

RAYMOND'S PLACE  
by James Dawson

Actually it wasn't really called Raymond's place and I never called him Raymond. It was Mills Antiques/Grandma's Old Books and he was Mr. Mills even when I got to know him.

As a kid, I had seen this intriguing business on Rt. 50 just south of Cambridge from the rear window of my parent's Buick as we sped past. The collecting gene, which I have, sometimes skips generations so we never stopped in. But as soon as I got my drivers license, that's where I headed. That old Choptank River bridge seemed about nine inches wide the first time I drove across it, let me tell you.

The siren call of the store was irresistible. "Mills Antiques" and "Mills Treasure & Trash!" were painted on the front building, while the rear shed proclaimed "Grandma's Old Books". No expensive pretension here. The lights on either side of the front door winked at you as the handwritten sign teased you to "Come in and buy what your grandmother threw away."

As I swung open the door that first time, it was like entering the Eastern Shore's answer to King Tut's tomb. Yes, there were wonderful things inside. If not from pharaoh's tomb, then from numberless Eastern Shore attics. Not just thousands of old books, but of everything and anything else you would never find in a normal store or even most antique shops.

Need a horn for a 1910 Edison cylinder phonograph? Well, I did. Raymond had one and it was a bargain at \$5. It still had some original paint on it. Actually, he let me have it for \$3 because I pointed out that one end was rusty. And for the record, his prices were so reasonable that I felt badly about getting that \$2 off, so I never asked him for a discount again. Need a Shirley Temple mug? There was a row of them on a window ledge. Was the tool kit of your Model T Ford missing a wrench? There it was. How about a set of frosted glass shades for the chandelier in a 1930 brown shingled bungalow? No problem. And in the back building, chairs enough for everyone to sit on to read all the books.

Stuff was everywhere. Stacks of plates, old hats, lamp shades, knickknacks and whatnots as far as the eye could see. It wasn't a store for the claustrophobic. Old picture frames, weird Oliver typewriters, glassware, postcards, tools. A shelf labeled "Plate Land" held souvenir plates from other states. A baby carriage dangled from the ceiling. There were about half a dozen oak china closets around, too. They weren't for sale but held certain select items. These were locked, but "Ask For Key" was printed on a strip of masking tape stuck to the glass. Raymond never minded opening them for you and there was always a small ceremony finding the right key.

I never could figure out why some things went into the china closets while others floated around loose. Things you thought should have been locked up weren't and yet you would wonder why some things were put in there because they didn't seem to be expensive or fragile. I never bothered to ask why, it was just part of the mystique of the place.

At first glance, everything seemed to be in a hopeless jumble, but with repeated visits you learned how to scan the stock to see if anything new was added. And when

Raymond started putting things aside to show you, you knew you were in. It was a friendly place, too. As one sign put it "You Are Only A Stranger Once."

I tended to think of it as Raymond's place because he was the talkative one in charge of sales and customer relations, but actually it had been started in 1959 by Raymond and his two brothers Albert and Henry. I knew about Henry, but I had been going there for quite sometime before I was aware there was a third brother Albert, the oldest. He was as quiet as Raymond was talkative. You hardly knew he was there, but Raymond credited him with constructing the buildings and stocking the bookshelves. There were tens of thousands of books in the rear building and he kept them in reasonable order. All were priced with pencil in Raymond's blocky printing.

I had mistakenly assumed that Henry was the oldest because he was so gaunt and frail looking. He usually sat warming himself next to the wood stove. There was another ceremony when it was time for you to check out, Henry's job was to write down the prices on a notepad as Raymond called them out. Henry would then do the total and then pass the pad to Raymond who glanced at it and then passed it on to you, so you could check the addition if you wanted to. It was always correct. They used a cigar box for a cash register.

Security? The back corner that served as an office was just as piled up as everything else. I'll bet that even if you saw just where he put the cigar box, that two minutes later you wouldn't have been able to find it if your life depended on it. It just blended in with everything else, perfectly camouflaged. Yet they could find it in a second. On nice days, they would all sit in lawn chairs out in the back yard under shade trees and chat with the regulars. All the doors were left wide open. You would go outside if you wanted to buy something.

I always admired their no overhead style of business. They didn't have a mortgage or rent payments to worry about. The land was cheap when they bought it and he and his brothers built the buildings themselves. First a white cinderblock 20' x 30' building and then a larger 25' x 65' shed out back. They had an outhouse so there was no water or sewer bill, a pay phone which meant there was no phone bill and finally they had a wood stove for heat. They may have burned old books for fuel for all I know. That cigar box served as a office equipment. Aside from property taxes and routine maintenance, the only bill was the puny electric bill from the few lights he had and a radio that played constantly in the back building, permanently tuned to WCEM, the local radio station. There was a note taped to it asking customers not to change the station.

Before you smile at these rudimentary business arrangements, just remember that because they had one of the lowest overheads of any business anywhere, virtually all their income was profit. In the roughly four decades Mills Antiques/Grandma's Old Books was open, it certainly outlasted countless upscale shoppes and boutiques in their high rent locations.

Their other common sense business decision was to buy cheap yet price things reasonably so that there was a constant turnover in the stock. Nothing murders a business faster than for customers to see the same overpriced and unsold items time after time. I bought a handmade, pre-Civil War ladder back chair there for probably twelve dollars. All it needed was a new splint seat. I still have it.

In their prime, they had a side business where they got paid for cleaning out people's attics and then sold some of that same stuff in their store. Very clever, like

being paid twice for the same item. They never used price guides to establish values, which really didn't exist when they started up anyway, they just had the knack of knowing what things were worth.

