

General Store: Comfy, Cozy, Cornucopia

The first weekend in December the Colvin Run Mill general store was abuzz. Kids, aided by volunteers, were shopping inside for gifts for their parents – a tradition at the mill – while their parents sat outside on the porch chatting. I squinted and let my imagination flow, conjuring up shades of Christmases long past when the store was a shopping destination and gathering place.



Dim lighting and wooden floors and fixtures in the store generate a sense of warmth and ease, friendly, homespun. Floors creak a bit, shelves are packed, countertops covered, goods dangle from the ceiling, and glassed windowed wooden bins showcase candy. Old post office mailboxes and spools of thread are stacked behind the proprietor's desk, and a pot belly stove radiates the promise of even more warmth. A comfy, cozy, cornucopia. The latter word by way of Greek myths and Latin: *cornu* (horn) and *copia* (abundance), limply translated as "horn of plenty," but a symbol of abundance or more prosaically, a "horn-shaped container."



General stores are part of our frontier history. Roving peddlers with a wagon load of goods "drummed up" business in rural communities. If a settlement were taking hold, the "drummer," as they were called, might build a simple store, and thrive if the community boomed or move on if it busted.

Colvin Run General store was typical of its kind, starting relatively late around 1880 but endured 64 years. Initially owned by W.A. Moxley and James Mateer, when Moxley passed in 1889, his son-in-law and principal debtor, Mark Cockrill, assumed his place, attesting to the knot of marriage and money. Cockrill advertised himself as a dealer in "dry good, notions, groceries, hats, caps, boots, shoes, cigars, tobacco, and general merchandise."

As Cockrill's slogan suggests, general store proprietors had to cater to every need which, by necessity, required using every square inch of space. Shelves covered the walls – at the expense of windows and light – filled with fabric, bolts of cloth- kerseymeres, thicksetts, humhums, tammies (translations at end of article) - medicine, spices, jewelry, musical instruments, tobacco, dishes, and cartridges. Countertops were covered with ribbons, hats and caps and leghorn bonnets, pots and pans, boots and shoes, leather, buttons, shears, and perfume. Nuts, beans, raisins, rice, and macaroni filled wooden bins. Lanterns, pails, ropes, horse harnesses hung from the ceiling. Plows, axes, hoes, and larger tools would be lodged in a back storage room. A veritable cornucopia of goods.



Many items were sold in bulk and in quantities that would shock us today. Flour came in paper bags weighing 24.5 and 48.5 pounds since families did their own baking. 100 pounds of sugar might be needed to make jelly and preserves, 100 pounds of salt to cure meats, and barrels of vinegar to pickle vegetables. A family of six would need four bolts of cloth to make clothing (refresher: a bolt generally is 100 yards long and between 42-60 inches wide).



For smaller quantities, sugar stored in a covered metal box would be scooped into a cornucopia fashioned by spooling stiff brown paper into a cone shape, then folded over and fastened with string. Molasses and vinegar were ladled out to the customer's container that would be sealed with a cork or bit of potato. Coffee beans would be scooped out of large tins and ground in the store's grinder and packed into a paper bag. Kerosene for lighting fuel was drained out of a barrel or pumped out of drums.

Toward the end of the 1800's convenience began to enter the shopper's world. Some goods were pre-packaged, branded products, igniting a new concept: advertising. Stores posted signs featuring soft drinks, tobacco, and other products. Old patrons of Cockrill's store recall seeing brands that we would recognize today: Dutch cleanser, Vick's salve, Chase and Sanborn coffee, and Campbell's soup. Other brands have long-since disappeared, gobbled up by consolidation and standardization, resulting in bland labels to match the contents of their cans.



The general store was a communications hub and the site of the local post office, making its proprietor a very important local person. Men would go and "set awhile" on overturned nail kegs around the potbelly stove or on the porch, munching tasteless, square soda crackers, sipping whatever was on hand, exchanging news and tall tales. Moxley and Cockrill were typical owners. They were postmasters, important members of the community, and extended credit ("Prompt payment ensures good credit," to quote Cockrill).

