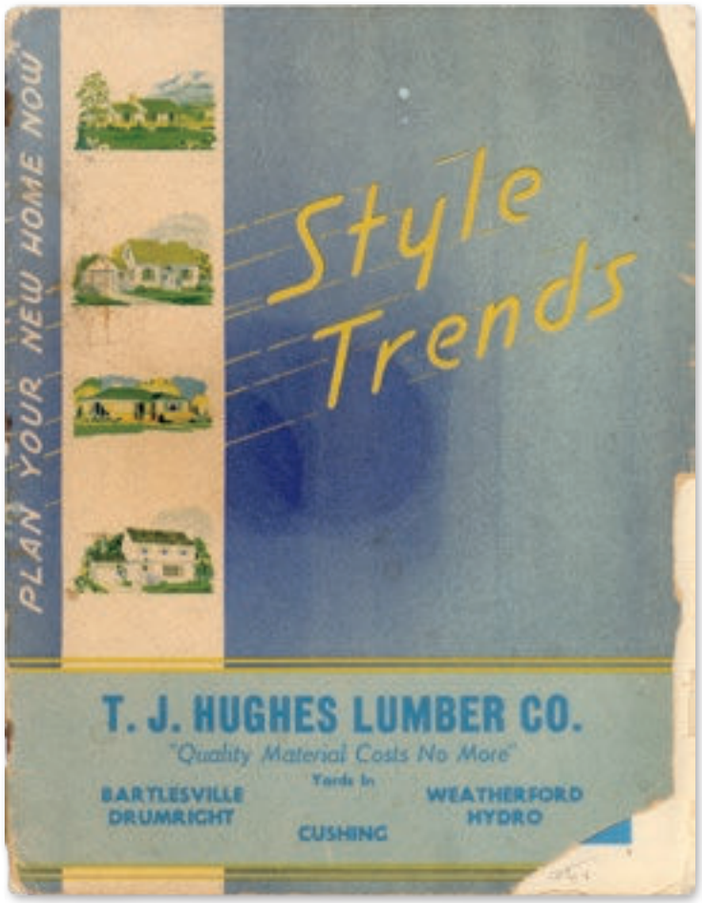
most familiar names on the city's retail scene, including a Froug's department store and a Humpty Dumpty supermarket, along with a Borden's Cafeteria, all hugely successful in the Tulsa market.[16] Seemingly guaranteed to generate a lot of foot traffic, Northland looked like an ideal place for the Hughes company to gain a foothold in Tulsa. The location, however, also carried some risks. Suburban development was spreading toward the south and east sides of the city, while Northland sat in the opposite direction, nearly five miles north of downtown. The $10 million shopping center was a deliberate effort to draw suburban development to a side of Tulsa that had been largely skipped by the post-war building boom.[17]

More than ever, the new Hughes Hardware catered to the individual retail customer, rather than contractors. Even the lumber came in pre-measured and cut sizes so it could be picked up and carried through a checkout lane much like any other item.[18]

"We know how men like to browse in a hardware store," said Tom Hughes, the new store's manager and the third generation of the Hughes family to work in the business.

"For the men," Tom told a local newspaper during the grand opening, "a hardware store holds the same fascination as a supermarket or a ready-to-wear store does for the women, and we encourage shoppers at Northland to stop in and just look around."

Born May 10, 1933, Tom had left home at age fifteen to attend the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, following in the footsteps of his father, T.J. Jr.,



Style guide from the 1950s.

and war-hero uncle, Hugh.[19, 20] After high school, Tom earned a bachelor's in business administration from the University of Oklahoma before joining the Marine Corps in June 1955.[21] Commissioned as a second lieutenant, he spent most of his two-year commitment at Camp LeJeune, an amphibious assault training facility near Jacksonville, North Carolina.[22]

The parallels with his uncle seem obvious—Hugh Hughes had also attended but dropped out of OU at the beginning of War World II to join the Army and led amphibious troops into battle in the South Pacific. The

similarities between Tom and Hugh did not stop there. Tom was methodical and self-disciplined, carried himself with a quiet confidence, and possessed an unshakeable sense of duty, first and foremost to his own loved ones.[23]

He enjoyed the military lifestyle and wanted to stay in the Marine Corps longer but left in May 1957 to go home to Cushing. His father, at age forty-nine, had suffered a bout of poor health and, while recovering to some degree, still seemed to be slowing down. Tom knew his father needed help running Hughes Lumber, and family came first.

At age twenty-four and having spent most of the previous decade away from the family business, Tom had no experience in retail and knew very little about the lumber business. Managing the new store in Tulsa was like learning to swim by diving into the deep end.[24] But he devoted himself to the business with the same tireless intensity that he had demonstrated in the military, and he soon developed a knack for customer relations.[25] If Hughes Hardware turned out to be less than successful, Tom certainly was not to blame.

Shoppers preferred to go to south Tulsa, and Northland never attracted the crowds that such a large shopping center needed.[26] Within a couple of years, stores began downsizing or canceling leases. Hughes Hardware closed in early June 1960, only eighteen months after it opened.[27]

Surely disappointed, Tom nevertheless understood that retailers can't be stubborn and can't let an unprofitable location drag down the whole company. This lesson would prove invaluable later in his career.

'PERFECT FOR EACH OTHER'

Tom wanted to skip a distant relative's wedding in early April 1961. The ceremony was taking place in the small town of Cleveland, nearly forty miles northeast of Cushing. Tom's parents were not going, perhaps not wanting to make the long drive on a rainy evening. Wanting someone to represent their branch of the family, they insisted that Tom make an appearance. Forced to go, he would forever be grateful after laying eyes on twenty-two-year-old Sally Lively.[28]

Sally had been the bride's sorority sister at the University of Oklahoma, where she studied elementary education. An excellent student and avid reader, Sally embraced college similar to the way Tom had loved the Marines. She excelled both academically and socially, developing a wide network of friends and joining Kappa Alpha Theta, where she served as chapter president during her senior year.

Tom woke up the day after the wedding still thinking about her. He called the bride's sister to find out more about "the girl from last night."[29]

"Tell me about Sally Lively," Tom said.

"I should have thought of this," the bride's sister said. "You are perfect for each other."

As soon as the bride and groom got back from their honeymoon, they invited Tom and Sally to dinner. Luckily for Tom, the interest was mutual.

Getting into a whirlwind romance seemed very unlike him.[30] Tom was cautious and methodical. He took time to make decisions. But not when it came to Sally. Tom proposed before the end of summer.

Wedding of Miss Lively And Mr. Hughes to Be Dec. 9

THE engagement and approaching marriage of Miss Sally Ann Lively to Thomas J. Hughes, III, son of Mr. and Mrs Thomas J. Hughes, 1011 S. Highland, Cushing, is being announced by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Lively, 1807 Wilshire Blvd., Oklahoma City.

The wedding will be December 9, in Westminster Presbyterian church, Oklahoma City. Dr. G. Raymond Campbell, pastor, will officiate at the 4 p. m. ceremony.

The bride-elect is a graduate of Northwest Classen High school, Oklahoma City, and the University of Oklahoma where she received a B. S. degree in Elementary Education and was named to the Dean's Honor Roll. Her social sorority is Kappa Alpha Theta. She also attended the University of Hawaii, Honolulu, and the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Miss Lively made her debut at the Beaux Arts ball in Oklahoma City in 1959 and is a member of French Heels club.

A graduate of New Mexico Military Institute, Roswell, N. M., the prospective bridegroom received his BBA degree from the University of Oklahoma, Norman, in 1955. His social fraternity is Sigma Alpha Epsilon and he is a member of Southern Hills Country Club, Tulsa and the Tulsa Club. Mr. Hughes served two years as a first Lieutenant with the U. S. Marine Corps and is associated here with T. J. Hughes Lumber Co.

A Happy Couple.
above: Sally's parents Robert and Juanita, Sally, Tom, Elizabeth, and T.J. Jr., December 9, 1961 at Westminster Presbyterian church in Oklahoma City

left: Cushing Daily Citizen, October 1, 1961.

"The only impulsive thing Tom ever did," Sally would say, "is fall in love and ask me to marry him."

The wedding took place December 9, 1961, in Oklahoma City, where Sally grew up.[31] The largest metropolitan area in the state, Oklahoma City had a population roughly 600 times larger than Tom's hometown.[32] Sally was not necessarily looking forward to small-town life.[33]

"We'll live in Cushing a couple of years," Tom told her. "Then we'll move to Tulsa."

'GOING TO WORK'

Tom's early childhood coincided with the Great Depression, a particularly hard time for rural Oklahoma. Cushing lost nearly twenty percent of its population, mostly from agriculture-related businesses scaling back or closing.[34] Of course, by the time a grown-up Tom brought his new bride to live in Cushing, the Depression was long over. But the town's population had never fully recovered, and in the 1960s the population was beginning to shrink again.

Tom's Uncle Hugh, during his tenure as chairman of the city council, had softened the blow of the 1960 U.S. census by expanding the

city limits to incorporate new suburban neighborhoods on the outskirts of town. Nevertheless, people were moving away from Cushing in the late 1950s and the trend only accelerated in the 1960s. The town would lose more than twelve percent of its population before the end of the decade, partly because production continued to drop in the Cushing-Drumright oil field. Petroleum jobs were evaporating.[35] But Cushing was not unique. Small towns all across Oklahoma were facing the same pattern of decline as the state's population became more urban.[36] Young people tended to leave places like Cushing to go to college or to serve in the military. Once they left, most young people never came back.

Tom probably would not have returned to Cushing either if not for Hughes Lumber.[37]

Nevertheless, he devoted himself to work with the same enthusiasm that his father and grandfather had shown to the company.[38] He had little interest in hobbies, except for an occasional round of golf. Even when it came to golf, Tom usually looked for an excuse to go to the office on the weekends instead of hitting the links.

"For him," Sally says, "getting up and going to work every day was just a joy. It's what he wanted to do."

Yet, he always made time for his wife and children. Sally would have dinner ready at six o'clock sharp every night, and Tom was rarely late.

"He worked hard all day," Sally says, "but for the rest of the evening he was going to be with his family."

Much like his father had done in a previous decade, Tom gradually assumed more and more responsibility at Hughes Lumber. By December 1964 he held the title of vice president, and by the late 1960s he was basically running the company.[39]

The Hughes family had been in Cushing for six decades, making them one of the oldest and most prominent names in town.[40] They had become an indelible part of local history, and of course the family would not have been the same either if T.J. Sr. and his brother Jack had not moved to Cushing in 1902.

Yet, as a new decade approached, Tom became convinced that the company's headquarters could not remain in his hometown much longer. He found it increasingly difficult to recruit top-notch executives when job candidates simply did not want to live in such a small town. Reversing gains it had made in the post-war boom, Cushing lost more than twelve percent of its population in the 1960s, dropping below 8,000 people. Meanwhile, Oklahoma City had grown more than twenty-three percent and Tulsa—fueled, as always, by the petroleum industry—had gained an incredible forty-three percent more population during the decade.[41]

Tom became convinced that the company's headquarters could not remain in his hometown much longer.

Oklahoma was becoming less rural and more suburban. Tom decided that Hughes Lumber needed to change with the times too. On July 6, 1970, a new corporate headquarters opened in Tulsa.[42]

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12. Cushing Daily Citizen, 29 September 1955
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14. Tulsa World, 13 March 1958
15. Tulsa World, 13 March 1958
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18. Tulsa World, 13 March 1958
19. HFG
20. (Oklahoma City) North Star, 5 October 1961
21. (Oklahoma City) North Star, 5 October 1961
22. Renoff, Greg: Tom Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
23. Renoff, Greg: Tom Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
24. Cushing Citizen, 23 March 1958
25. Renoff, Greg: Sally Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
26. Tulsa World, 13 June 2021
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28. Renoff, Greg: Sally Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
29. Renoff, Greg: Sally Hughes bio, Müllerhaus Legacy
30. Sally Hughes interview, 7 June 2023
31. HFG
32. U.S. Census
33. Sally Hughes interview, 7 June 2023
34. U.S. Census
35. U.S. Census
36. Daily Oklahoman, 8 October 1996
37. Sally Hughes interview, 7 June 2023
38. Sally Hughes interview, 7 June 2023
39. Minutes of the Director Meeting of the T. J. Hughes Lumber Company, 7 December 1964, HLR.
40. Cushing Herald, 10 October 1902
41. U.S. Census
42. Daily Oklahoman, 5 July 1970

Tom Hughes

CHAPTER 07

VERY ASTUTE

The Hughes family gathered in Tulsa in early July 1972, both to celebrate the Fourth of July and to conduct some important business.[1] The corporate offices had been moved from Cushing two years earlier, and Tom Hughes, the thirty-nine-year-old head of Hughes Lumber, knew that sooner or later the company would have to face another major change.

Most family-run companies eventually face an existential crisis as ownership passes from one generation to the next. In some cases, the new generation simply does not want to run the company and decides to sell it. But that obviously would not be an issue for Hughes Lumber with Tom himself already running day-to-day operations.

