

Recollections of the Little Country Store
by Marjorie Keller Walkington

“Did you ever wonder what a country store was like in the early part of this century? Our father, Charles S. Keller, started just such a store about the year 1910. Our parents lived six miles east of Kinmundy, Illinois, six miles south and east of Farina, about eight miles from Omega, a good many more miles from Xenia, the surrounding towns, so their home was located in an ideal spot for such a store. Travel with horse and buggy or wagon was too slow for long distances, so a grocery store in the neighborhood was really a convenience. It also provided a place where neighbors could meet and “hear the news.”

When a building was remodeled and made ready for business, our father with \$50 in his pocket, boarded the train at Farina for Mattoon to buy his first order of groceries from Hulman and Company. The order consisted principally of the very necessities: sugar, coffee, soup beans, salt, baking powder, soda, some stick candy and of course, tobacco. The first three items came in large bags in bulk and had to be sacked and weighed according to the customer’s need. Stick candy came in jars, tobacco came in large squares and was cut into “plugs” with a tobacco cutter, each plug about three or four inches in size. The two brands were Star and Horseshoe. There was also Granger Twist and Bull Durham, which was a sack tobacco used for making cigarettes, as was Velvet and Prince Albert in tin cans. A book of cigarette papers was given with each purchase so the smoker could “roll his own”.

As business increased, a new frame store building was built and a more varied stock of groceries was available for the customers.

Flour, called Songer’s Best, was purchased from the Kinmundy Milling Company, which was run by Abe Songer. It was a soft wheat flour. A better grade of flour, Havasack, was also stocked. In a few years, an addition was made to the store building and a grist mill, run by gasoline engine was installed. On this mill, corn could be shelled and ground into meal with a set of French burrs. Also wheat was ground into whole wheat flour. So corn meal and wheat flour were two more available items. Much of this was used during World War I when white flour was rationed. Some customers brought their own corn or wheat to be ground.

Lard was purchased in fifty-pound tin cans. Customers brought their own containers in which to get lard. Cheese came in large wooden boxes. In fact, all canned goods such as salmon, sardines, beans, corn, peas, etc. were packed in wood boxes at that time instead of cardboard as they are today.

By this time, there was more of a variety of candy, which came in wooden buckets, one of which was the old fashioned chocolate drops or “hay stacks” which we still have today.

The Booker School House was just across the road. Children would come over at noon hour to buy brown penny pencil or five cent Big Chief tablet or maybe they only had a penny for a stick of candy or chewing gum.

Money was scarce in those days, so customers often brought a bucket or basket of eggs to barter for groceries. The eggs were candled by the light of a kerosene lamp set inside of a tin-like box which had two holes in the front, the size of eggs. Eggs were held up to this light to see if they were clear, or if there were floats (dark spots) in them. Clear eggs were the fresh ones. Chickens were sometimes brought to exchange for groceries. The chickens and eggs were taken to Farina to a produce buyer, named Jacob Reitz, who ran that business for many years. On the

return trip home, a shipment of groceries were brought back which had been shipped by freight form Hulman and Company.

During rabbit season in the winter months, many rabbits were killed and traded at the store for shells and tobacco. Fifteen cents was the usual price paid for a rabbit. Our father boxed the rabbits and shipped them to a commission firm in Chicago.

Kerosene and lamp chimneys were necessities as oil lamps were the only means of lighting the house. Later when automobiles became popular about 1914 and 1915, gasoline could be purchased at the store. Soda pop, considered a luxury at that time, was also available. But since there were no ice deliveries, the soda was cooled by placing it in a bucket and hanging it in the well, as people did their milk and butter.

Later, denim overalls, blue chambray shirts and Old Rockford socks could be purchased here.

This store continued in operation until the middle of the 1920's when the economy improved and people were driving their automobiles to larger stores in towns for a more varied selection. The owners had accomplished their purpose as a service to the community and as a livelihood for themselves. It is an ever changing world and we must change with it. So ends the story of the little country store located at the Booker Corner and owned and operated by the Keller family.”