

The General Store

Part II

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This is part two of the continuing series of stories of the last hundred or so years in Columbia County. The story is about "country stores" in the county. It is far from complete. Apologies are extended to all of the stores that I overlooked and to the fine, hard-working people who spent long hours in these stores.

The Laubach Store was on what is now known as Camp Lavigne Road north of Benton in what was then called Laubach, PA. The crossroad community consisted of one general store that at one time contained a post office, a couple of houses and at the foot of the hill east of the store a former railroad stop on the Bloomsburg and Sullivan Railroad known as Laubach's Station. Many in the area still refer to the area as Guava, the name of a post office at that location. The area was named for Andrew Laubach who became the first post master in 1882. The post office died with the ending of train service to the upper reaches of Columbia County.

There was a bench in front and a bench in the store where the same guys (always guys) hung out every night until closing time at 8:30 or 9. The scroll desk where Joe Laubach sat when he wasn't waiting on someone contained bills nicely organized; some of them were graying and crackly and dated back to his father. The generations of Laubachs who owned the store gave credit ("early welfare") to people who were out of both work and luck.

A work week at the store was rather structured. Joe Laubach took orders on Tuesday, in some cases by phone, but mostly by actually going to houses where the women would say what they wanted. Joe got the old truck—a truck that seemed to go back to the 1930s—and delivered on Wednesday.

Baker's meat plant in Millville delivered meat to the store on Thursday. Baker's scrapple was the "best in the world," son David recalled, "better than Pennsdale." Hurl Hess delivered vegetables and fruit the same day. Peters Meats of Williamsport delivered bacon and ham. Letterman's from Bloomsburg delivered and a Pennsupreme Ice Cream truck brought the "great big containers for cones." A candy dealer quickly made his rounds, while retailing the penny candy was the biggest pain as people would take their time getting a variety while the shopkeeper bent over the case. It was back-breaking work to pick pecks of potatoes which Hurl Hess brought in huge bags. Some locals will remember the cheese case with the big round chunk of cheese, the coffee grinder, and the food stamps during and right after the war.

Son David Laubach remembered delivering "to some guy in Jamison City who lived back a road," saying "we never saw him just put the groceries at the end of the road and he put the money in a mailbox." David remembers opening at 3 AM the first day of deer season and remembers getting to see Carl Furillo and other Brooklyn Dodgers that Carl would bring with him into the store, and he remembers the encroaching competition of the Benton IGA markets in the Fifties.

David remembers not only the sights of the store, but remembers that the store always smelled good because of the coffee, cheese and meat. It was a man's store, and not even David's mother or grandmother frequented the place. Women came in, but "it was mostly a man's place."

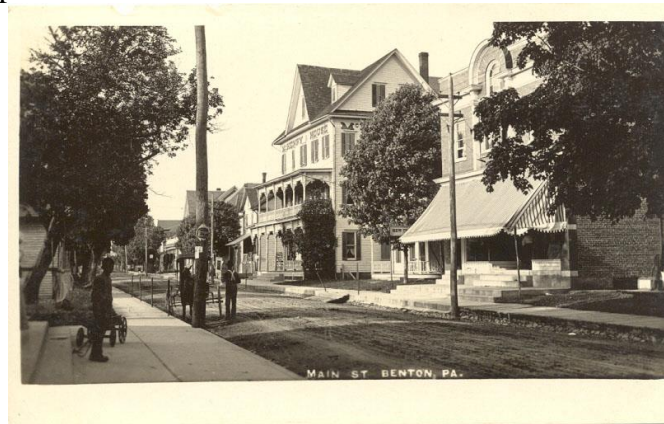
Danville had John F. Tooley's Double Store (No longer in business.) "York state potatoes, cabbage, apples and onions." There was also the Leader Store Co., Ltd.

Catawissa had the Opera House Pharmacy "alcoholic, cholera and diarrhoea (sic) remedy." No longer in business.

Lightstreet had Carson's General Store and the general store/grocery store of Myron (Butch) Davis. Except near to the end of his life, Butch never hired help. He would butcher and wait on customers, and butcher and wait on customers. In his later years, he walked the aisles in the store pushing a grocery cart for stability.

Unityville had the Sherwood Store. Talmar had the LaRue Hess and later the Edgar Baker General Store.