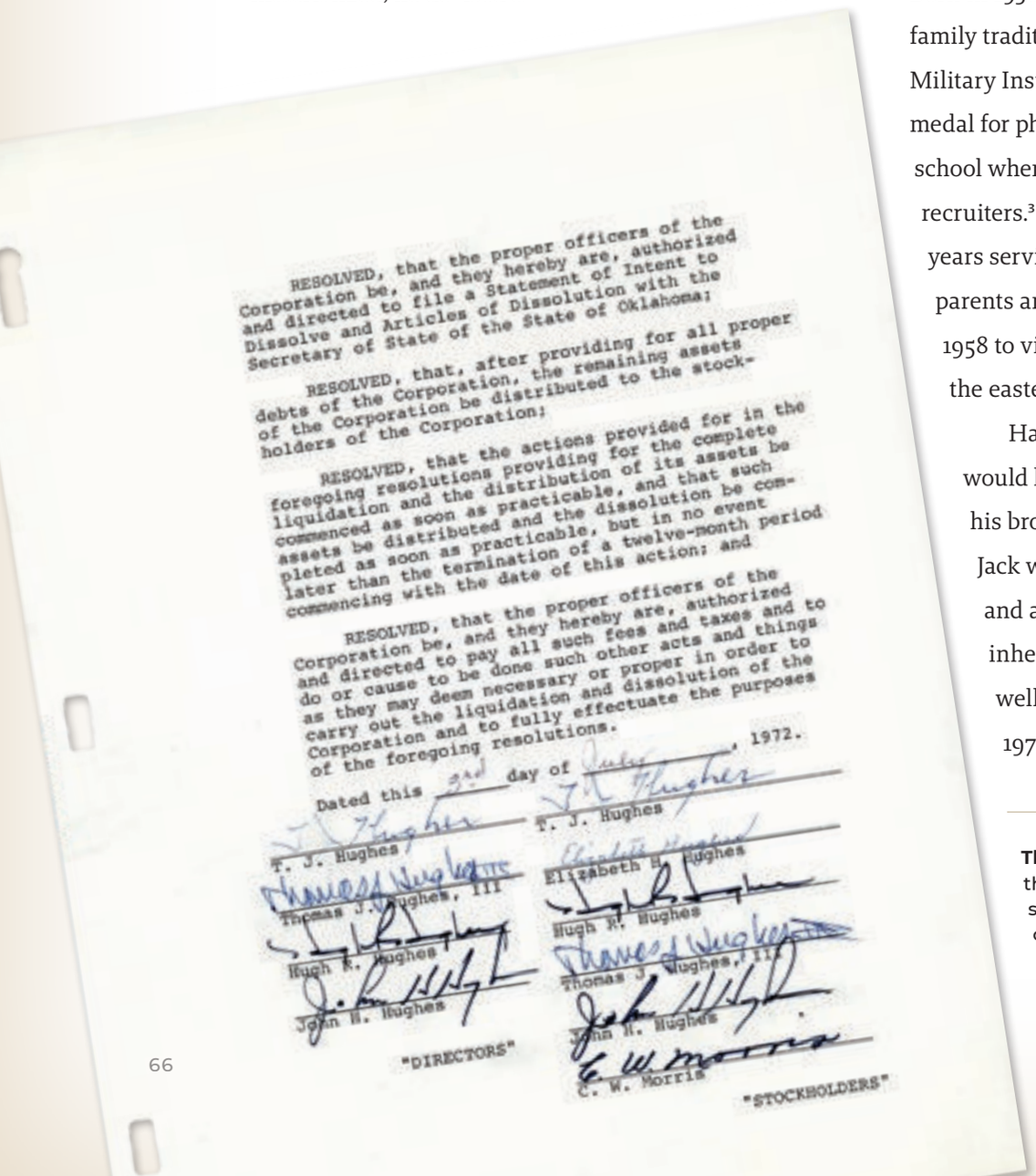
In other cases, however, the next generation cannot agree on how to manage the company or how to divide up shares. Squabbles begin and relationships become strained. Sometimes a family ends up selling a business just to end the strife.

Tom did not want to see that happen to Hughes Lumber or to the Hughes family. Always thinking ahead and trying to anticipate problems before they materialized, he devised a plan to settle the company's future while his father and uncle were still alive.[2]

T.J. Jr. was sixty-four years old and more than happy to step aside and let his oldest son take full control. Likewise, Tom's fifty-three-year-old Uncle Hugh was ready for a more leisurely lifestyle and agreed to sell his share of the company to his nephew.

That left only Tom's younger brother, Jack Hughes. Born in 1936, three years after Tom, Jack followed the family tradition of graduating from the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, where he received a medal for physical fitness in 1953—no small feat at a school where everyone stays fit enough to satisfy Army recruiters.[3] Jack was fiercely patriotic and spent several years serving in the U.S. Coast Guard, which gave his parents an excuse to travel to Europe in the spring of 1958 to visit him on-duty on the island of Rhodes in the eastern Mediterranean.[4]

Had Jack wanted to help run the company, Tom would have been happy to split ownership and give his brother a hefty share of the responsibility.[5] But Jack wanted to pursue other business interests and accepted Tom's offer to buy his share of the inheritance. The details had been worked out well in advance, and all that left to do on July 3, 1972, was sign the paperwork.[6]



RESOLVED, that the proper officers of the Corporation be, and they hereby are, authorized and directed to file a Statement of Intent to Dissolve and Articles of Dissolution with the Secretary of State of the State of Oklahoma;

RESOLVED, that, after providing for all proper debts of the Corporation, the remaining assets of the Corporation be distributed to the stockholders of the Corporation;

RESOLVED, that the actions provided for in the foregoing resolutions providing for the complete liquidation and the distribution of its assets be commenced as soon as practicable, and that such assets be distributed and the dissolution be completed as soon as practicable, but in no event later than the termination of a twelve-month period commencing with the date of this action; and

RESOLVED, that the proper officers of the Corporation be, and they hereby are, authorized and directed to pay all such fees and taxes and to do or cause to be done such other acts and things as they may deem necessary or proper in order to carry out the liquidation and dissolution of the Corporation and to fully effectuate the purposes of the foregoing resolutions.

Dated this 3rd day of July, 1972.

T. J. Hughes

T. J. Hughes

Thomas J. Hughes, III

Hugh K. Hughes

John H. Hughes

"DIRECTORS"

T. J. Hughes

Elizabeth H. Hughes

Hugh K. Hughes

Thomas J. Hughes, III

John H. Hughes

C. W. Morris

"STOCKHOLDERS"

The beginning of a new era. The signatures on this document are an agreement to sell their shares to Tom Hughes, making him sole owner of Hughes Lumber in 1972.

"Tom was very astute in the way that he handled that situation," remembers Sally Hughes, Tom's wife. "It was perfect because Tom wanted to be able to do the things that he wanted to do, and so it all worked out right. Everybody was happy about it, especially Tom."

It was perfect because Tom wanted to be able to do the things that he wanted to do, and so it all worked out right. Everybody was happy about it, especially Tom.

OUTWARD-THINKING AND SOPHISTICATED

Tom had two priorities. First, his family. Second, Hughes Lumber. In his mind the two could not be entirely separated. Tom's father, T.J. Hughes Jr., had generally believed that what was good for the company would be good for the family. Tom agreed. Working hard for the company was a way to take care of the people he loved.

But he loved the company, too. And he genuinely enjoyed working for it.

"He enjoyed golf and he loved being with us, our family," Sally says. "But his passion was work. He really liked it."

In addition to taking family vacations, Tom liked to travel to trade shows and attend industry conferences. In the 1970s, he became deeply involved with two national groups in particular, the Building Center Roundtable and the Lineyard Conference.[7] Each group typically met once a year. Spouses could attend, and the Lineyard Conference even encouraged it. Meetings would start early and end with a speaker at lunch, letting members spend their afternoons however they wanted.

"It was a happy marriage of work and fun," Sally says. "Tom and I could go somewhere together or with a group of friends, which was ideal for him because he did not really care that much about just going someplace and not working."

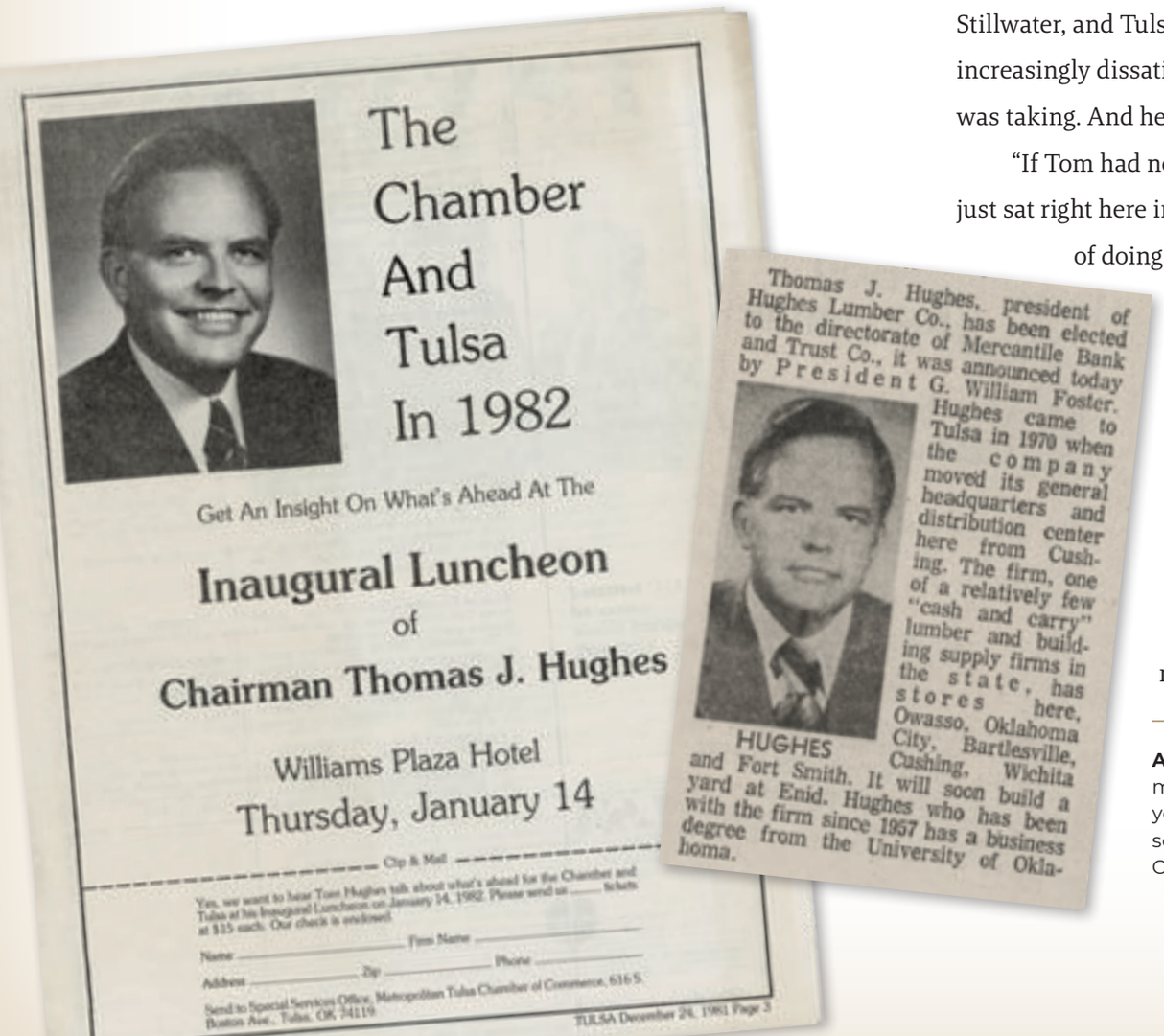
The Lineyard Conference started in 1956 after some company owners became frustrated with a previous national association that catered to small, independent lumberyards.[32] The owners wanted a group that would focus on bigger companies that operated multiple lumberyards in different cities, some even in multiple states. Ironically, by the time Tom joined the group, the members were considered relatively small companies compared to the national retail chains that were emerging in the 1970s.

Existing members could veto anyone who wanted to join the Lineyard Conference, which allowed local and regional companies like Hughes Lumber to keep direct competitors out of the loop.[8] That way, Tom and other members could speak freely about the challenges they faced in the lumber industry. They could share advice without giving away a competitive advantage.

As a result, the discussions were always frank and sometimes rather bleak. Topics included rising energy costs, increasingly restrictive environmental regulations, taxes, and labor shortages. Members discussed the hard choices they had to make in laying off workers, closing locations, or even going out of business.

"They would just lay it all out," Sally says. "Tom got a sense of how people did it in other parts of the country, and it gave him an expanded horizon."

From these annual roundtable meetings, Tom began to understand the growing threat that local lumberyards faced from big-box stores and major retail chains. Sutherlands Lumber and Payless Cashways had been the biggest competitors in the Tulsa market for almost as long as Tom had been working for Hughes Lumber. A typical Sutherlands store had 28,000 square feet of retail space and advertised itself as a "supermarket lumberyard."[9] The regional size of the chain allowed it to negotiate low prices with wholesalers.



The Chamber And Tulsa In 1982

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Williams Plaza Hotel
Thursday, January 14

Clip & Mail

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Send to Special Services Office, Metropolitan Tulsa Chamber of Commerce, 616 S. Boston Ave., Tulsa, OK 74119.

TULSA December 24, 1981 Page 3

Thomas J. Hughes, president of Hughes Lumber Co., has been elected to the directorate of Mercantile Bank and Trust Co., it was announced today by President G. William Foster.

Hughes came to Tulsa in 1970 when the company moved its general headquarters and distribution center here from Cushing. The firm, one of a relatively few "cash and carry" lumber and building supply firms in the state, has stores here, Owasso, Oklahoma City, Bartlesville, Cushing, Wichita and Fort Smith. It will soon build a yard at Enid. Hughes who has been with the firm since 1957 has a business degree from the University of Oklahoma.

HUGHES

Tom raised the issue of competitive pricing at the Lineyard Conference, and that's where he got the idea of joining the Lumbermen's Merchandising Company, or LMC. The organization allowed smaller lumber companies to partner with each other nationwide and order merchandise in bulk.[11] Joining LMC in 1990 gave Hughes Lumber purchasing power equivalence despite having smaller stores and fewer locations.

"That made a huge difference," Sally says.

Hughes Lumber continued to grow under Tom's leadership. By the summer of 1982, a decade after Tom took full control, the company operated nine locations, including stores in Enid, Oklahoma City, Shawnee, Stillwater, and Tulsa.[12] Nonetheless, Tom seemed to feel increasingly dissatisfied with the direction his company was taking. And he planned to change it.[13]

"If Tom had not been outward-thinking, if he had just sat right here in Tulsa and didn't explore other ways of doing things, he would have fallen behind the competition," Sally says. "He was very sophisticated, actually, in the way that he ran his company."

