

The Demise of the Neighborhood Grocery
Store

Presented to:

The Athenaeum Society
Hopkinsville, Kentucky

By

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February 1, 1990

"THE DEMISE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD GROCERY STORE"

Recently, circumstances beyond my control, my wife's illness, forced me out of my regular haunts to go and buy the family's groceries. Don't get me wrong, on occasion I do go to the market with my wife, but this is usually done to keep from being labled a chauvinist or in order to show her ways to be a bit more frugal with our underbudgeted grocery dollars.

But alas, the labyrinthine ways of the modern megamarket are unfamiliar to me. I have pushed the cart through acres of panty hose, garden tools, and videotapes looking for a bar of soap. Working my way toward the checkout counter, I come upon a twenty foot display of salad ingredients wilting under color-enhancing lights, carrots, lettuce, sprouts, cabbage, peppers, plastic tomatoes, and mushrooms, (mechanically sliced, shredded, and slivered) waiting to be tossed by the customer into little plastic bags. Beyond the last mound of ingredients stands a lineup of bottles, manufactured and homogenized dressings wearing their international nametags; "Red Russian," "Frisky French," "Greek Garlic" and "That's Italian."

Approaching my own moment of reckoning, I watch the lady in charge of the checkout line. Daily she drags a ton of merchandise across the electronic scanner, some items twice if they are reluctant to reveal their price and serial number to the computer.

I would like to ask her about Checker's Wrist Syndrome. Does she experience its symptoms? But here time is measured in billionths

of nanoseconds, and there is none to waste. When my turn comes, she will have her job to do and I will have mine. Hers is to process my purchases as quickly and efficiently as possible. Mine is to be sure that the redemption date on my coupon for twenty cents off Milk Bone Dog Treats has not expired, to have ready the money I owe as the amount is flashed on a screen, to check the amount of change that the computer says is my due, and to thank her for her hopeful comment on what is left of my day. And then to leave the area without incident: neither dropping a dime nor losing my car keys.

As I made my way to my car through the automotive maze of the parking lot I remembered other times, which seem such a short while ago, and wonder; "What ever happened to Mr. Gilligan and his wife?" "What ever happened to the neighborhood grocery?"

The typical neighborhood grocery was a small family run operation. It was usually located in a residential district and had few if any regular patrons from outside the immediate area. With little or no off street parking most of the trade was walk-in. In the days before our present mobility the neighborhood store was the source of food and household supplies for most of the residents of our town.

According to Meacham's directory, Hopkinsville had a total of 35 groceries at the turn of the century. Interestingly, there were only six lawyers listed in the 1899 directory. It would appear that the majority of the 9000 people in Greater Hopkinsville were much more concerned with eating than in tying up

the legal loose ends in their lives.

During the next 15 years, as Hopkinsville grew, so did the number of grocery stores. By 1915, there were more than 60 groceries in our town. The largest concentration of these was in the downtown area which had fifteen groceries between Virginia Street and Little River stretching from Sixth to Twelveth Streets.

If you walked west on Sixth from Virginia to Main and proceeded down West Seventh to the River you would have passed no fewer than nine groceries in a scant three and a half blocks.

By far, the largest and best known of the downtown groceries were W.T. Cooper & Co., on North Main between Sixth and Seventh Streets, and C.R. Clark's, located on the east side of Main between Ninth and Tenth Streets. Cooper's large grocery advertised: groceries, Queensware, tinware, glassware, toilet soap, cigars, tobacco, candies, and Graniteware. Cooper also offered Premium Store Tickets on all cash sales. Apparently credit business was a bain to grocers even then as it would be for years to come. In addition to the aforementioned items C.R. Clark's Store also advertised china and silverware, cutglass, household items, fish, wild game, oysters and fresh vegetables of all kinds. The Clark ads also bragged that even "A child can trade at our department grocery."

Interestingly, the Forbes Manufacturing Company also operated a retail grocery on Main Street. It is believed that this was a company store, in the spirit of coal mining company stores, and was operated primarily for the benefit of the employees at the

Forbes' plant.

During the next twenty years, Hopkinsville continued to grow as new residences were built farther from the downtown area. Groceries boomed with the Roaring Twenties and many went bust during the Depression Era. But the concept of the grocery changed very little. By 1935 Hopkinsville had 73 groceries. But one very important change was taking place in the grocery business. The names of Hopkinsville businessmen began to disappear from the downtown area groceries. Names like H.G. Hill of Tennessee, The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company or A. & P., and The Kroger Grocery and Baking Company all gained a foothold on East Ninth Street in the downtown area. Piggly Wiggly and two Red Front Groceries appeared on Main Street. All of these belonged to large chains of grocery stores that were being started across Southern Kentucky and Tennessee. In these places buying and selling groceries became a business, not a transaction between friends and neighbors.