W. T. Pease, Bloomsburg. "Anyone who enjoy (sic) a good smoke will get their money's worth in any of the following 5 cent brands: Rufus K. Polk, Penn Social Club, King Oscar, Manhattan, Spanish Arms, and Jupiter."



The M. D. Pennington Store Company, Benton.

The Pennington store was located on the East side of Main Street in Benton. Stairs to the second level were at the rear of the store. This store was located where the Benton Municipal Parking Lot is now located on the East side of Main Street, and was directly across from Joe Dalto's Restaurant. The original Pennington store was the Pennington & Seely store.

The first building North of Market on the East side housed the Kozy Korner restaurant in the location where it is today on the South side of the building. On the North side of the building the United States Post Office served the local area until the post office in its current location on Third Street was dedicated April 25, 1964. The second building was a double house. On one side, Mary and Bruce Fritz lived and on the other side Skeet Miller lived. Skeet for a time was a barber with his brother, Guy, across Main Street where Dr. Hutnik now practices. Skeet later moved north on Main Street and cut hair there.

The Pennington Store was the third building north of Market Street, Benton. Adjacent, an alley cut between the Pennington Store and the Charlie Hess Meat Market. The Hotel Moses Van Campen came next. The Harv Belles General Store came next, and later that building became Buckley's Five and Dime, and then passed through ownership of Bob and Joyce Gordon, the Bankes family, Dee Wise, and the Flower Station. The building is no longer there.

In Pennsdale, the smoked ham, smoked bacon, sausage links and loose sausage, the ring bologna, the T-bone steaks, the kielbasa, and the old-fashioned hot dogs are not as varied as a collection of tractor seats, nails, jerky, canned food, and dust on dust that you can find in real honest-to-goodness country stores—but still it is a general store. In fact, they even call it a "general store."

The store at 607 Village Road in which the Pennsdale meats are sold dates back to 1839 and is just off route 220 about 29 miles from Benton via route 239, 118 and 220. The hitching post is still out front, and the old post office sign from when the postal station closed in 1985 hangs above the door, and the town still has some Quakers and a Pennsdale Meeting House. John Springman opened the first general store and a photograph from about 1905 shows him standing with his wife behind a counter surrounded by merchandise that the store sold. Hanging from the rafters and filling the cases are canned goods, yard goods, baby clothes, traps, cigarettes and chewing tobacco. Not much remains of the old store, but the wooden floor and the wooden counter where customers pay for purchases are original. The meat is genuine Pennsylvania slaughterhouse.

The Red Rock Corner Store is at the foot of Red Rock mountain, nine miles North of Benton, at the intersection of routes 487 and route 118. Freas Seward operated the store as a general store and later sold the store to Zell and Bill Seward. Zell opened a restaurant in the store where her sour buckwheat cakes were legendary. She maintained a service station with gas pumps. The garage did minor garage work. The garage survived until a truck came roaring down Red Rock mountain and ripped through part of the garage.

The restaurant had two large round oak tables, and there were some tables spread out in the store, so that about 20 could be served at any one time. The specialty of Zell Seward was buckwheat cakes, unlike any we know of being sold today. They were sour! Customers would drive for miles to eat the cakes, while others today feel that Monica has better cakes at the Brass Pelican.

Today the Red Rock Corner Store is a favorite stopping place to buy hoagies. The meat is fresh and carved, and their sandwiches are hugely popular. This is a favorite of the Ricketts Glen crowd.

Frank W. Woolworth, who called himself a "boob from the country," was doing pretty well in 1879 with the urban retail trade. Woolworth had clerked in a store for a number of years for a man by the name of W.H. Moore and decided to branch out on his own by opening what he called a "five-and-ten" store in Lancaster in 1879, named because they had \$.05 items on one side of the store and \$.10 items on the other side. Woolworth theorized that by advertising \$.05 items, somewhat like the clearance table of today, customers would stream in the door and end up buying some of the higher priced items as well. He believed that his future was in the selling of large quantities of low-cost items. The Lancaster store succeeded, but two successive stores

failed. That didn't stop Frank and his next store was in Scranton. By 1911, a \$65 million dollar corporation was formed and nearly one hundred employees became millionaires. Frank W. Woolworth died in April, 1919, at the age of sixty-six.

Not all parts of Pennsylvania had the population of Lancaster, Scranton and other areas where Woolworth opened his stores.