Mr. Mills loved to buy and sell things, and he had a reputation for being fair with everyone. I don't even think he cared that much about the money, he enjoyed finding things for his regular customers who sometimes stopped in as often as once a week. It wasn't just a business, it was also a hobby, an entertainment and a social affair all rolled in together. Raymond also loved VWs and if you had one, that's all he wanted to talk about. Actually, he would talk about VWs even if you didn't have one, so you got to hear what Mr. Ben at the service department said regardless of what kind of car you drove.

A friend of mine was at an auction and bought 500 cases of eight track tapes for \$30. He had to leave most of them behind, so he took as many of the better ones as he could load in his car. Question: How many cases of 8 track tapes can you cram into a Plymouth Reliant and still be able to drive it? Answer: 127, which was over 1,000 individual tapes. They were even piled in his lap as he drove to Raymond's to sell them for a quick turnover to Mr. Mills, who was delighted with them. I don't know how many were eventually sold. There are probably still some in there.

And then there were the postcards. Mr. Mills bought a couple of hundred thousand apparently from a defunct wholesale distributor. Nowadays, these cards are called linens because their surface resembles the texture of cloth. Some were comic cards from the 1940s showing giant watermelons being pulled by teams of horses, or people clowning around on vacation, but others were nice older views of Delmarva: "Moonlight Scene at Bridge over Lewes and Rehoboth Canal, Rehoboth Beach, Del." for example. Hundreds of copies each of many different views. Never mind what they were, Raymond bought them probably for 1¢ each and sold them at ten for a dollar. They were so cheap that dealers came from all over to buy them for resale.

You could spot these cards everywhere. Those dealers sold them to other dealers and soon the cards were spread all across the country. With each transfer, the price kept going up to as much as ten dollars or higher for some of the more interesting cards. It got to be a game to speculate just how many middlemen a particular card had gone through since it left Mr. Mills' place. They are even turning up on ebay now.

Yet even at ten cents each, I'll bet that Raymond made more money on the cards than anyone did. By keeping his prices low, he sold quantities of them, while the ten dollar cards were probably slow sellers.

One of his great joys was the guest book he kept out on a table. Over the years, he accumulated the signatures of customers probably from all 50 states and numerous foreign countries, none of whom could escape the lure of the place. He delighted in showing off the signatures of Betty Davis and other movie stars who it was said had come to visit Robert Mitchum, who once lived nearby. Mr. Mills was a very trusting man and unfortunately, he eventually showed it to the wrong person and mourned the loss of it years after it was stolen.

Another resident mystery was what was upstairs to the front building. The steps had been blocked off ever since I had been going there. Nobody knew what was up there and the Mills boys weren't telling. I once asked Raymond point blank and he just smiled and gave me some evasive answer. Actually, there was probably nothing mysterious up there, likely just more stuff.

Sadly, Henry and Albert died within a short time of each other in 1985 and then it really was Raymond's place. The business got to be more than he could handle alone, yet he couldn't resist buying anything if the price was right, so the result was that there got to be piles on top of piles in front of piles that were behind other piles. A cardboard sign reading "Please Return When Finished" was obscured by a minor avalanche. Soon there were no more aisles to walk down as they all filled up. His now defunct VW van was parked off to the side resting on four very flat tires. It too was jammed full of books.

As age and infirmities caught up with him, he was open fewer and fewer hours, maybe an hour or two on a nice afternoon. You knew when the place was open if you drove by and the door lights were blinking. Finally, he couldn't open anymore.

By now I had my own place on Rt. 50 and soon he began stopping in to see me on a regular basis. His wife Martha would take him on a weekly drive to see the sights and he always had to stop to visit and buy some of my five cent book specials. He liked to give them to a friend, who he thought wanted them. He was a nice man who loved to do little kindnesses for others. I never really knew much about his personal life. I was surprised when he mentioned that he played the guitar in church.

I've never met anyone else who maintained such enthusiasm for life into his 80s. And it kept him young. I've known people half that age who spend their days moaning about every little thing, but not Raymond.

It didn't take much to make him happy either. He delighted in collecting things like battery wristwatches with different designs and advertising logos on them. He even took to wearing two or three of them at once. Not that he was so desperate to know what time it was, but because he couldn't decide which one was his newest favorite. So why choose one when he could wear all three? I remember one that crowed like a rooster and then spoke the time when he pushed a button.

If anyone else wore three watches at once it would be judged a weird eccentricity, but when Raymond did it, it was just innocent enthusiasm. Maybe we should all strap on a few extra watches.

He also loved to go to the Cambridge MacDonalds. I remember that he and Martha even went there for lunch one Christmas. He said that as he sat in the booth looking out at Rt. 50, he thought that the traffic light flashing red and green looked just like Christmas lights.

I didn't want to admit it to myself, but when he came to see me that last time, I knew that I would never see him again. It took him many long minutes to get the few feet into my door and all he wanted to do was to stop in and say hi and see if I was okay. Like I said, he was always thinking of others.

Raymond died in July 2005 soon after celebrating his 50th wedding anniversary, but just shy of his 90th birthday. Sometimes I still see his penciled prices in books he once sold and it's going to be really hard now for me to erase them so that I can pencil in my own prices when I sell them. Old books frequently outlast the people who write them and sell them and own them and so they pass from one place to the other on their own journeys just like people. Grandma's old books become great-grandma's old books as they make their way to a new generation of readers.

The driveway to Mills Antiques/Grandma's Old Books is overgrown now and the door lights won't blink anymore because the "Sorry, We're Closed" sign is forever. Of

course, the property and will be sold for a fortune and the buildings will be bulldozed and that will be that. The end of an era.

But whichever franchise ends up there, I will always remember that it was once Raymond's very special place.

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The *Tidewater Times* is practically a local institution and has published many great articles on Delmarva in it's 54 year history. Thanks, *TT* for letting me use this one.