Tom realized that participating in LMC would not be enough to keep Hughes Lumber competitive in the long-term. Lowe's, a major retail chain based in North Carolina, already had more than 200 stores nationwide and

A leader in his community. Tom sat on many boards, including twenty-three years on the Bank of Oklahoma board, and served as Chairman of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce in 1982.

was expanding rapidly.[14] Home Depot, meanwhile, had recently gone public to finance an aggressive strategy to expand coast-to-coast.[15] Neither company had taken root in Oklahoma yet, but Tom knew it was only a matter of time. He knew from the discussions at the Lineyard Conference that many local lumberyards did not survive very long after a Lowe's or a Home Depot came to town.[16]

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER

Hughes Lumber had opened a location in Wichita, Kansas, in the fall of 1972, only a few months after Tom took full control of the company.[19] The store had been part of Tom's original growth strategy and it represented an early milestone in the company's new era under his leadership. But Tom had learned early in his career, while managing the short-lived Hughes Hardware at Tulsa's Northland Shopping Center in the early 1960s, that retailers could not afford to become sentimental. By the spring of 1982, the Wichita store had become unprofitable and Tom was not going to let it drain resources away from the company's other locations in Enid, Oklahoma City, Shawnee, Stillwater, Cushing, and Tulsa.[20]

A weak economy had hurt Hughes Lumber in Kansas. But the company had also faced stiff competition from regional and national lumberyard chains in Wichita, a taste of what was already beginning to happen in Oklahoma. Tom knew the competition was only going to grow in his home state. Oklahoma's economy was even worse than Kansas's at the time. Oil prices, after increasing nearly tenfold during the 1970s, began to fall in 1981 and kept falling, in fits and starts, for the rest of the decade.[21] By the late 1980s, Oklahoma's oil and gas industry had slashed nearly sixty percent of its workforce. In Tulsa alone, more than 31,000 people lost their jobs in the great Oil Bust.[22]

During this bleak economic crisis, Tom told his teenage son Robert to find a summer job.[23]

Born in 1965, Robert seemed to take after his extroverted grandfather, who had been one of Cushing's most popular socialites as a young man. Like T.J. Jr., Robert could chat easily with perfect strangers and seemed to have a knack for building lasting relationships.[24] He surely would have found plenty to do with his friends during the summer, but Tom wanted to instill the strong work ethic that his father had instilled in him. Tom wanted his son to understand the value of a hard-earned dollar.

Tom's father had not pressured him to work for the family business, and Tom never pressured Robert or his older son, Jeff. The idea to work for Hughes Lumber . . . was Robert's.

That did not mean Robert had to work for Hughes Lumber. Tom was the third generation of his family to lead the company, but he would not have minded being the last Hughes to work at Hughes Lumber. Tom's father had not pressured him to work for the family business, and Tom never pressured Robert or his older son, Jeff. The idea to work for Hughes Lumber during his summer break from high school when he was fifteen was Robert's.[25]

"I was really curious about the whole thing," Robert remembers. "I wanted to see what was going on and what it was all about."

His entry-level job included unloading freight, stocking shelves and filling customers' orders at a Hughes Lumber yard near 42nd Street and Memorial Drive, a commercial area with several car dealerships and heavy traffic. The work was physically demanding, but Robert enjoyed chatting with customers and liked kidding around with his co-workers, who did not seem to care that his name was on the front of the building.

Robert worked there for three summers during high school and took shifts on the weekends if the staff was shorthanded. Then, while going to college at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Robert spent his summers working at a Wickes Lumber, a large chain that had started in Michigan.[26]

"I was doing manual labor out in the lumberyard, loading customers and unloading freight," Robert remembers. "Even at my really inexperienced and naive level, I could tell it was a much bigger operation than Hughes Lumber."

As he approached graduation in the late 1980s, Robert had several conversations with his father about the possibility of coming back to Tulsa to take a larger role at the family's company. But Tom's reaction surprised him.[27]

"Nothing lasts forever," Tom told him.

Hughes Lumber was facing a serious and growing threat from national retail chains combined with one of the worst economic slumps in Oklahoma history. The future of the company seemed bleak.

"He was discouraged," Robert says. "He wasn't sure the company was going to be a good opportunity for me in the long term."

Besides, Tom had always cherished the time he spent in the Marine Corps and, while he loved Oklahoma, he was glad he had spent part of his life

living elsewhere. Robert might regret coming back to Tulsa immediately after college, Tom suggested.

"He thought it would be good for me to go out and try some other things, to have that experience and mature as a young man," Robert says. "And I was excited about that. I agreed that it was a really good idea."

Instead of joining Hughes Lumber after college, Robert went to graduate school at Northwestern University and settled into a career with a Chicago advertising firm, Bayer Bess Vanderwarker.

REDUCED TO A SKELETON

While Robert was working in Chicago, a fire started at the Hughes Lumber in Shawnee about forty-five minutes after closing time on a Tuesday evening in late July 1990.[28] The ruins were still smoldering twenty-four hours later.[29]

Crews from seven fire stations fought the blaze but could only hope to keep it from spreading to nearby businesses.

"The yard was reduced to a skeleton within three hours," according to reports in the *Daily Oklahoman*.

Authorities never determined how the fire started. Although, suspiciously, a second fire erupted in a dumpster about half a block away while firefighters were still working at the lumberyard.[30]

Fortunately, the employees had all left before the fire broke out and no one was injured. But after a decade of lean profits, the financial loss rattled company officials in Tulsa.[31] Tom was determined, however, not to let the fire become a bad omen. He already knew that Hughes Lumber was going to have to make sweeping changes if it wanted to survive for another generation. In fact, he had already begun to make some changes.

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2. Sally Hughes interview, 7 June 2023
3. *Cushing Daily Citizen*, 2 July 1953.
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THE OIL BUST

Early in the afternoon, local time, on October 6, 1973, at least two hundred Egyptian fighter jets simultaneously attacked multiple Israeli airbases, missile sites and command centers, setting off a conflict that would become known as the Yom Kippur War.[1]

In Oklahoma, the news broke just in time to make the ten o'clock news. But no one could have known the enormous ripple effects a war in the Middle East would have on the state.

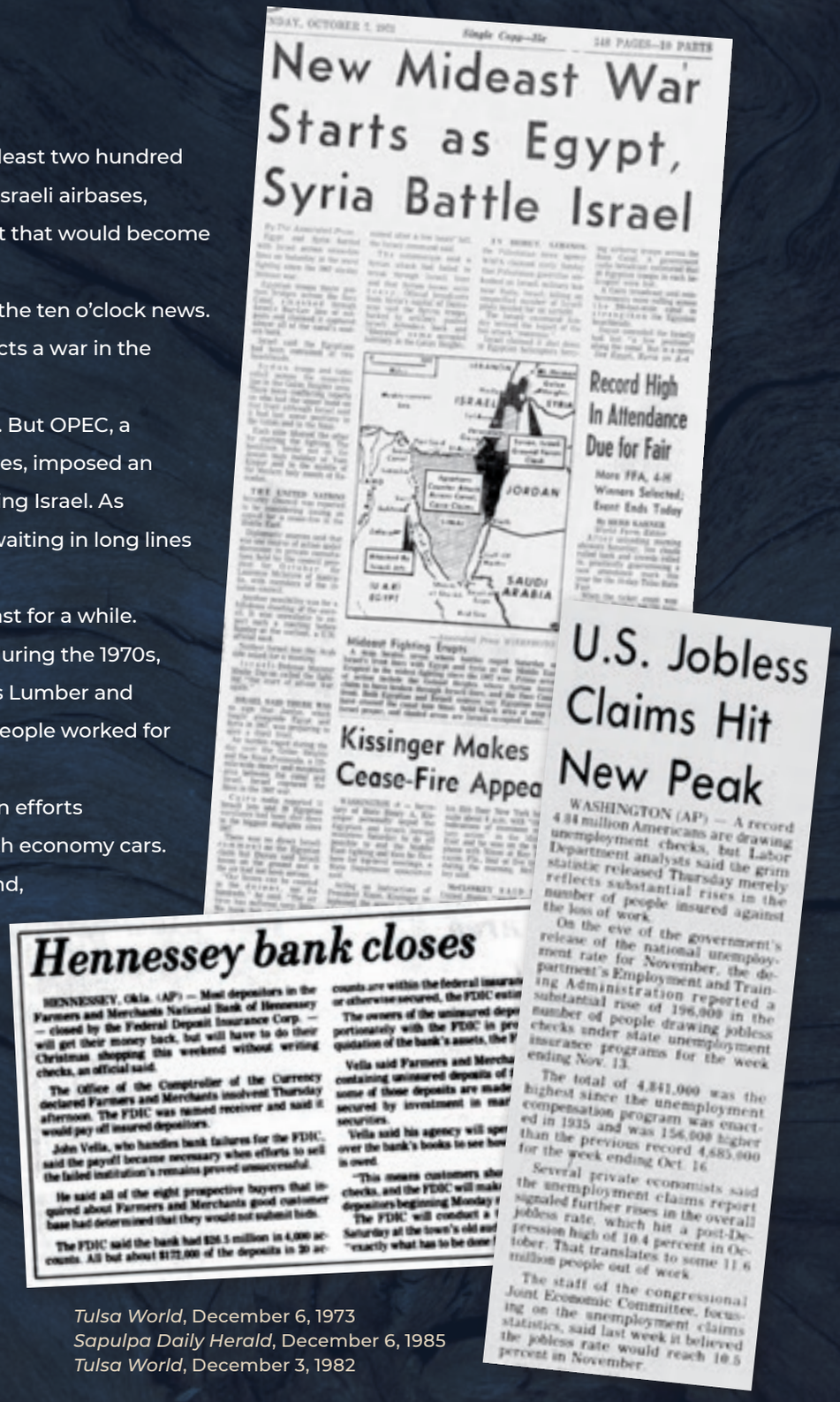
Oil, when the conflict started, cost $3.89 per barrel. But OPEC, a coalition of mostly Middle Eastern oil-producing countries, imposed an embargo on the United States as retaliation for supporting Israel. As supplies dwindled, Americans soon found themselves waiting in long lines at gas stations. Fuel prices tripled by January 1974.

Oklahoma's oil-driven economy skyrocketed, at least for a while. The petroleum industry added more than 60,000 jobs during the 1970s, sparking a housing boom that fueled profits for Hughes Lumber and other construction-related companies.[2] Nearly 29,000 people worked for the oil industry in Tulsa alone.[3]

High gas prices, however, encouraged conservation efforts nationwide. Millions of drivers replaced gas-guzzlers with economy cars. The U.S. government imposed a national speed limit. And, while demand for oil began to decrease, drilling efforts ramped up in the Gulf of Mexico and other areas outside of the Middle East.

By 1981, after peaking at $31.77 per barrel, oil prices began to fall. The prices kept falling for the next five years, finally hitting bottom at $12.51 in 1986.

Even after adjusting for inflation, energy prices during the Oil Bust remained well above pre-embargo levels. Oil producers, however, had leveraged billions of dollars to finance expansions. As prices dropped, the producers defaulted on loans in record numbers, triggering a banking crisis across Oklahoma.



Tulsa World, December 6, 1973
Sapulpa Daily Herald, December 6, 1985
Tulsa World, December 3, 1982

Before it was over, one out of five banks had failed statewide.[4] And eighty-seven Oklahoma towns wound up without a bank or a savings and loan. The state's unemployment rate, sitting at three percent in the late 1970s, reached nearly nine percent in the mid-1980s.[5] Corporate bankruptcies multiplied exponentially, with more than 9,200 Oklahoma companies going out of business in 1987 alone.[6]

Tom Hughes, president of Hughes Lumber during the Oil Bust, worried that his company might become part of the statistics.[7] More than 31,000 people in Tulsa, which had become a vital market for Hughes Lumber, lost their jobs during the Oil Bust and home construction came to a virtual standstill.[8]

Statewide, the economy did not fully recover until the late 1990s, when unemployment finally sank back to levels Oklahoma had not seen since the 1970s. But the two largest cities recovered more quickly, partly because rural residents moved to larger cities. Oklahoma City's population grew fourteen percent in the 1990s while Tulsa's population grew seven percent.[9] Home construction rebounded, at least in metropolitan areas, which brought much-needed relief to Hughes Lumber and the rest of the construction-related industry.[10]

By 1993, revenue was growing again and Tom was confident that the company had successfully weathered the financial storm. A revitalized Oklahoma economy, however, attracted Lowe's and other national retailers to the state, which created yet another challenge for Hughes Lumber.

The Daily Oklahoman, December 6, 1986

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CHAPTER 08

NOBODY GAVE US A CHANCE

Two weeks after starting work at Hughes Lumber in April 1987, Craig Hiemstra called his former boss to ask if his old job was still open.[1]

"Man, I want to come back," Craig said. "Can I?"

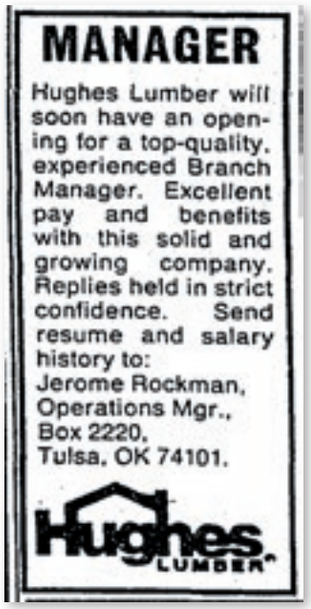
The answer was yes. And Craig might have quit his new job at Hughes Lumber if it didn't mean he would have to move back to South Dakota.

"I was kind of tired of the winters up there," Craig says.