By 1938, Hopkinsville could boast of three wholesale grocery houses, but by 1940 only Ragland Potter still remained in business. Also notable in 1940, the third grocery in six years opened at the corner of Walnut and Eighteenth Streets. This one was run by George Ely Giles and operated here for two years before moving to its present location on Eighteenth Street in 1942. Of the many groceries that have done business in Hopkinsville over the years, it seems that only Giles' Market has maintained the proper growth while retaining much of the atmosphere of the old

neighborhood grocery. Giles' is the second oldest family owned grocery in town being surpassed only by Drury Brothers.

In 1942 Piggly Wiggly left our fair town and Kroger and A. & P. both moved to Main Street. These businesses were located across the street from each other and both occupied double store front locations.

The number of groceries fluctuated between 48 and 61 from the end of the war until the early 1970's. But names like Minit Market, Cash and Carry, Superette, Jiffy Mart, Quick Stop and Pic & Pay were reflecting America's need for a different type of grocery. One where you could go and not be able to find a parking space, to look for a substitute for a product that they were out of so you could stand in a long line to pay for it. All for the sake of speed and saving time,

Each of the neighborhood groceries of the past had its own clientele and each developed its own personality. Whether it was Haddock Brothers on East Ninth Street, D.B. Bostick's Grocery on Canton Street, or Dixon's Market on East Twenty-First Street, no two stores were alike. One of the best known stores was Bloozer Gee's at the corner of Walnut and Eighteenth Streets. From 1950 until early 1962 this was the most popular alternative to the lunches served at the H.H.S. cafeteria. Very few of the students at Hoptown High during the decade of the 50's failed to make at least one trip to Bloozer's for a quick lunch consisting of a sandwich and chips or a candy bar and a coke.

The neighborhood grocery was much more than a store where you

went to buy your food items. They also carried household items that were often needed. Coal scoops and scuttles, stovepipe, kerosene lamps and extra chimneys for these lanterns were all common fair found at the grocery. Flour and sugar were also available there in bulk quantities. The grocer had to keep close tabs on the sugar, for often the revenueurs would stop by to see if anyone was buying large quantities of this commodity so vital to the making of moonshine.

Along with canned foods and household items there was often an array of fresh vegetables and fruits when in season. These were frequently purchased from customers or taken as payment toward one's bill. While these items didn't have a government inspection seal on them you could bet that they were indeed homegrown and fresh. One former grocer in our town related an incident when she had bought a quantity of fresh strawberries from some children. When she went home that evening she discovered that her own berry patch had been picked bare. She had bought her own strawberries.

Few of the neighborhood grocery stores offered much in the way of fresh meats. For the residential grocers these items were left to the larger stores downtown or to the meat markets which specialized in such fare. At most, a stick of bologna, souse, liverloaf and hoop cheese could be found in a small refrigerator at the back of the store. There was always an ample supply of crackers nearby. These meats were usually sliced right on the counter with a large suspicious looking knife. In the same area

of the store were several gallon jars containing dill pickles, pickled pigs feet or pickled eggs. I never recall seeing anyone buy these taste treats but neither were the jars ever full.

The stores on the edge of town were a unique blend of city and rural cultures. These stores would carry more in the hardware and tool lines. They usually had an expanded line of meats and many actually had meat counters. They offered what today would be considered a huge bologna, ham or cheese sandwich for a very reasonable price. These sandwiches were topped by your choice of mustard, salad dressing, or hot sauce. They were then served on butcher paper and usually consumed on the front stoop of the store. After washing it down with a Big Orange or a Grape Nehi the meal would be topped off with a Moon Pie.

Many farmers would bring their freshly killed pork into town to be ground into sausage at a store that could boast of an electric meat grinder. The farmer usually stayed for the grinding process, tasting or smelling of the fresh mixture while providing instructions for adding the correct amounts of pepper, sage, and other spices. As often as not this service was paid for by leaving a portion of fresh sausage with the grocer.

The farmers would often gather in the corner of the store while their wives finished their shopping. Here they would discuss the weather, politics, or the condition of their crops. Often they would wager the cost of a round of drinks on who could pull the Coca-Cola that had the most distant point of origin from the chilled waters of the cooler.