The General Store evolved with the times but could not keep up with them. Rural free delivery, RFD, enacted in 1893 meant that mail, including goods, would be delivered to the farm at no extra cost. RFD was promoted by the Postmaster General in 1889, Mr. John Wanamaker. Ring a bell? Wanamaker of Philadelphia opened one of the first and largest department stores in America, the Grand Depot in 1876, inspired by *Les Halles* in Paris; built a 12-story palatial store

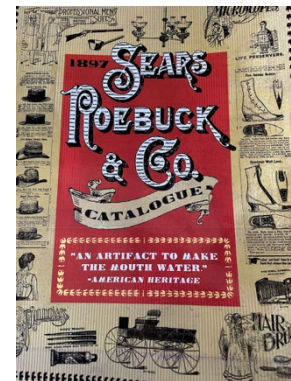
in 1911 (now Macy's); and was the brainchild behind "money back guarantees" and, some say, price tags. Clearly, he had a horse in the RFD race.

So did Aaron Montgomery Ward who had worked in a general store and as a traveling dry goods drummer. Appalled at the huge markups by middlemen and the often-inferior goods they peddled, Ward commenced with a plan thought to be sheer madness: selling quality goods at reasonable prices through advertising in a catalogue and delivering them by mail. Low margins would be compensated by high volume. He launched his initiative in 1872 in league with the Patrons of Husbandry (the Grange). Eventually, the business blossomed.

Musical Interlude

Oh, the Wells Fargo Wagon is a coming down the street/Oh please let it be for me/
Oh the Wells Fargo Wagon is a coming down the street/I wish I wish I knew what it could be/
I got a box of maple sugar on my birthday/In March I got a grey mackinaw/
And Once I got some grapefruit from Tampa/Montgom'ry Ward sent me a bathtub and a cross cut saw....

Ward's 240-page catalogue, affectionately called the "Wish Book," became such a hit that Richard Warren Sears copied the idea twenty years later after RFD took effect. Sears, who initially sold only watches, was joined by watch repairman Alvah Curtis Roebuck, and expanded their offerings to all manner of goods in a 500-page catalogue. Some general store owners were more than displeased, stoking their potbellied stoves with the mail order catalogues.



Better roads and the advent of the automobile meant general stores could be bypassed for urban ones. Large stores, however, employed the clerk system used in general stores. The customer would point out the desired item, the clerk would write up a sales slip, the slip would be taken to the cash box, the customer would pay and get a receipt and go back to the clerk to exchange the receipt for the desired item. (Your author can attest that this system was still in use in Moscow as late as 1996.)

Clarence Saunders of Memphis, Tennessee had a better idea. In 1916 he opened the first grocery store in which patrons would serve themselves, taking merchandise straight off the shelves and placing it into wooden hand baskets conveniently placed by the entrance. All items had prices marked on them, a novelty. And yes, candy was positioned next to the check out register. He gave an unforgettable name to his establishment: "Piggly Wiggly."

General stores still offered goods for locals not blessed with cars to drive into the cities, but the writing was on the wall. Slowly, slowly, they faded away, as did Cockrill's store when he passed in 1944. The Fairfax County Park Authority moved the store from the east side of Colvin Run Road directly opposite the mill to its current location in the park.

When you are next in the store to make a purchase, gaze at the antique display items that recall the history of general stores. Imagine the times when folks shopped to fill a need and “set a while” to visit with friends and neighbors. Reflect on the good fortune of our children to visit such a marvelously maintained museum. And if you squint a bit and let your imagination run, just maybe you too will gain a glimpse of days past of a comfy, cozy cornucopia, the old general store.



Answers to clothing terms long since abandoned:

Kerseymer: a woolen cloth, twilled or plain, used for men's suits

Thicksetts: twilled cotton cloth; a corduroy, or velveteen.

Humhums: a coarse Indian cotton cloth used for making towels

Tammies: a plain-woven often glazed cloth of fine worsted or woolen and cotton formerly used for dresses, curtains, and linings