South Dakota gets thirty inches of snow a year and temperatures often stay below zero for several days at a time.[2] That's why Craig's parents had moved to Oklahoma in the mid-eighties, and why his father had called one morning in early 1987 to tell Craig about a help-wanted ad in the *Daily Oklahoman*.[3]

Hughes Lumber was looking for managers and assistant managers. Unusual for Hughes at the time, the company was looking specifically for people with experience selling building materials.

In his mid-twenties at the time, Craig was working for United Building Centers, which primarily served contractors and homebuilders in South Dakota while dabbling in do-it-yourself retail—precisely the business model that Tom Hughes, the president of Hughes Lumber, wanted to adopt in Oklahoma.[5]



Hughes Lumber was beginning to recognize that it wasn't going to be able to compete very well for DIY business against the bigger home centers. It had to change or it was going to go out of business.

Craig drove nine and a half hours down Interstate 35 to interview with a Hughes executive at the company's lumberyard in Ponca City, a small town just east of Blackwell in north-central Oklahoma, where the Hughes family had first gone into business nearly a century before. Craig started work shortly afterward at the Hughes Lumber in Fort Smith, a town of 72,000 people just across the Oklahoma border in northwest Arkansas.[6]

Like all Hughes Lumber yards at the time, the Fort Smith location followed a cash-and-carry business model and focused almost exclusively on individual do-it-yourself customers.[7] Craig, however, was recruited partly because of his background with contractors, which fit the company's strategy to face growing competition from large retailers such as Sutherlands and Payless Cashways, and in the long-term Lowe's and Home Depot.

"Hughes Lumber was beginning to recognize that it wasn't going to be able to compete very well for DIY business against the bigger home centers that were moving into its territory," Craig says. "It had to change or it was going to go out of business."

Change, however, never comes easily, even when it's desperately needed.

"There was a lot of resistance to change within the company," Craig says. "And it didn't take very long for me to start thinking, 'Oh, boy. I've made a huge mistake getting myself into this.'"

His old boss wanted him back. But Craig decided to stay in Arkansas for at least six months "to see how it goes." He did not want to spend another harsh winter shoveling thirty inches of snow. But that was only part of it. The job at Hughes Lumber was turning out to be a lot more difficult than Craig expected. He wanted to find out if he was up to the challenge.

Craig Hiemstra, Bartlesville/Dewey Manager

"I started seeing the changes that we were making, and I liked being a part of that," Craig says. "I liked when contractors became regulars. I liked winning."

IT TAKES YEARS AND YEARS

Craig left Fort Smith in June 1988 to take over the Hughes Lumber in Bartlesville, forty-five miles north of Tulsa.[8] Tom Hughes's father, T.J. Hughes Jr., had gone to Bartlesville nearly half a century earlier to buy a lumberyard there as one of his first independent business decisions after taking charge of day-to-day operations at the company.

Craig found the store in a similar condition as the one in Fort Smith. The store was an attractive home center that focused on cash-and-carry customers while paying very little attention to homebuilders or contractors, who almost invariably used store credit. The previous year, before Craig's arrival in Bartlesville, the store had extended only $76,000 in credit, a tiny fraction of total sales.

"In other words," Craig explains, "contractor business was almost nothing."

He wanted to basically flip the situation around, with contractors eventually accounting for the bulk of sales. But that would mean retraining or replacing the entire staff, an effort Craig knew would take several years. Hughes Lumber employees in the late 1980s and early 1990s were cashiers and salespeople, trained to provide good customer services but with no in-depth knowledge of building materials.

Hughes Lumber offered "'a Walmart-type experience' for customers," Craig says.

"Our sales staff might have known where things were," he says. "They could help customers find something. But they didn't know about a product's application. They couldn't talk about it on a contractor's level."

Immediately after becoming the manager in Bartlesville, Craig started thumbing through the Yellow Pages and calling local contractors, trying to set up meetings. But nobody was interested in talking to him. Hughes Lumber had spent decades focusing on individual do-it-yourself customers, who were generally price-conscious and only needed to buy enough materials to finish a weekend project or two.

Builders, in contrast, wanted higher-quality products that could be delivered in bulk.

"Nobody thought about Hughes Lumber that way," Craig says. "Prior to this time, the company really didn't want any contractor business. We were comfortable with the cash-and-carry customers and happy to let the contractors go somewhere else."

The battle would take years.

"But if you get one good contractor, then he'll tell someone else how good you are," Craig explains. "Then you get two or three more contractors, and they tell other people. And it just keeps growing."

DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY

New customers had to come from somewhere. Bartlesville was not growing fast enough in the early 1990s to bring new contractors to town. Every time Craig won a new client, one of his competitors lost an old client.[9]

Of course, the other lumberyards fought back. One manager even began warning contractors not to take Hughes Lumber seriously.

Fiercely competitive, Craig wanted to prove to everybody, but most of all prove to himself, that he could win the fight. He worked his way through the Yellow Pages again and again, calling every contractor in town who had not given Hughes Lumber a chance. He put together his own staff who could "speak the contractors' language." He told his salesmen to get aggressive. "Do what it takes."

Some corporate office staff in Tulsa, however, did not always understand what Craig was doing. If the pushback got severe enough, Craig would call Tom's direct number.

Lowe's Home Improvement Warehous
celebrates Muskogee store opening
Superstore Donates $1,000 to Muskogee Habitat for Huma
Lowe's Companies, Inc. announced that its new
warehouse-size superstore in Muskoge
celebrate its grand opening from Thursd
ary 15 through Sunday, February 18, 199
gee County's new destination home cente
2901 old Shawnee off Highway 62
Turnpike. Shopping hou
ent Warehous

Lowe's trying to nail dow
By Steve McLinden
ARLINGTON — Lowe's
me Improvement Warehouse,
North Carolina-based retailer
battles Home Depot
ughout the southern United
s, plans a multistore return to
Metroplex and is negotiating
ites in Arlington and Fort
, real estate sources said.
e sites are at Interstate 20
latlock Road near The Parks
ington mall and at I-20 and
Irvin Road near Hulen
Mall in Fort Worth.
Parent firm Lowe's Cos. plans
to build stores of about 135,000
square feet at each site and add as
many as eight other stores around
the Metroplex, the sources said.
New Lowe's sites are typically 12
to 15 acres. Each store employs
about 200 people.
The company closed two
smaller Fort Worth stores during
the late 1980s after Home Depot
began its push in the area.
Atlanta-based Home Depot
Promotional
of the target sites,
"big box" retail
under development
by Memphis, Tenn.-b
Investment Co., already
the Lowe's logo, commi
estate brokers said.
Stan Lotridge, a broke
United Commercial Rea
Dallas who has worked
Lowe's on site selections, said
firm has four

Fix-It-Up Giant Plans City Store
By Jim Stafford
Staff Writer
Oklahoma City's lineup
of home improvement su-
perstores will be joined
later this year by a
160,000-square-foot entry
category giant
of North
Skidmore and Regional
Vice President Duane
Hiemenz.
In Oklahoma City,
Lowe's will enter a mar-
ket that already features
retail locations operated
by such industry heavy-
weights as Home Depot,
Builders Square, Suther-
and Payless Cash-

Your Future Will Change Once Lowe's Moves In.
LOWES
owe's, one of America's leading building materials/specialty
retailers, is about to become your newest neighbor. With
e upcoming opening of our newest store in **Shawnee, OK,**
'll have the opportunity to grow with this $6 billion company
we plan to double in size over the next five years. And once
e's moves in, you can move up...with great career growth
advancement potential.

"He had my back," Craig says. "We had to make these changes, and Tom understood that.

"I started seeing the changes that we were making, and I liked being a part of that," Craig says. "I liked when contractors became regulars. I liked winning."

OPEN AGAIN TOMORROW

Lowe's opened a store in Bartlesville in 1996, a reckoning that Craig had known would come eventually and that Tom had seen on the horizon a decade earlier.[10] The impact was immediate, and the effects even bigger than they expected.[11]

Within a month, staying open on Sundays or past noon on Saturdays did not seem practical. DIY products were no longer selling well, and the store had far fewer customers coming through the door. Nonetheless, the number of orders increased from contractors and sales volume grew.

If Hughes Lumber had waited for Lowe's and other national retailers to come to Oklahoma before changing business models, the company wouldn't have stood a chance. Even with the head start, it was not going to be easy. Cash-and-carry customers still contributed a significant portion of sales in 1996, but they declined quickly.

Everybody—his friends, his family, and his client—kept asking Craig, "When are you guys going to close?"

He hated the question.

"Well, we're closing at five o'clock today," he would say. "Then we'll be open again tomorrow."

People would smile at the joke. But Craig knew what they were thinking: "Yeah, sure."

"Nobody gave us a chance," he says. "Nobody."

1. Craig Hiemstra interview, 12 June 2023.
2. National Weather Service.
3. Craig Hiemstra interview, 12 June 2023.
4. *Bartlesville Examiner-Enterprise*, 31 May 2015.
5. Craig Hiemstra interview, 12 June 2023.
6. U.S. Census data.
7. Craig Hiemstra interview, 12 June 2023.
8. Craig Hiemstra interview, 12 June 2023.
9. Craig Hiemstra interview, 12 June 2023.
10. *Daily Oklahoman*, 22 December 1996.
11. Craig Hiemstra interview, 12 June 2023.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CHAPTER 09

A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF PRIDE

Lowe's first tentative venture into Oklahoma began in 1985, when the company bought and rebranded fifteen stores in the "Oil Patch" of Oklahoma and West Texas.[1] Not coincidentally, shortly afterward, Tom Hughes began implementing his reforms in response to the threat that Lowe's and other national retailers seemed to pose to Hughes Lumber.

Ironically, at the time, Lowe's was reforming its own business strategy, but in the opposite direction. Tom wanted to rely less on cash-and-carry customers and attract more business from contractors while Lowe's wanted to shift away from contractors and boost retail sales.[2] For most of the company's history, starting in the 1920s, the typical Lowe's store had a relatively small retail floor displaying a limited inventory with a lumberyard out back, not unlike the original Hughes Lumber in Cushing.[3]

Do-it-yourself customers did not account for a significant part of Lowe's sales until the late 1970s and the company did not begin to open home improvement supercenters until the 1980s. The size of a typical Lowe's store grew from less than 7,000 square feet to 20,000 square feet and then, by the end of the decade, to more than 60,000 square feet.[4]

Retail sales grew along with the size of the stores. Do-it-yourself customers accounted for only twenty percent of Lowe's revenues in the late 1970s. By the mid-eighties, however, Lowe's was approaching a fifty-fifty balance between retail sales and its contractor business.[5] The expansion into Oklahoma was supposed to continue the company's emphasis on the cash-and-carry model.[6] The move, however, could not have come at a worse time for Lowe's.

Crude oil prices, a cornerstone of the Oklahoma economy, collapsed just as the company was trying to establish itself in the state, going from $30 a barrel in November 1985 to only $10 a barrel in July 1986.[7] Unemployment skyrocketed to nine percent while homebuilding came to a virtual standstill.[8] As a result, contractors stopped spending money at Lowe's before the new Oklahoma stores had developed enough retail traffic to make up the difference.[9] Three of the first five Lowe's locations in Oklahoma closed in 1986, just a year after they opened. And the other two went out of business in 1987.[10]

"We swallowed a bitter pill," the company told shareholders in 1987, "along with a certain amount of pride."[11]

Of course, Lowe's would come back to Oklahoma with a vengeance in the 1990s. But the company's early stumble gave Tom a few more years to get ready for the challenge.

A SMALL LOWE'S

Virgil Case lost his job when Lowe's closed its first store in Enid, a town of 45,000 people in north-central Oklahoma.[12] Having the experience on his resume, however, helped twenty-three-year-old Virgil get a job as a counter salesperson at the local Hughes Lumber in 1988.[13] The jobs seemed interchangeable. At both Lowe's and Hughes, the staff focused on serving do-it-yourself customers rather than contractors. Virgil had gone to school to work in construction and with that knowledge earned a promotion to assistant manager in 1990, and Tom saw potential to make Virgil a store manager at some point in the future.

Tom wanted new managers to gain experience in Bartlesville, where Craig Hiemstra was leading the charge to attract more business from contractors and homebuilders. They would still need people skills like any other salesmen, but Craig emphasized the need to speak to contractors "in their own language," with expert knowledge of materials and products.[14]

Certain contractors are really picky about the brands they come to like and prefer, certain species of lumber for example. You have to understand what they want, and you try to truly become partners with them.

Virgil Case, Stillwater Manager

"I learned a lot," Virgil says. "We made sure we had the right products that the builders expected, as well as programs with vendors on special order products. Certain contractors are really picky about the brands they come to like and prefer, certain species of lumber for example. You have to understand what they want, and you try to truly become partners with them. It's a very different relationship than you have with a cash-and-carry customer."

After gaining experience under Craig's mentorship, Virgil left Bartlesville in 1992 to become an assistant manager in Stillwater, where Hughes Lumber was planning to build a new, larger store.[15] The project was a sign of confidence as the state's economy recovered from the Oil Bust. And Stillwater, home to more than 20,000 students at Oklahoma State University's main campus, was one of the fastest-growing communities in the state, making it an ideal place to expand the company's new focus on contractors.[16]

With construction nearly finished in 1993, Tom sent a new assistant manager to the existing store in Stillwater and assigned Virgil to set up the sales floor at the new location, standing on a busy shopping thoroughfare just northeast of downtown.[17] Despite the company's long-term plan to develop more business from contractors, the old store in Stillwater continued to rely almost entirely on do-it-yourself customers. The design of the new store reflected that old business model.

Virgil found himself erecting aisle after aisle of shelving loaded with tons of merchandise. Colorful displays advertised low prices. Several checkout lanes

"A SMALL LOWE'S"

Hughes Lumber's Stillwater location was a good example of how the stores were being displayed to cater to the cash-and-carry DIY customers. A shopper could find everything they needed for their project from basic tools, to paint, and all the way up to custom kitchen cabinets.

stood near the front of the store. The store looked much like any other Hughes Lumber location at the time. Indeed, the store resembled the kind of home improvement center that national retailers were building in the 1990s, only it was a third of the size.