It was from men such as these that I learned my first lessons in politics and the true meaning of inflation. I will always remember a seemingly unprovoked outburst one hot summer afternoon.

The ravings of a gentleman telling how the Republicans and President Eisenhower were taking the whole country to hell in a handbasket. This was followed by a long list of the social ills our land faced if major changes were not soon in coming. What had prompted this outburst filled with such dire prophecies? It was inflation of the cruelist kind, the cost of a coke had risen from a nickel to six cents.

Many a child learned life's first economic lessons at the grocery. A drink bottle found along the street or road was sold there for a penny or two or the litter around the store was picked up in return for a candy treat from the store owner. For the older children of the neighborhood there was trash to be taken out and burned, floors to be swept, shelves to be stocked and groceries to be delivered. And what to do with the rewards of ones labors? Do you spend it where it was earned, or do you save it for the Saturday Matinee downtown at the Rex. I personally had an agreement with my first employer. I received a small part of my pay while he kept the larger portion as payment toward a very special Timex watch which sat on the top shelf behind the counter.

As I remember I was able to proudly walk out wearing that watch after just nine weeks as a working man. I lost my job four days later after showing up two hours late for work. Another of life's lessons learned the hard way.

Charging us for what we bought was how Mr. Gilligan and his wife made their money. Standing there all day punching the cash register. A job description of what they might have been paid for however would bear little resemblance to what they actually did all day. They talked alot. If you wanted a more efficient operation you could go downtown to one of the larger chain stores. Each customer knew that when his turn came the grocer's attention would be undivided. Each one would be greeted, listened to, and in some small way ministered unto. Some aspect of your health, personal relationships, or financial disasters might be reviewed or brought up to date since you were last in the store.

What did they talk about? First, they were a directory of city services. If you needed a haircut, try Fichen's on East Ninth. The best dry cleaners, Molel's or Gray's, both of which were on East Seventh.

Sometimes their voice would fall in an exchange of confidences about your landlord, your arthritus acting up, or your child's problems at school. Other times their voice would rise to chastise a neighborhood child who had been seen through eyes that could have only been located in the back of the grocer's head.

If the customer were a young housewife, she might learn how to make a creamy cheese sauce. The grocer would admire her baby and remember it's name. Taped to the side of the cash register were pictures of his own grandchildren. The most appreciative customers however, were the old folks who lived in the neighborhood. The people who bought three potatoes, an onion, and

a day old loaf of bread and for whom the trip to the store might be the high point of the day. These were the grocers special care, their mutterings punctuated by words of kindness.

Their shopping done for the day, some of the old parties would line the everpresent bench outside the door, stand by the drink box or sit on chairs or drink cases inside the entrance. As the afternoon sun warmed their backs, they would solve the world's problems, watch the other shoppers or the little children at the gumball machine. Sometimes they would just read the crude handwritten notes taped to the front door, put there by someone wanting to sell their '52 Studebaker, needing a babysitter, or wanting to refinish your hardwood floors. Just using up time, of which they had more than enough of.

But the neighborhood arteries changed as the neighborhoods aged, and Hopkinsville entered the age of subdivisions. No one wanted a tacky looking grocery on the same block as their new home so the grocery was zoned away from it's lifeblood. The faster pace of life, refined taste satisfied only by shopping at the larger stores, and the new mobility introduced by the automobile and the two car family all joined together to spell the end of the neighborhood grocery and a simpler way of life.

Wiser heads than mine say that they knew it was coming, and not only because of the local wave of urban change. Any college student halfway through Retail Marketing 101 could have predicted it. Watching Mr. Gilligan or his wife in action, one could point out that a grocery store is not a social agency. Moreover, their

clients lined up at the door on those chairs and drink cases were using space that could better be used to hold a great pyramid of breakfast food or a display of dishes, one piece free with each purchase of \$10 or more.

Only someone from a more congenial discipline, working from a different set of premises, with another view of life would have approved of this operation.

Driving through the old neighborhoods of our town I view old abandoned grocery stores. So this is why I must go to such a strange and impersonal place now to buy my groceries.

That is what set me to wondering what became of Mr. Gilligan and his wife. I have discovered that Mr. Gilligan died many years ago while I was away at school. I have been told that his wife went to live with a son who owns a small restaurant down south. If this is true and she is still around, then I hope they let her take her turn at the cash register each day, making change, making friends, handing out little packs of mint flavored toothpicks and a kind, sincere word to go with them.