

GROCERY STORE BUSINESS

INTRODUCTION: *The Morning Press for many years ran a daily column called the "Passing Throng" that often included historical information and accounts of what life was like in the area. One published on May 3, 1941, was an interview with Leon Brewer who owned a general store in Orangeville. Leon, born in October 1889, started working in Frank Quick's general store in Orangeville at the age of fourteen. His son, Don, stated his father bought the business from Quick in the early 1920s and ran it until he retired in the early 1960s. As a young boy, he spent time working in his father's store and mentioned that in addition to groceries, you could purchase dry goods such as hardware items and foot wear. This informative article offers a glimpse of what it was like to work and shop in a general store.*



"Yes, indeed, times have changed in the grocery business," remarked Leon Brewer of Orangeville, who can begin to qualify as an old-timer, for he started clerking for Frank Quick when he was fourteen, and while Leon isn't what you might call old, he can count up almost as many years in the grocery business as *The Morning Press* can claim as a newspaper.

"I guess some of we old-timers wouldn't know what to do if we had to work on these short week schedules." Leon, who has made a fine recovery from a severe attack of pneumonia, declared, "Back in the old days we always opened the store at six o'clock in the morning and kept it open until after ten. Then, on Saturdays, we never thought of getting out before midnight.

"I'll never forget one incident having to do with store hours in those early days. I didn't leave the store until one o'clock Sunday morning and, a day or two later a customer reminded me that you closed up pretty early Saturday night. I wanted to buy a pair of shoes. I told him I was there until one 'clock whereupon he told me he had driven past at two in the morning, and he couldn't understand why I wasn't open.

"That was typical of the store business in those early years when we lighted the store by kerosene lamps and had the job of filling the lamps each morning. The old-time general merchant, the old-time druggist and the newspaper man have always appealed to me as having just about the hardest hours of anybody I knew."

It was easy to see that Leon was looking back to the days when the general store furnished the setting for the public forums of those days.

Always there were poorly lighted windows with practically no thought given to display.

Everything was sold in bulk in those days in contrast to the present, when practically nothing in the way of groceries or allied lines is sold that way. The cracker barrel, the molasses barrel, and the coal oil container were always familiar sights in every store. The pickles were always sold from barrels, as was much of the other merchandise.

"I'll never forget," remarked Leon, "when I came across the first canned product I had ever seen in the store. That product was canned Myana peas. Today, everything comes in cans or containers. Folks don't even want to buy sugar in bulk. They want it packaged. How times have changed."

In those far-off days there was usually a group centered around the pot-bellied stove – a group that ran much to whiskers and moustaches. Usually cheeks bulged as whiskers dripped tobacco juice, and as aim for the large box, filled with sawdust, to make it easier for the tobacco chawers, was often bad. But that mattered little in those days. Grocery store sanitation was not so much emphasized then.

Those were the days when crackers and cheese or bologna and cheese, bought at the counter, took the place of today's restaurants. There was no more cherished luncheon in those days. Frequently, it was called a snack.

Leon's memory didn't hark back to the days when most folks made lamp-lighters out of old newspapers, and after igniting them in the kitchen stove used them to light the various lamps. He didn't come into the grocery picture until the sulphur matches made their

appearance. "And didn't they smell," he put it as more of a statement than a question. "Do you know that we scarcely ever sell a box of matches today? Most people use the small folders which they pick up with their purchases." That reminded us that had Bloomsburg's match factory continued it would probably be making these match folders instead of the boxed matches that enabled Fred Fear to clean up several millions during his years of operation in Bloomsburg.

Saturday and Saturday night always provided the banner trade hours for those old-fashioned general stores. Folks drove in then to do their trading, and not a great deal of cash changed hands. The farmers brought their butter, their eggs and their potatoes – possibly other items – and traded them in for other family needfuls. A few sticks of peppermint candy were frequently included in the purchases – for the children.

In those days when there was no rural free delivery, no telephone and no daily paper to reach him, the farmer led a life of isolation. The church and the general store became the meeting places. At the latter, he could always expect to find sale bills plastered on the walls. He could likewise expect to find others eager to exchange information. Small wonder it was that the general store of that day became the meeting ground of the public. Small wonder, too, that the customers expected the store to be open early and late. Not infrequently the proprietor was quite a power in politics. His views were respected, and he was looked upon as a store house of information.

But today the general store has largely disappeared from the picture, as has largely disappeared the traveling salesman, who drove his horse regularly to the store.

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