"We were a small Lowe's," Virgil says. "We had everything the retail customer would want."

YOUNG AND UPCOMING

Tom had no delusions about the company's situation in the mid-1990s.[18] Lowe's would inevitably come back to Oklahoma, and competition would be ramping up from other retailers as well. Hughes Lumber was proving it could gradually attract business contractors. Tom knew the company would face tough times in the years ahead, but seemed a lot more optimistic than he had been in the late 1980s, when he had encouraged his son to look for opportunities elsewhere.

By 1993, Robert had begun talking to his father again about leaving Chicago and coming back to Tulsa to take a leadership role in the company. This time, his father seemed enthusiastic. And Robert, not yet thirty years old, made the move in 1994, becoming the fourth generation of his family to join the company.[19]

"It was an easy decision for me because I had always had some interest in it," Robert says. "I was proud of my dad and what he did. I always looked up to him a lot, and I think I liked the idea of following in his footsteps."

Tom warned him, of course, that he was coming onboard at a particularly challenging time.[20] The company was racing to prepare itself for an onslaught from national competitors and trying to transform its entire business model. But Robert remained unfazed.

"I was young and upcoming," Robert says. "And naive."

WILLING TO ROLL MY SLEEVES UP

Meanwhile, with the new store finished in Stillwater, Virgil received the promotion that he had been hoping for. Only twenty-nine years old, he became a store manager in Owasso, a fast-growing suburb north of Tulsa where Hughes Lumber saw plenty of potential for building ties with local contractors and homebuilders.[21] Virgil had not even finished unpacking, however, when the company asked him to move back to Stillwater and take over the store that he had just left.

He would have been thrilled to take the job five months earlier, before he had moved to Owasso. Instead, Hughes Lumber had installed a different manager for the new store. Virgil had gone through the trouble and expense of relocating his family to metropolitan Tulsa, eighty miles east of Stillwater.

He did not particularly want to go through the hassle of moving again so soon. And Owasso seemed a better career path anyway.

"I thought Owasso, being a smaller location, would be a better training environment for me," Virgil says. "And I thought it had a lot of potential to grow as Owasso grew."

He turned down the offer and continued unpacking. Thirty days later, however, Virgil answered a phone call from a Hughes Lumber executive.

"Tom Hughes would like to meet with you Monday morning," the official said. "And I'll let you know: He wants to talk to you about Stillwater."

Virgil knew Tom would not force him to take the job. But Tom could be very assertive, and it would not be easy to tell him "no."

"It was a little bit concerning," Virgil admits. "Managers didn't last very long in Stillwater at that time. They had a lot of turnover, so I was concerned I would turn into one of those statistics."

On the other hand, moving back to Stillwater would have some advantages. He still had a Stillwater bank account and a Stillwater phone number. He still had friends in Stillwater, and it was forty-five minutes closer to his family in Enid. Virgil and his wife talked about it all weekend, and by the time he walked into Tom's office on Monday morning he was ready to say "yes."

Virgil had known Tom since going to work for Hughes Lumber in Enid six years earlier. Tom would visit the store multiple times a year and made a point of meeting every employee, even the entry-level sales clerks. The next time he came, Tom would remember everyone and even ask about their children by name.[22]

"He always had time to talk to me," Virgil says. "He knew what was going on in the stores. He knew who was doing what and who had potential to move up."

Virgil trusted Tom. So, when Tom said Stillwater would be a good career move, Virgil believed him. But he was going to be a different kind of manager than the Stillwater location had ever had before. Several managers in a row had washed out because they tried to make it an administrative job.

"That doesn't work," Virgil says. "You've got to be hands-on."

One of his first decisions was to move the manager's office from the second floor to a small room on the ground floor, where his desk would sit just a few

steps from the main sales counter. Then he made a point of spending as little time as possible at his desk.

"You don't manage one of our locations from the office," Virgil says. "You manage one of our locations from being involved. That's how you also get to know your customers, by working with them one-on-one. You also show your employees that, 'Look, I'm willing to roll my sleeves up right beside you.'"

You don't manage one of our locations from the office. You manage one of our locations from being involved. That's how you also get to know your customers, by working with them one-on-one.

Virgil began developing relationships with local contractors and homebuilders. But he faced the same challenge in Stillwater that Craig had faced in Bartlesville, with professional builders simply thinking of Hughes Lumber as a place for amateurs. Changing the company's reputation would require a methodical effort to win over one contractor after another, a process that Virgil knew would take time. He also knew Hughes Lumber was running out of time. Not long after Virgil moved back to the Stillwater store in 1994, Lowe's announced plans to build a gigantic superstore less than two miles away.

1. Lowe's Annual Report 1987.
2. Lowe's Annual Report 1987.
3. Lowe's Annual Report 1986.
4. Lowe's Annual Report 1987.
5. Lowe's Annual Report 1987.
6. Lowe's Annual Report 1985.
7. Thomson Reuters Datastream.
8. U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics.
9. Lowe's Annual Report 1987.
10. Lowe's Annual Report 1987.
11. Lowe's Annual Report 1987.
12. U.S. Census data.
13. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
14. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
15. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
16. U.S. Census data.
17. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
18. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023.
19. *Daily Oklahoman*, 2 December 2009.
20. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023.
21. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
22. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.

Tom Hughes, 1994

CHAPTER 10

READY FOR IT

In the summer of 1995, after settling into his new role in Stillwater, Virgil Case took a road trip across Arkansas with several other Hughes Lumber managers to visit Lowe's Home Improvement Centers and see firsthand what their competition was going to look like.[1] The group spent two days driving from store to store, carrying a stack of pages an inch thick with a list of products and building materials to find in each Lowe's.

They compared prices, examined the quality of the merchandise, estimated inventory levels and noted how the stores were arranged and the way products were displayed. The level of customer service proved harder to gauge, with the Hughes managers not pretending to be real customers or doing much to hide what they were really doing. But they tried to get a general sense of the shopping experience, all with the goal of measuring their own stores against the supercenters.

The trip seemed kind of like scouting an opposing team before a big game. The Hughes Lumber players were, of course, the underdogs. They were facing the Super Bowl champions of lumberyards. But they were all the type of managers who thrived under competition and bristled with self-confidence. The mood on the trip remained lighthearted and upbeat, despite the busy schedule and the imposing size of the competition. Virgil used the opportunity to deepen friendships with his fellow store managers.

Nonetheless, under sober analysis, the experience only reinforced Virgil's impression that Hughes Lumber could not realistically hope to compete head-to-head against Lowe's for DIY customers. The company might be able to match Lowe's prices, at least on strategic items that customers would care about the most. He felt certain that Hughes Lumber could offer better customer service. Most do-it-yourself shoppers, however, would still go to Lowe's simply because it was a bigger store with a larger product assortment, and a national brand.

"With their size, it's just perception," Virgil says. "They were going to be perceived as 'bigger is better and cheaper,' and it would be very difficult to convince the average shopper otherwise. It was a battle we weren't going to win."

This was not a battle Tom Hughes planned to wage. He had come to the same conclusion a decade earlier, when Lowe's had briefly entered the Oklahoma market and was spreading quickly across other states. He suspected Lowe's would eventually return to Oklahoma, and other major retailers would come to the state, too. In response, he had set in motion a plan to transform his company's business model, moving away from cash-and-carry retail to become a supplier for local contractors and homebuilders. The effort was making progress in the mid-1990s, but contractor business had not grown enough to replace retail sales. Hughes Lumber would have to hold on to some do-it-yourself shoppers long enough to win over more contractors.

Lowe's returned to Oklahoma first in Muskogee, a town of 38,000 people about fifty miles southeast of Tulsa, in late 1995, followed by the Stillwater location in mid-1996.[2] A $10 million investment, Stillwater's supercenter sat on nineteen acres of prime real estate on North Perkins Road, the town's main suburban shopping thoroughfare. The sales floor covered 85,000 square feet, not counting a 30,000-square-foot outdoor garden center, which alone was bigger than Virgil's entire store in Stillwater. One Lowe's location could hire as many as 200 employees, more workers than Hughes Lumber had companywide.[3]

The company expected Lowe's to target relatively large markets in the state, such as Stillwater and Bartlesville, as well as major cities like Tulsa.[4] Instead, Lowe's continued to add more and more locations in Oklahoma over the next several years, opening stores even in towns as small as Grove, with a population of fewer than 7,000 people, on the banks of Grand Lake. While the chain did not enter every town where Hughes Lumber had a location, the size of a Lowe's store allowed it to pull customers from a wide area. The location in Grove, for example, would easily lure customers away from Hughes Lumber in Fairfield, a small town more than twenty minutes north of Grand Lake.

Not a single Hughes Lumber store would escape the new competition and the company knew it could not avoid taking a financial hit. Virgil and the other managers, however, came back from Arkansas with plans to soften the blow.

"We did a lot of preparation," Virgil says. "We tried to educate ourselves on their pricing, their pricing structure, and their product assortments. We were ready for it."

WE WERE GOING TO BE OK

The Hughes Lumber store in Stillwater included the company's first-ever drive-through yard, which basically turned a customer's vehicle into a giant shopping cart. Driving in one gate and out another, customers paid at a booth that resembled a drive-through bank teller's window.[5]

"Everything in the yard was marked with prices and you just loaded up whatever you wanted," explains Virgil Case., manager of the Stillwater location since 1994. "You never had to come inside."

Virgil, at the time, considered it an innovative experiment that might spread to other Hughes Lumber locations. In hindsight, however, the company was trying to keep one foot in the do-it-yourself market even while trying to step into the contractors' sphere. Retail shoppers wanted convenience. Contractors needed to buy in bulk. The drive-through yard tried to satisfy both.

"It turned out to be a lot of maintenance to keep up with," Virgil says. "And we did away with it."

The effort, nonetheless, showed the company's willingness to adapt and try new ways of doing business. Perhaps most importantly, the effort reaffirmed the urgent need to increase business from contractors. Lowe's had

Stillwater's drive-through lumberyard

cornered the market on convenience, and do-it-yourself shoppers could not be lured back to Hughes Lumber with or without a drive-through yard.

When Virgil became manager of the Stillwater location in 1994, Hughes Lumber stayed open seven days week: 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday; 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday; and noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday. Saturdays were an especially busy day as customers tackled do-it-yourself projects at home, and employees rarely got weekends off.[6]

Virgil oversaw a staff of thirty-five people, including several Oklahoma State University students. Most of them, of course, were not experts in building materials.

"Far from it," Virgil chuckles.

No expertise was required to work on the sales counter. Virgil simply needed employees who were friendly and helpful, with a reasonably good knowledge of the store's layout so they could point customers in the right direction.

"The showroom went from the front of the building clear to the back," he says. "We had kitchen and bath displays. We had storage barns. We had play sets."

Eighteen months after Lowe's opened in Stillwater, Virgil could hardly recognize his own store. Several aisles of merchandise had disappeared, and he scaled back product displays, especially for ceiling fans and light fixtures, where Lowe's offered a much larger selection.

Virgil built a temporary, partial wall stretching from the floor to halfway to the ceiling to reduce the size of the showroom and enlarge the storage area at the back of the store, where he used the space for contractor-grade building materials instead of consumer products. As cash-and-carry sales continued to fall, Virgil stocked fewer and fewer products for do-it-yourself customers. That, of course, gave those customers less and less reason to shop at Hughes Lumber, accelerating the decline of retail sales. But this strategy also allowed Virgil to focus more and more resources on his growing list of clients among local contractors and homebuilders.

"You could make an argument that maybe we waited too long to start scaling back on our product assortment," Virgil says. "Or you could make an argument that we cut back too soon."

Eventually, the checkout lanes disappeared and the staff shrunk to just a handful of sales representatives, who became more and more knowledgeable about building materials and their applications. Virgil extended the new wall floor-to-ceiling and made it permanent, leaving only a small showroom at the front of the building. In Virgil's mind, finishing the wall essentially marked the end of Hughes Lumber as it had existed for decades: It was no longer a store, but a building materials supplier.

Virgil's job as manager changed radically too. He could not simply wait for customers to come to him, so he spent less time at work and more time out in the community. Most significantly, he joined the local Homebuilders Association, where he eventually served as president.

"You get involved," Virgil says. "You get to know those customers better and you get to know potential customers, and they get to know you better. That helped a lot."

He also hired outside salespeople to visit job sites and make Hughes Lumber "much more visible with our builders."

"We reviewed our product assortments, our species of lumber, our window lines, our exterior and interior doors," Virgil says. "We made sure we had the right products that the builders expected.

"Certain contractors are really picky about the brands they come to like and prefer, or what species of lumber they want. Our builders preferred Douglas fir, so we switched our inventories to Douglas fir. You try to truly become partners with them."

Hughes Lumber had always offered delivery while Virgil had worked for the company, but he expanded the fleet of delivery vehicles in Stillwater and worked to make it more efficient.

"At first, drywall was carried in one sheet at a time off the back of a flatbed truck," Virgil remembers. "Today, we have donkey forklifts on the back of our delivery trucks. We have a boom truck to deliver drywall with, and we can get into places with those pieces of equipment that makes the job on the builder and his subcontractors a lot easier. Once again, it shows those customers that we are here to make their job easier and then be a true partner with them."

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

In the mid-1990s, as Hughes Lumber continued to move away from a retail business model, Virgil's stiffest competition came from a locally owned, independent lumberyard that already catered to contractors and homebuilders.[7] Stillwater, with a population approaching 40,000, had recently surpassed Muskogee to become the tenth largest city in Oklahoma and was continuing to grow.[8] The increasing population was bringing new homebuilders into the area who were willing to give Virgil a chance. But there were not enough of them. If Hughes Lumber was going to survive in Stillwater, Virgil had to take customers away from the competition.[9]

"It was just a matter of going the extra mile for them," Virgil says, "and showing them that 'We're here to make your life easier.'"

