

PRESERVING HISTORY IN MINIATURE

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Before the automobile changed Columbia County's patterns of life, every country village and many crossroads had a general store. Almost all of these have disappeared, though one or two can still be seen much as they looked a century ago, and others are preserved in photographs. One old general store in the county has been recreated in a unique way—in a faithful miniature model.

Winifred Allbeck of Madison Township is an accomplished miniaturist—a maker of models in tiny sizes. Working from photographs and memory, she has created a remarkably accurate and convincing “doll-size” model of the general store once operated by her relative, “Uncle Willie,” at the village of Eyers Grove along Little Fishing Creek.

Wellington R. Hileman (also spelled Heilman) was about thirty years old in 1907 when he took over operation of the store. The building still stands, now a residence.

Nearly a century later, his niece Winifred began to recreate the store. Her model is set inside a glass-front bookcase section from a lawyer's office, and is equipped with a light, seen at top of the photo, to illuminate the scene.

The model is at a scale of about one inch to one foot, or 1 to 12. The store manager, W. Heilman, is depicted behind the counter, with his face and torso from an actual photograph. Some of the miniature items on display, such as the bicycle hanging on the left wall, were bought from commercial model suppliers. Most of the items shown, however, were created from various ordinary items Mrs. Allbeck found around the house.

The model-maker showed considerable ingenuity in finding and adapting ordinary objects to look like items for sale. A dozen biscuits, for example, are actually the backing of a small brooch, brushed with chalk. A round pie is a bottle-cap with the filling cut from the corner of a foam egg carton. Cookies are bits of ordinary white bread compacted, dried and painted. Ears of corn are made from dried flower pistils, while string beans are created from leaves of artificial plants, rolled tightly and painted. Eggs are formed from white clay. Bread loaves are small pretzel nubs. Quart baskets are woven of very-thin-sliced balsa wood. A broom is made from straw wound onto a matchstick. (The above close-up photo shows a few crafted items.)

And so it goes, for scores of items crowded around the store. Mrs. Allbeck worked on this model “at odd moments” for several years, always keeping an eye out for small objects which could be transformed into store merchandise.

Wellington Hileman was the son of Jacob Heilman Jr., a miller from Columbia Hill in Montour County, and his wife Mary. Wellington was a carpenter and house builder by training, but in 1907 he took up store-keeping for a few years. The family still owns the account book he opened when he began keeping the store. It covers store transactions January 14th through July of 1907. Mr. Hileman wrote neatly in a very clear hand, so the entries are easily readable.

As with most country stores before World War I, business was both by cash and by barter. In addition to the customer's name and the specific items purchased, the account book has four columns for posting entries, headed: Bought for Cash [that is, bought by the store],

Bought for Trade, Sold for Cash, Sold for Trade or Charge. The first entries, for January 14th, show the way the store operated:

- Michael Hawk brought in 1 dozen eggs, which the storekeeper credited to Hawk's account ("Bought for Trade") for 28 cents; then Hawk purchased 28 cents' worth of sugar ("Sold for Trade").
- Mrs. Beyer brought 1½ dozen eggs, credited at 51¢; she bought 6 yards of calico @ 6¢ per yard and 1 dish @ 18¢ and paid 3¢ to make up the total 54¢.
- Bud Howard bought 15 oz. Cheese @ 16¢ per oz., 2 qt. Syrup @ 10¢, and candy for 5¢; he paid 40¢, posted in the "Sold for Cash" column.

Each of the four columns was totaled at the foot of each page, so the storekeeper could keep a constant eye on his volume of business and how much credit he was allowing his customers. While cash was widely available in rural areas at this time, the farm-based village economy still operated as it always had, as much by barter as by cash.

At the time he was keeping the store, Wellington Hileman was living at Evers Grove in his mother Mary's household, along with his sisters Elizabeth and Sadie. His mother died in June of 1913 at age 76, and the household broke up. Wellington moved to Luzerne County, married Adda Watt, and had at least two children. He died in Wilkes-Barre in September 1972 at the advanced age of 95.

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