

# The General Store

## Part I

*[This article appeared in a local Facebook feed. It is reprinted here with permission from the author, a Life Member of the Society. ~Ed]*

The general store was the focal point of local communities, crammed with everything from axe handles to zippers, a place neighbors could drop by to share the gossip of the town and do a bit of shopping. Most general stores had a few things in common; i.e., a porch out front, where people could talk and load and unload goods; large windows for display; pillars supporting an upper balcony at the front of a second story where the merchant often lived; a large undivided merchandise area for the store, and the stores usually had long, wonderfully built oak cabinets that extended to the ceiling. The employees were local people, and everyone was called by their first names. Often the store served double duty as the local post office. Barter was common, and credit was often extended until farmers got paid for their crops. Many eventually sold gasoline from pumps installed in front of the stores as automobiles arrived in the communities.

It is hard to forget, for those of us old enough to remember this sort of thing, the crowded shelves, the glass showcases and all of the things that hung from the ceiling. The long counters were always piled high with inventory and heavy brown paper and cast-iron string holders and chocolate bars and gum and candy and butter, cheese, meat and vegetables. We remember the smell of fresh ground coffee, sharp cheddar cheese, dried fruit, and kerosene.

The items that were kept "under the counter" were asked for in a whisper and then pre-wrapped in brown paper. Young boys on one leg and then the other asking delicate questions were always surprised when the clerk anticipated the question and fielded the question with ease. In the case of the Pennington Store in Benton, we certainly remember Doyle Pennington with his constant cigar and plastic cigar holder. As Archie Bunker would say, "Those were the days."

There frankly aren't many operating general stores left. The days of Swisher's Store and the carving off of sharp cheese in that store or the odor of freshly made scrapple and smoked sausage at the general store of Butch Davis in Light Street are a thing of the past.

Few will remember the old Benton Store Company. B. G. Shultz was manager and Harry Crossley was chief clerk. It was a general store with a second floor meeting room used by various groups such as the Order of Eastern Star and the IOOF. Over the years, the building served as the Benton branch of the Neil Harrison Store. It later became the C. A. Edson store specializing in plumbing, reverted back as the Benton Store Company specializing in antiques, and is now again a successful antique mall. The building is currently in the best condition that it has been in years and worth a visit from you.



*Brewer's Store (on right), Orangeville*

Brewer's store on Main Street, Orangeville, was a delightful place with clothes, penny candy and groceries. The penny candy and counter was on the right side of the store. Going back through the store, steps went up to shoes and coats. Mr. Brewer's wife, May, had a small store in their cottage above the old Iron Bridge in the summer. Grade school kids would go into Brewers and be asked to spell a big word—Constantinople or something like that. Those who got it right would get free ice cream. There was a pot-belly stove. A pickle barrel, barrels sat in front of the counter with crackers, similar to the oyster cracker of today, nails—things to remember. The best part was the old fashion ice-cream parlor at Brewers store, accessed from a connecting door. Many in the area knew Donald and Doyle Brewer, sons of the Brewers who had the Orangeville store.

In the northern end of Columbia County, everyone knew George Post and his Fairmount Springs General Store. It made an impression on kids as they climbed the steps leading into the dark, old store.

Kids who had behaved themselves could pick soda from the cooler (5 cents at the time) hanging in ice water. The root beer was spicy on the tongue, the birch beer filled your mouth with that wonderful sweet taste and the cream soda was smooth. It was always so hard to choose. At the candy counter, 10 cents bought 10 pieces of candy. The smell of the store, the bread, produce, and feed smells may come streaming back to more seasoned citizens. Oh, yes, George Post also delivered groceries every Friday, bringing the groceries ordered on Wednesday of that week. He always had a piece of candy for the kids.

Those were the days when mail carriers would deliver emergency bread or cereal during the week if a family ran out.

Grant Johnson Store. The store was at the corner of State and Walnut Streets, Millville, in the 1930s. It is no longer in operation. The aisles were piled high with shoes and clothes and general merchandise.

John Herbert Laubach remembered watching Grant Johnson weigh out carpenter's glue, nails, butter, sugar, candy, etc. when his Uncle George Parker took him to shop. Grant Johnson had what the old folks called "a hitch in his gitup." In later years he would be in front of the store and

take 10, 15, or 25 steps without moving an inch. After a while he would master forward motion and start walking home.

Harrison General Store at Forks was much more than it appeared to be. It served the Bloomsburg & Sullivan Railroad, the United State Post Office and the men of the community who would walk or drive to the store in the evenings to get their tobacco and their mail and a place to rest for a time before heading for home. The side of the pot-bellied stove with the spittoon was the focal point of the store and the store was the focal point of the community, as were many of the local general stores.

The Harrison General Store in Forks dated to about 1901, and the post office within the original 20 x 24 foot building measured something like six by eight feet. On the left as one entered from the front porch with its pitchforks, hoes and chicken wire was the glass-enclosed cigar case and beside it was the candy case, using the theory that if a father bought a cigar he could hardly turn down little Lester and his sweet tooth. The store was typical for local general stores. One entered by double doors that were glass paneled.

Glass-enclosed showcases lined the walls on either side of the store. Counters that were used for cutting and weighing extended toward the rear of the store and shelves were everywhere. The store sold the essentials: muslins, gingham, calico, men's long underwear for the winter and "long-johns" for summer.

Lydia Pinkham and Carter's Little Liver Pills were favorites in the drug department and Arbuckle's coffee and bags of table salt and rat cheese highlighted the grocery part and boxes of nails and bamboo-fishing poles and large cakes of ice could be found elsewhere in the store.

Within a few years of its construction, a 30-foot extension to the store was built and it housed the men's work clothes and farm boots.

Even the loft housed locally grown items like walnuts and chestnuts drying in the heat, and dangling from the ceiling under the loft hung lanterns and baskets and oil cans.

Our area is lucky to have the history of the store recorded in the book the "Life and Times of A Country Merchant" by Emma Harrison Burrus, which she published in 1979, as a reference to Rush Harrison's General Store, later owned by Neil S. Harrison.



*Neil S. Harrison's, Benton*