As more and more Stillwater contractors switched to Hughes Lumber, Virgil heard secondhand reports about the other independent lumberyard in town.

"They were surprised how quick we got our feet on the ground with the builder side of the business," he says.

Virgil, like other Hughes Lumber managers, thrived on the competition and, frankly, was glad to be out of the retail business.

"It may sound funny," he says, "but I think Lowe's did us a favor. The contractor business, to me anyway, is much more enjoyable."

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1. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
2. *Daily Oklahoman*, 18 April 1995.
3. *Daily Oklahoman*, 18 April 1995.
4. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
5. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
6. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
7. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.
8. Daily O'Collegian, 24 November 1997.
9. Virgil Case interview, 26 June 2023.

Hughes Lumber, Muskogee, Oklahoma

CHAPTER 11

LEARNING THE BUSINESS

Alone at corporate headquarters on a Sunday afternoon, Tammy Rubin was not surprised to hear Tom Hughes coming through the door. They saw each other at work almost every weekend in the early 2000s.[1]

Usually, they would acknowledge each other with a quick nod of the head or perhaps exchange a few words of small talk, then go on with their work in silence. This time, Tom stepped into her office.

"Tammy," he said in a friendly tone, "why are you always here on the weekends?"

Tom did not know it, but she always kept a box in her office for carrying files home. Even on the rare days when she did not come to the office, Tammy was still working.

"Because I love business," she told Tom. "And I'm still learning it and I've just got work to do."

Tom nodded and turned to leave, but Tammy stopped him.

"Why are you here every weekend, Tom?"

He looked back at her and grinned.

"Because my name's on the door."

No doubt Tom felt a heavy responsibility to take care of the company and the people who worked there, but he also enjoyed working. He liked reading spreadsheets. He looked forward to getting an earnings report.

Tammy shared his enthusiasm for crunching numbers. That's why Tom promoted her up the corporate ladder.

Before joining Hughes Lumber, Tammy had spent more than twenty years working as an accountant for a large corporation that held vast business holdings, giving her experience in a wide variety of markets, from oil and gas to manufacturing and real estate. She even handled aircraft charters for a while. But Tammy left that company after it went through a change of ownership and was working as a public accountant when a former boss called her.

"Tammy, do you like where you are?" he asked.

"No," she admitted. "Public accounting is not for me. I'm a nuts-and-bolts guy. It's been nice, but I'm ready to find something else."

That's what her old boss was hoping to hear. He was at Hughes Lumber now.

"Why don't you come over here and work for me?" he suggested.

When Tammy started at Hughes Lumber in June 1999, it was her first experience with a retail business. And Tom shared some advice with her on her first day.

"Retail is detail, Tammy," he said.

With that in mind, Tammy quickly settled into a seven-days-a-week routine "trying to learn everything I could."

About a year later, Tom called Tammy and the company's CFO to his office.

"I only need one of you," he announced, "and I want her."

The CFO packed up his desk and Tammy became the new controller-CFO.

"I was shocked," she remembers. "I just kept digging my heels in and learning the business and working."

Four years later, in August 2004, Tom called her to his office again.

"Tammy, I'm going to make you vice president," he said. "Not vice president of administration, vice president of the company."

She was shocked again. Not only because the job was a big step up, but also because her last name was not Hughes.

"Normally," Tom told her, "there are no officers that are not family members."

She knew that, of course. In fact, she was the only corporate officer outside the family. So why give her the title?

"You have a hell of a sense of operation," Tom told her.

"I learned so much because I watched everything that Tom did, every decision that he made," Tammy says. "His vision and his insight were unlike anything I've ever experienced."

Tammy Rubin, Controller-CFO

STEPPING BACK

Tom, like his father and his grandfather before him, wanted a smooth transition to the next generation of the Hughes family. T.J. Sr. had gradually handed over responsibilities to T.J. Jr. in the 1940s, and T.J. Jr. had done the same with Tom in the 1960s. Tom followed the same pattern with his son Robert.[2]

By the time Tammy became vice president, Robert had been working at Hughes Lumber for ten years, and had been gradually taking on more and more responsibilities. Robert became president of the company on February 16, 1999, while Tom remained chairman.[3]

Not long after making her VP, Tom called Tammy to his office one last time.[4] He was in his seventies now. While he still loved working, Tom knew it was time to slow down and let someone else have the reins.

"I'm stepping back," he told Tammy, and from now on she would report directly to Robert.

The change made little difference in her daily routine. Robert was already heavily involved in managing the company and took part in every significant discussion.

"I put Robert's name first on the email versus sending it directly to Tom with Robert copied," Tammy explains. "It was really an uneventful thing for me because I just kept doing what I was doing. We all did."

Nonetheless, Tom would be sorely missed.

"I learned so much because I watched everything that he did, every decision that he made," Tammy says. "His vision and his insight were unlike anything I've ever experienced."

Tom never "wasted words," Tammy says. He was friendly and invariably polite but not talkative. Robert, on the other hand, seemed more extroverted and fostered a more laid-back atmosphere in the office. Meetings would start with friendly banter instead of getting straight down to business. But he had the same meticulous attention to detail as Tom.

"It's a different management style, but the process didn't change," Tammy says. "We run a lean, mean operation. That hasn't changed."

Besides, it's not as if Tom completely retired or suddenly lost interest in the company and disappeared.

"He was ready to pull back, but he was always paying attention too," Robert says. "He didn't second-guess me. He didn't try to get in the middle of things. But he knew what was going on."[5]

NO ONE DOUBTED

Tom stopped coming to work on the weekends, then spent less and less time at the office even during the week.[6] Eventually, he was hardly there at all.

Robert suggested that Tammy move into Tom's old office, a larger space than she had before. She changed all the furniture but kept two drawings that Tom always had hanging on the wall, one above the other. The top drawing depicts a Victorian-era businessman, frail and thin, wearing ragged clothes with mice scampering around his feet. The captions reads, "I sold on credit!"

The second drawing shows another nineteenth-century businessman, rather stout and splendidly dressed, smoking a cigar and sitting in front of an open safe filled with money. "I sold on cash!" it says.

Tom inherited his attitude toward credit from his father and grandfather, both of whom indulged it as little as possible. The original Hughes Brothers Hardware store in Blackwell offered store credit as a necessity of doing business in the late 1890s, but T.J. Sr. watched the accounts closely and demanded prompt payments.[7] Likewise, T.J. Jr. had understood the need to provide credit to contractors, but he had steered Hughes Lumber toward cash-and-carry retail customers, minimizing the company's financial risk.

Tom ran the business the same way in the 1970s and 1980s, offering store credit but only to a limited degree.[8] The new business model that Tom pursued in the 1990s, however, required a change in attitude. If contractors were going to become the bulk of sales, Tom would have to get used to extending a lot of credit.

"It was a big deal for him," Tammy says. "It was a hurdle."

This image in Tom's office was a reflection of his feelings about credit and debt.

Tom managed credit accounts directly until he learned to trust Tammy enough to hand the responsibility to her, years after she came to work at Hughes Lumber.

"We're very aggressive in trying to get new business," Tammy says. "We've evolved in our thinking

outside the box to get these customers that may be a little bit credit challenged or have some issues."

That does not mean, however, that the company abandoned Tom's cautious approach.

"Our bad debt write-off is very, very minimal," Tammy says. "We do go to great lengths to work with our customers and make things work for both parties. But we're very, very diligent when we do our credit investigations."

Hughes Lumber had made it to the twenty-first century by evolving and adapting, decade after decade, as each generation of the family faced its own unique challenges. But the company also survived by refusing to change in some ways. From the very beginning—and in a sense that really means from the opening of the first Hughes Brothers Hardware store in 1895—the company made customer service the top priority, carefully avoided debt, and applied the golden rule to doing business, treating customers and employees the way the Hughes family itself wanted to be treated.

Tom had inherited those values from his father and grandfather, and he had passed them on to his son.

"No one doubted him," Tammy says. "Of course, Robert would put his own spin on things, we knew that. But the values wouldn't change. The ethics would be the same."

Sally and Tom Hughes

1. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023.
2. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023.
3. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023.
4. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023.
5. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023.
6. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023.
7. *Times-Record*, 4 January 1900.
8. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023.

HUGHES LUMBER: POISED FOR MORE GROWTH

Robert Hughes has combined his company's metro area operations at a Tulsa Port of Catoosa site. The Oklahoman file

Lumber company expands

• The supplier grows to seven locations, including a Tulsa Port of Catoosa facility.

BY DEBBIE BLOSSOM
The Oklahoman

Robert Hughes is an optimist.

His family-operated, 83-year-old business, Hughes Lumber Co., bought a small lumber operation near Grand Lake in October, increasing the firm's statewide locations to seven, including a consolidated site at the Tulsa Port of Catoosa.

Hughes said the Fairland lumber yard "fit our model," one that focuses on customer service and a narrow product line for

wallboard, pre-hung doors and windows.

Regardless of a construction downturn that since 2005 has cut demand for the company's products almost in half, Hughes Lumber continues to grow.

Hughes, who serves as company president, said the Fairland operation was "a well-run business and in good shape," an asset to Hughes Lumber's other lumber yards in Bartlesville, Enid, Ponca City, Muskogee and Stillwater.

And like other companies that move forward even as the economy tumbles in the oppo-

poised for the recovery.

"The market has stabilized," Hughes said, and he is projecting a modest increase in sales next year.

Hughes Lumber goes back to the 1890s, when four family members left Kansas during an Oklahoma Land Run to start what was then more of a hardware operation, Hughes said. By the 1920s, though, the business was focused on lumber.

It originally was in Cushing until Hughes' father, Tom Hughes, moved the company to Tulsa in the early 1970s.

Hughes returned to his home state in 1994 after studying in Chicago and working there in

SEE HUGHES E2

Tulsa-based Hughes able to grow despite economy

Hughes Lumber Co. employs 100 people, with 35 working at the Tulsa Port of Catoosa location, "where we service the Tulsa area jobs and contractors," said Robert Hughes, president.

The company serves 19 Oklahoma counties and has a small market in Kansas.

Hughes believes there could be more acquisitions in the company's future, particularly if any opportunities surface within 150 miles of Tulsa.

"For someone looking to sell a smaller business — we would like to, sure," he said. "We've always had a chain of lumber yards in Oklahoma."

CHAPTER 12

WE HAD TO GET OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONES

Eight years out of high school, JayJay Streck got a call from the manager of Hughes Lumber in Stillwater, Oklahoma.[1]

"Would you be interested in talking to me about a job?" Virgil Case wanted to know.

JayJay's parents had worked for a small, independent lumberyard in Hennessey, a farming community of about 2,000 people located on the historic Chisholm Trail about fifty miles due west of Stillwater. JayJay had grown up around Garrison Lumber and, when he got older, some friends went to work there. They had told him when a job came open.

"Heck, why not?" JayJay thought. "Let's give it a shot."

By the time Virgil called, JayJay had come to love working at the lumberyard and thought he might eventually run the business himself. Or maybe he

would start his own lumber company someday. Either way, he did not want to move away from family in Hennessey, and he was not interested in working anywhere else.

"I was pretty content," JayJay remembers. "I was in my hometown, in my comfort zone."

Virgil, who had established himself as one of the most successful Hughes Lumber managers during the company's transition from cash-and-carry to a contractor-based business model, had an opening for an assistant manager. JayJay, even from fifty miles away, had made a strong impression in Stillwater. Friendly with clients but aggressive against competitors, JayJay had a stellar reputation with builders and contractors in the area. He seemed to be the kind of leader that Hughes Lumber needed for its new business strategy. He "spoke the contractors' language," as Virgil would say.

JayJay initially said "no." But Virgil suggested there was no harm in talking to him.

"Just talking," he said.

JayJay agreed, but reluctantly. He met Virgil in May 1999 and left without taking the job.

On the other hand, he had not turned it down either.

"I was dragging my feet," JayJay says. "It's human nature. Nobody likes change."

A few days later, Robert Hughes himself called and asked if he could come to Hennessey to met JayJay in person. The fourth generation of his family to head the company, Robert had become president of Hughes Lumber only three months earlier. He wanted to be as aggressive in going after fresh talent as he was in going after new clients.

Robert impressed JayJay just by coming to meet him. But Robert's advice made an even bigger impression.

JayJay did not have to work for Hughes Lumber forever, or even leave Hennessey if he did not want to, Robert told him.

"Even if you come and work for us," Robert said, "and you decide you want to come back to Hennessey and buy this lumber company, think of the knowledge that you'll bring back."

JayJay had to admit, "That makes a lot of sense."

He did not want the fear of change to hold him back from a big opportunity.

"I'll give it a shot," he told Robert.

In June 1999, while still living in Hennessey, JayJay began commuting forty-five minutes to and from Stillwater every day.

A WHOLE DIFFERENT SCALE

Hughes Lumber had lost money for several years in a row in the 1990s.[2]

"We were fortunate to survive," Robert says. "Looking back, it's a pretty amazing story that we did survive really because a lot of companies that were similar to us didn't."

He gives a lot of credit to his father Tom, who was still serving as CEO as Robert took over day-to-day operations as president of Hughes Lumber in 1999. Tom had always been careful to keep the company's debt to a minimum, which gave him a lot of "dry powder" to use during the battle to survive Lowe's arrival in Oklahoma.

"We were fortunate to survive," Robert says. "Looking back, it's a pretty amazing story that we did survive really because a lot of companies that were similar to us didn't."

"Our banking relationships remained strong," Robert says. "They stood behind what we were doing. During the mid-1990s, that was the thing that really threatened us the most."

Tom had devised a plan to transition from cash-and-carry retail to a business model focused on supplying homebuilders and contractors. Our employees, especially store managers, made it happen, Robert says.

