

Ability, Caring Boosted Banker

By RON CHEPESIUK
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It was one of more than 1,000 letters Rock Hill banker Charles Longerman Cobb received in 1946.

A New Jersey hobbyist who collected old vehicle license plates wrote to ask Cobb to send him S.C. tags for certain years. The accommodating Cobb immediately sent a letter to the S.C. Highway Department inquiring about old auto tags. Failing to locate the needed plates through official channels, he inserted an appeal in his daily bank ad appearing in the local newspaper.

That was the way Charles Cobb operated. What the Saturday Evening Post story, which had prompted the deluge of mail, said was true. Cobb was a man "who would buy all of a newsboy's papers because the little salesman got pretty cold sometimes before they got rid of that last one."

Cobb, for more than a half-century one of Rock Hill's leading businessmen, was born on April 14, 1883, in Chester, the son of Charles Edward and Mary Ann Frew Cobb. His father died when he was 2, and soon after, his mother took Charles and the rest of the family to Rock Hill to live.

From a very early age, Cobb's business ability was evident. At age 12 he became a newspaper carrier who not only sold papers himself, but soon had 20 boys working for him. He handled papers from New York to New Orleans for distribution in the York County area.

From his newspaper work, Cobb developed a strong reading habit. In his adult life he read 11 newspapers a day, from The New York Times to The Fort Mill Times.

Earning \$70 to \$80 a month as a newspaper distributor, Cobb be-



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came interested in banking. He took a job at Rock Hill's National Union Bank at much less salary, \$5 a month, in order to break into the profession.

He started off as a messenger boy, but quickly climbed the corporate ladder to collecting clerk, then bookkeeper and finally assistant cashier.

In 1905 at age 22, Cobb left the National Union Bank to organize the Peoples Bank and Trust Co. with his cousin, John R. London. In 1909 the institution became chartered as the People's National Bank of Rock Hill. He became president in 1939 and chairman of the board in 1949.

Many people well beyond the York County boundaries recognized the talent and business ability of Charles Cobb. In 1932 at the request of Herbert Hoover, he took a six-month leave of absence to direct a federal program that involved crop production loans. The programs covered 19 states from Maine to Florida. He arranged 138,000 loans amounting to about \$40 million.

He still found the time to be active in the community and his profession, serving, among other capacities, as a Winthrop College trustee, member of the Kiwanis Club, president of the South Carolina Bankers Association and vice president of the American Bankers Association.

When once asked to account for his success, Cobb merely said, "People have been kind to me and I love my work." Believing that the greatest word in the English language was think, he had the word put on plaques and then placed them throughout the bank as reminders for his employees.

The small-town banker skyrocketed to national fame in the 4,000-word story that appeared in the Nov. 20, 1946, issue of the Saturday Evening Post.

In addition to the fan mail, messengers brought in a steady stream of telegrams to his office. The telephone calls were so numerous that local residents had to wait hours to get their calls through.

People took the Post story at face value and showered Cobb with pleas for money, loans and help for every conceivable problem. Cobb employed an additional secretary to help him open letters and answer everyone who had written him.

Cobb died on March 14, 1953, one month short of his 70th birthday.

Among his papers, now preserved in the Winthrop Archives, is a resolution of respect issued soon after his death. It reads: "All those who knew Charles Cobb well found him intensely alive, incessantly observant, broad gauged in his understanding and radiating in infectious enthusiasm."

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