"Everyone was very committed and cooperative," Robert says. "We had a plan and we were able to see it through due to the hard work and dedication of our employees. So, it all worked out fine in the end."

Now heading into the twenty-first century, Robert was taking a bigger role in running the company and was ready for Hughes Lumber to do more than just survive. He wanted to start growing again. That would mean recruiting high-quality managers who could mirror the success that Craig Hiemstra was having in Bartlesville and Virgil Case was demonstrating in Stillwater.

JayJay, one of the first new employees hired to be a part of Robert's growth plan, joined Hughes Lumber as an assistant manager, but that was only going to be a stepping stone.[3]

"You come on as assistant manager," Virgil had told him. "We'll train you, and then you'll become a manager."

JayJay thought earning the promotion might take a year or more, but it came much sooner. He was already an accomplished salesman with several years of experience in the lumber business. He adapted quickly to the scale of operations at Hughes Lumber, which dwarfed the smaller company he had been working for.

"Where you were only making maybe five deliveries a day, now you're making twenty deliveries a day," JayJay says. "Delivering lumber is the same no matter where you're doing it, but it was a whole different volume, a whole different scale."

On January 1, 2000, after only six months of learning from Virgil, JayJay left Stillwater to become the manager of Hughes Lumber in Ponca City, a north-central Oklahoma town with several sprawling oil refineries. From a distance at night, the smoke stacks almost looked like a big-city skyline stretching across the southern sky. But the Oil Bust had hit Ponca City particularly hard and job losses peaked in 1993 as more than five percent of the town's population faced layoffs.[4] Wickes Lumber, a regional chain, wanted out of the Ponca market as the local economy slumped into a prolonged recession, and Hughes Lumber seized the opportunity to buy the location at a bargain price.[5]

The opportunity turned out to be a profitable investment, despite Ponca City's population continuing to dwindle throughout the 1990s. Robert even credits

"Each time you move to a new place, you have to prove yourself again," JayJay says. "But if you get better at what you're doing every day, people will follow that."

JayJay Streck, Vice President of Sales and Operations

the Ponca location with helping Hughes Lumber endure the financial crunch of the Oil Bust. As Oklahoma's economy recovered, however, Lowe's opened a Ponca City store in 1996. Like the other places where Lowe's built a store, the local Hughes Lumber's retail sales immediately plunged.

Robert needed Ponca City to have a new manager who could build ties with local contractors the way Virgil had done in Stillwater. Robert sent JayJay.[6]

CAN'T DISAPPOINT THE CUSTOMER

More than forty miles north of Stillwater, Ponca City sits near the Kansas border, almost doubling JayJay's daily commute to ninety minutes. He still did not want to move out of his hometown, but JayJay quickly grew tired of the long drive from Hennessey.

After only eleven months in Ponca City, he jumped at the chance to take over the Hughes Lumber location in Enid, a town of 47,000 people in north-central Oklahoma.

Twenty percent bigger than Stillwater and nearly twice the size of Ponca City, Enid seemed to offer more growth opportunities for Hughes Lumber, and for JayJay personally. More importantly for him, his office in Enid sat only eighteen miles from his house in Hennessey, a drive he could make in less than twenty minutes. It was almost like working and living in the same town again.

"It was a great fit," JayJay says. "I loved it from day one."

He already knew some Enid homebuilders and contractors from his days working for a local lumberyard in Hennessey, which made regular deliveries to customers in Enid. His predecessor as the manager at Hughes Lumber had already built up a significant client list for the location. JayJay would not have to worry about making the transition away from cash-and-carry retail—the new business model was already in place and proving to be successful in Enid. If anything, the previous manager had been

too good at the job, making it difficult for JayJay to prove to his clients and even to his own staff that he was equally capable.

"Each time you move to a new place, you have to prove yourself again," JayJay says. "But if you get better at what you're doing every day, people will follow that."

This store was by far the biggest lumberyard he had managed, exponentially more complex than the small company where he started in Hennessey.

"At a smaller yard, you might be the guy who is pulling the load and making the delivery," JayJay says. "You're relying on yourself and just a small group of other people."

Bigger yards, like the Hughes Lumber in Enid, require a well-organized team. Everyone is assigned a task, not necessarily understanding how it is part of a larger goal of filling an order. But if everyone stays on schedule, the deadline is me,t and the customer is happy.

If one person falls behind, however, the entire plan starts to unravel. That's when decisive leadership becomes vital.

"It's complex," JayJay says. "Somebody has got to change what they're doing, but that's going to change what other people are doing too. You have a lot of moving parts that all have to come together."

No matter how hectic a day became, however, one very important detail could not change, JayJay says.

We can't disappoint the customer.

"We can't change the delivery schedule. Our schedule stays the same no matter what. We can't disappoint the customer."

Employees at Hughes Lumber worked hard to always meet the delivery schedule, ensuring happy customers.

CHANGE WITH THE TIMES

Enid was adding nearly 300 residents a year when JayJay arrived in the early 2000s, which was enough to keep local homebuilders busy.[7] The population was not growing fast enough, however, to lure new contractors to town. JayJay would have to look beyond Enid itself to find a significant number of new customers.

Under his management in the early 2000s, the location's service area stretched forty-two miles north to the Kansas border and nearly ninety miles west to Woodward, a town of 15,000 near the Oklahoma Panhandle.[8] JayJay did not venture farther east than Interstate 35, a little more than thirty miles from Enid, to respect the territory covered by the Hughes Lumber in Stillwater. But most importantly for his expansion goals, JayJay reached out to contractors and homebuilders as far south as Oklahoma City, a 100-mile drive from Enid.

The state capital's population was growing by more than 3,000 people a year in the early 2000s, and some years it grew by more than 6,000 people.[9] That's not even counting the rapid of growth of the city's northern suburbs, where Edmond alone was building more than 500 new houses a year.[10]

Across most of JayJay's territory—stretching across the rural expanse of northwest Oklahoma—small-town homebuilders tended to be set in their ways.[11] Most of them had been framing houses for decades and had always used the same species of wood. Prices might fluctuate, but they wanted what they wanted.

"They're not willing to change," JayJay says. "They don't even want to talk about it."

In a more competitive housing market like metropolitan Oklahoma City, builders are always looking for ways to trim costs. If Douglas fir is trading at a good price, they'll take it. If the price of yellow pine drops, they'll try it instead.

"Their question is always, 'How can you save us money?'" JayJay says. "It's very different in a rural market, where the question is, 'Can you get us what we want?'"

For JayJay, accommodating the two markets was almost like running two lumberyards from the same location. Price was the driving factor at one while it hardly mattered at the other. But the common factor was customer satisfaction.

"All of our competitors have basically the same products. Lumber is lumber," JayJay says.

Then how can Hughes Lumber stand out?

"Get the customer what he wants, when he wants it." JayJay says. "Do that and the customer stays loyal to you."

Contractors do not particularly care where a place of business is located. They simply want the material to be on the job site on time and in full. To make operations speedier, Hughes Lumber significantly expanded its fleet of delivery vehicles. By the late 2010s, as the Oklahoma City market became increasingly important to Hughes Lumber, the company was using semitrucks with fifty-foot trailers that could deliver "an entire house" in one trip.

"You change with the times and you adjust," JayJay says. "That's what we've done to grow the business."

A NEW ROLE

JayJay had initially hesitated to take a job at Hughes Lumber partly because he had bigger goals in Hennessey, where he thought he might someday run the small, rural lumberyard where he was working at the time, maybe even own it. Working for Hughes did not temper his goals. It only channeled his ambition in a different direction.

He told Robert several times over the years that he was happy with his job, but not satisfied.

"I want to be more than a manager someday," JayJay said. "I don't want to be a manager forever. I want more."

Robert saw his talent and wanted to make the most of it.[12] He knew if JayJay did not get a bigger role within the company he would eventually leave to find opportunities somewhere else. The two of them would often discuss "a new role" for JayJay, but for several years the job description remained vague.

Finally, in the early 2020s, Robert created a new position at the corporate offices in Tulsa.[13]

"All right, it's time to get you put into this new role," he told JayJay one day. "This is what we're going to do. You're going to be vice president of sales and operations."

From now on, all store managers would report directly to JayJay instead of to Robert, who would be handing off some of his day-to-day responsibilities to focus more on strategic goals.

The arrangement pushed both men "out of our comfort zones," JayJay says.

"That's the hardest thing for human nature to do, to get out of your comfort zone," he says. "But anytime you're making yourself do it, you're going to grow. And that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to grow personally, and we wanted the company to grow. And we knew to make that happen, we had to get out of our comfort zones."

His new office window overlooks the lumberyard at the Tulsa Port of Catoosa, an industrial park on the northeast outskirts of Tulsa, where the Hughes Lumber corporate office has been located since 2008.[14] But he spends a lot of time away from his desk, traveling the state to visit Hughes Lumber locations.[15]

While visiting each location, he talks to each manager about the unique issues faced in the local markets. But he never micromanages. JayJay wants to give each manager "the room to make their own mistakes and to learn from those mistakes."

The management style comes from Robert, who handled local managers the same way for twenty-five years when JayJay reported directly to him. Now Robert avoids micromanaging JayJay.

"I run it like it's JayJay's lumber company," JayJay says. "It's my responsibility. And that's the way Robert wants it. If he didn't trust me, he would make some changes. But that's why I'm still here. I enjoy working for Robert. He lets you learn and grow and do what you do best."

JayJay marked his twenty-fifth anniversary with the company in 2024. He has never been sorry he took the job.

"It's been a great adventure," he says. "Every day, I wake up happy and get started. A positive attitude goes a long way. But it's easy for me to be positive because I enjoy what I get to do."

1. JayJay Streak interview, 28 June 2023
2. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023
3. JayJay Streak interview, 28 June 2023
4. Diversifying into Knowledge-based Industries in Ponca City, Oklahoma after the Departure of Conoco Phillips, International Economic Development Council, 2008.
5. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023
6. JayJay Streak interview, 28 June 2023
7. U.S. Census data
8. JayJay Streak interview, 28 June 2023
9. U.S. Census data
10. U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics
11. JayJay Streak interview, 28 June 2023
12. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023
13. JayJay Streak interview, 28 June 2023
14. *Tulsa World*, 10 December 2009
15. JayJay Streak interview, 28 June 2023

COVID

Tammy Rubin, CFO and vice president of Hughes Lumber, was flying back to Tulsa from a business trip when she first heard about a mysterious and deadly virus that was beginning to spread from China to the United States and the rest of the world.[1]

News reports in early 2020 sounded terrifying. But Tammy remembered previous outbreaks—bird flu in the mid-2010s, for example—that initially sparked fears of widespread disruptions to the economy and day-to-day life. In hindsight, they did not seem so bad.

"I wondered if this was going to be any different," Tammy says.

At the corporate offices in Tulsa, however, Robert Hughes was not going to take any chances.

"We're going to be proactive," the president of the company told Tammy. "We're going to take care of our employees."

The leadership team extended sick leave and worked out contingency plans to continue making deliveries even if a large number of employees had to miss work at the same time. They even considered scenarios in which the company would have to temporarily cease operations. As concerns grew over the economic impact of the pandemic, Robert sought to reassure employees.

"We're going to take care of it," he told them. "We're going to work together."

Oklahoma initiated a partial shutdown on March 24, 2020, followed by a more comprehensive shutdown order on April 1.[2] Restaurants and many retailers closed. Most office spaces transitioned to remote work. Even churches canceled public services. Construction and related industries, however, were declared essential and became exempt from the shutdown, allowing Hughes Lumber to remain open during the pandemic.

It was not, however, business as usual.[3]

"COVID really changed a lot for us," Tammy says.

Of course, the company took the standard precautions of cleaning workplaces more often and keeping as much distance between employees as possible. More significant changes included a move toward digital recordkeeping to minimize paperwork. Drivers adopted contactless deliveries, taking photos to confirm that a load had been dropped instead of asking for a signature.

The pandemic pushed the U.S. economy into a recession in 2020, but spending on home improvements actually grew more than three percent, reaching nearly $420 billion that year.[4] More or less trapped at home, residents modified their living spaces for work, school, and leisure activities, giving an enormous boost to contractors and homebuilders. Lumber companies were among the few businesses to see revenues grow during the shutdowns.[5]

"It didn't impact our business as much as it did a lot of companies," Tammy says.

1. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023
2. National Institutes of Health
3. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023
4. Baker, Kermit. "Despite Devastating Effect on the Broader Economy, Pandemic Has Been a Boon for U.S. Home Improvement, "Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2021.
5. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023

Robert Hughes, 2025

CHAPTER 13

ALL THE TIME

With profits growing again in the early 2000s, company President Robert Hughes invited managers to go to Baltimore for the Orgill Brothers Dealers Market, an annual trade show where they could examine new products and share ideas with each other as a group. Robert wanted to show appreciation to some of the employees who had helped the business survive into the twenty-first century.[1]

The sheer size of the event in Baltimore impressed Dan Etzkorn, who had never seen a trade show like it before.[2] Thousands of people had come from all across the United States, even from around the world. Hundreds of booths displayed every conceivable type of hardware product and building material, stretching across six city blocks.

"We were all kind of wide-eyed," Dan says. "We didn't know to take it all in."

Along with Dan, the group included Craig Hiemstra, Virgil Case, and JayJay Streck.

After a long day at the conferences and browsing the seemingly endless number of displays, the group enjoyed a great steak dinner with all the trimmings. Dan eyed Robert nervously, worried how much the group was spending on the company's tab.

"It had to be a lot," Dan says. "We were all just sitting around having a good time and maybe got a little carried away."

But Robert was having as much fun as the rest of them. He wanted to show gratitude for the hard work the managers had done and hoped to forge a tighter bond among the team members.

"Going out of town together, combining pleasure and work, is important and very beneficial," Robert says.

SITTING DOWN WITH FAMILY

Dan and the others who went to Baltimore came to see the trip as a milestone.[3] The trip celebrated the successful end of the company's long campaign to reinvent itself as a building materials supplier instead of a retail outlet. And the trip marked the beginning of a new era under Robert's leadership.

Robert had been with the company for ten years now.[4] His father, Tom Hughes, had been gradually handing over the reins, giving Robert a major new responsibility every few years. By 2003, Tom was in his seventies and taking a more hands-off approach to the company, although he still served as a valuable sounding board for his son.

"He was very good about allowing me to make my own decision and my own mistakes," Robert says. "He didn't second-guess me. He didn't try to get in the middle of things. We had a great working relationship. Working with family is a privilege."

Hughes Lumber had always prided itself on fostering a friendly work environment. Tom had embraced the Christian idea of servant leadership, believing he should help his employees as much as they helped him.[5] One example of this attitude came early in Tom's career, not long after he had joined his family's company in the late 1950s.

The manager of the Hughes Lumber in Drumright had been planning a long vacation with his wife to visit their adult son and his young family in North Dakota.[6] The manager was going to have to cancel the trip, however, when no one could cover for him while he was away. Tom, when he heard about the situation, volunteered to spend two weeks in Drumright to manage the store himself and allow the manager to enjoy a much-needed vacation.

That kind of servant leadership inspired intense loyalty from Tom's employees.[7]

"It's not a big company," explains Craig Hiemstra, who worked for Hughes Lumber for more than thirty years before he retired in 2020. "Everybody knows you, and you're treated like friends and family. You really are. There's not this corporate mentality to it."

Hughes Lumber had always prided itself on fostering a friendly work environment. Tom had embraced the Christian idea of servant leadership, believing he should help his employees as much as they helped him.

Hughes Lumber, under both Tom and Robert, treated Craig so well that he encouraged his wife and all six of his children to work for the company too at various stages of their lives. His five sons have worked at various Hughes Lumber locations over the years while his daughter helped remodel some of the locations. His wife used to help take inventories at different locations.

"Whenever I had an opportunity for someone in my family to work for the company, I always took it," Craig says. "It just seemed natural because the company was part of my family too. It still is."

Although he has been retired since 2020, Craig still gets an invitation to the company Christmas party every year. Hosted at the Hughes family home, the party has become a cherished holiday tradition for many employees and their families.[8]

"You don't get that with every company," Dan Etzkorn says. "When we go on buying trips, when we go to events, when we go to workshops, or any other place, we always have dinner together. And it always feels like sitting down with family."

Dan remembers a time, while he was working as a yard foreman in the 1990s, when his five-year-old daughter was hospitalized with type 1 diabetes. Dan missed a week of work, a situation that might have caused friction with some employers. But the Hughes family called him personally, not to ask when he was going to be back at work, but to check on how his daughter was doing.

"They have just been phenomenal for me and my family," Dan says. "Really, they are family too."

Like Robert promised in Baltimore twenty years ago, Hughes Lumber has made team-building experiences a priority ever since. Managers and executives routinely attend conference, visit trade shows, or find other reasons to take trips together, sometimes just for recreation.

"We have been on planes, boats, and trains together," Dan says. "We've done a lot together, and we've done it not just as co-workers but more like brothers."

ALWAYS CHANGING

In mid-2008, Robert moved the company's administrative offices from 66th Street and Sheridan

Hughes employees build and assemble pre-hung doors at the company's Port of Catoosa facility.

Road in suburban South Tulsa to the Tulsa Port of Catoosa, an industrial facility on the northeastern outskirts of the city.[9] Hughes Lumber already had a significant presence at the port, where the company operated an intra-company distribution center as well as a shop for manufacturing pre-hung doors. The corporate headquarters, however, had been in a more white-collar neighborhood. The move to an industrial area reflected Robert's pragmatic approach to finances as Hughes Lumber, along with the rest of the country, faced a prolonged recession in the late 2000s.

As the most inland port in the United States, the Tulsa Port of Catoosa provides access via the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers to the Gulf of Mexico, more than six hundred miles from Tulsa.[10] Barges come and go with 2.5 million tons of wheat, fertilizer, steel, and manufacturing goods each year. Just as importantly for Hughes Lumber, the port offers excellent rail service, which is how the company receives forest products from the Pacific Northeast. It's also a convenient location for distributing materials to Tulsa-area homebuilders.[11]

Combining all three functions at one site—administrative offices, distribution center, and lumberyard—allowed the company to cut costs at a crucial moment. A record number of subprime mortgages defaulted in 2008, causing home prices to plummet nearly thirty percent nationwide.[12] The U.S. unemployment rate skyrocketed from five percent at the end of 2007 to ten percent in October 2009, and it did not fully recover until 2015.

Meanwhile, home construction in Oklahoma dropped by fifty-five percent between 2008 and 2009, radically reducing demand for building materials. Nonetheless, Hughes Lumber continued to prosper. The

acquisition of an independent lumberyard in Fairland, a small community near Grand Lake in northeastern Oklahoma, brought the company's total number of locations to seven statewide in December 2009.[13]

Hughes Lumber then employed roughly 100 people across Oklahoma, including thirty-five at the Port of Catoosa. The workforce has remained essentially the same size ever since, even as sales have continued to grow.[14]

"We run a lean, mean operation," says Tammy Rubin, CFO and vice president.

When Tammy joined the company in 1999, retail sales still accounted for roughly twenty percent of revenue. Now that revenue stream amounts to less than ten percent. The contractor business has continued to grow as Hughes Lumber has made an ever-increasing effort to appeal to different areas of the construction industry.

"We really reach out," Tammy says. "We've done multifamily housing. We've done large contractors, small contractors, DIY. If there's business out there, we will find it."

Future growth for the company will come two ways, Tammy predicts.

First, Hughes Lumber seems likely to add a small number of additional locations, although not necessarily right away.

"But we are always looking for opportunities and considering possibilities," Tammy says. "We're cautious about it. We aren't in a rush about it. But when the circumstances are right, we'll make a move."

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the company will continue to win over new customers. Some will come to Hughes Lumber as the industry continues to consolidate and smaller lumber companies go out of business. Other customers will be new to the area as an increasing number of regional and national homebuilders move into Oklahoma.

"I see residential housing just continuing to grow," bringing new business for Hughes Lumber as well as the company's main competitors across the state, Tammy says.

"The pie will be growing, so our piece of the pie will be growing too. A lot of growth, in my perspective, is going to come from larger builders. They're not just building three, four, five homes at a time. They're building whole subdivisions."

JayJay Streck agrees that economic growth, especially in the metropolitan areas around Tulsa and Oklahoma City, will bring potential new customers into the company's territory.[15] But Hughes Lumber will have to work hard to get them.

"Everybody is competition," JayJay says. "It's not just one company out there going after the same customers. You're competing against everybody every day. It's everybody going after all the customers."

The sales pitch for Hughes Lumber has not changed much since the 1990s, when the company began aggressively pursuing business from contractors and homebuilders.

"Give us a chance to sit down and let us explain to you why we're different," JayJay tells people. "We're not going to just deliver materials to you. We will solve problems for you. We will show you how to be more profitable."

Hughes Lumber Headquarters


Arkansas River.
Port of Catoosa
Hughes Lumber
Headquarters

THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

In spring 2023, while making his way through an airport to return to Oklahoma after a trade show, Dan Etzkorn ran into an executive from a rival lumber company.[16] As a longtime manager of Hughes Lumber in Muskogee, Dan had served on the board for the Oklahoma Lumbermen's Association and had gotten to know several officials from various lumber companies across the state, including the one who recognized him in the terminal.

"Would you be interested in doing something different?" the executive wanted to know.

Dan did not hesitate to answer.

"No."

The executive might have been offering him a better job with a higher salary. Dan did not bother to ask because it would not have changed his mind.

He had been with Hughes Lumber since 1992, only the second place he had ever worked since high school, and he hoped to retire from the company in a few years.

Dan Etzkorn, Muskogee Manager

"It's not a matter of, 'Am I frustrated? Do I want to try something different? Can you give me more money?' I'm not interested in all that. The thing is, I don't think I can find what I've got here anywhere else."

Dan refers to other Hughes Lumber managers as "brothers." Robert Hughes, the president, treats Dan so much like a member of the family that customers in Muskogee sometimes assume he actually is.

"Good morning, Mr. Hughes," they might say.

"Oh, wait a second," Dan will say. "I'm not the owner, I'm the manager."

Working at Hughes Lumber, however, was not "just work" for Dan and his "brothers."

"It's more than a job," he says. "I really do feel like I'm a part of something."

Of course, that only makes him want to work even harder.

Robert Hughes is convinced that employee loyalty has played a crucial role in the company's success and longevity.[17] His family has deliberately fostered a positive work environment ever since four brothers came to Oklahoma Territory to go into the hardware business in 1895, decades before Hughes Lumber itself was born. Treat people well, Robert says, and they will return the favor.

"We've been lucky in the people who have worked for us over the years," he says. "There's been trust, passion, there's been commitment in each generation by people who wanted to make the company better than when they found it."

People will always need lumber companies. Market forces will change. Corporate strategies will change. Technology will too. But the basic need for lumber will not go away.

"We're providing materials for building shelter," Robert says. As long as people walk this Earth, there's going to be a need for that. Products evolve, but you're still selling and distributing big, heavy building materials for shelter."

Contractors will remain the company's primary focus, with regional and national homebuilders becoming increasingly active in Oklahoma.

"In order to do business with them, we have to do some things differently," Robert says. "We're taking more of a statewide approach because they want someone to cover the entire state for them. That has become, strategically, our mindset—to cover the areas of the state where the big builders are building."

That primarily means the metropolitan areas around Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Grand Lake. Hughes Lumber, however, has no intention of forsaking the legacy markets in Stillwater, Bartlesville, Ponca City, Muskogee, and Enid.

"We're on the right track," Robert says. "We've experienced a lot of growth. We know what we need to do to keep growing. We're stronger than we ever have been and that will continue."

Of course, the future is notoriously unpredictable. Hughes Lumber has faced several challenges that previous generations had not foreseen—the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, World War II and suburbanization, the Oil Bust and the rise of national competitors.

"Looking back on it," Robert says, "it's a pretty amazing story that we did survive."

New challenges will surely arise that the current leaders of Hughes Lumber cannot anticipate right now.

"The most important things don't change," Robert says. "You come to work every day and you do what's right for your customers and for your employees. It's that simple."

When those challenges come, the company will fall back on age-old principles that have guided Hughes Lumber and the Hughes family for more than a century now.

T.J. Hughes, Robert's great-grandfather, made a promise in 1902: "The entire business will be conducted on a fair and square basis."

Integrity. Handwork. Treating others the way you want to be treated.

"The most important things don't change," Robert says. "You come to work every day and you do what's right for your customers and for your employees. It's that simple."

1. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023
2. Dan Etzkorn interview, 13 June 2023
3. Dan Etzkorn interview, 13 June 2023
4. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023
5. Sally Hughes interview, 7 June 2023
6. Drumright Derrick, 15 October 1957
7. Craig Hiemstray interview, 12 June 2023
8. Dan Etzkorn interview, 13 June 2023
9. *Tulsa World*, 10 December 2009
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14. Tammy Rubin interview, 12 July 2023
15. JayJay Streck interview, 28 June 2023
16. Dan Etzkorn interview, 13 June 2023
17. Robert Hughes interview, 17 July 2023


KANSAS
OKLAHOMA
MISSOURI
ARKANSAS
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Joplin
Ponca City
Bartlesville / Dewey
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Fairland
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YEARS
1925–2025
Hughes
LUMBER

EPILOGUE

A PROUD LEGACY

Celebrating its centennial year in 2025, Hughes Lumber is one of the largest independent lumber and building material suppliers in Oklahoma, serving professional contractors in more than sixty-five counties from eight locations including the newest in Whitesboro, Texas opened in 2025.

We cannot overstate our appreciation for the patronage and support from the thousands and thousands of customers, employees and suppliers who have been part of our history. We are truly humbled.

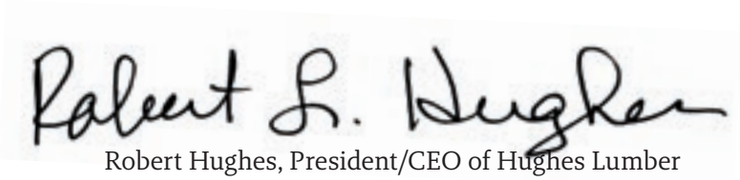
During the last 100 years, Oklahoma lumbermen have experienced major challenges, including the Dust Bowl, five Oil Busts, fifteen recessions, six wars, numerous U.S. and local housing market crashes, the big-box store invasion of the 1990s, and a pandemic.

In that time, hundreds of lumberyard companies have come and gone in the state. But Hughes Lumber survived with the promise to “Lighten the Load of Building with dependable, responsive, professional, knowledgeable, and friendly customer service.” This, along with vision, commitment, courage, and the willingness to make tough decisions, has enabled growth and prosperity for the company along with employees, customers, and vendors.

Tom Hughes passed away on October 18, 2023 at 90 years old. The Hughes family intends to own, operate, and grow the company for many years to come. Our independence means an unwavering focus on what is best for our contractor customers and employees right here at home.

Large national lumberyard companies are a major force in the industry like never before. They are driven by Wall Street investors and private equity firms, with priorities other than what is best for local customers and employees. This presents a huge competitive advantage for Hughes Lumber and other strong, independent lumber companies now and going forward.

Customers, employees, and vendors appreciate the value of Hughes Lumber’s independence. We are proud of our legacy, but what matters most is our on-going commitment to being the best lumber and building material supplier and employer in our markets. This will allow us to continue successfully for generations to come.



Robert Hughes, President/CEO of Hughes Lumber

We cannot overstate our appreciation for the patronage and support from the thousands and thousands of customers, employees and suppliers who have been part of our history. *We are truly humbled*.

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100
YEARS
1925–2025
Hughes
LUMBER