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HONORABLE MENTION: ESSAY

"Country Stores"

by Cindy McMurtrey

An example of pure Americana, the small grocery store, is rapidly disappearing from the Southern countryside. These independently run emporiums once peppered the country roads and small towns of the South. Often one man or one family owned the store, making it a mom-and-pop business.

There was a special ambience or "air" about a country store that was apparent even before one entered it. A typical store had a gravel parking area (not an asphalt parking lot) liberally littered with soda-pop bottle caps. Often two ancient gasoline pumps with glass-domed tops adorned the center of the parking area.

A prospective customer entered the store by walking up the two empty Coca-Cola cases which serve as steps and across the plank porch. He would stop to take a reading off the large red thermometer that extols the virtues of Royal Crown Cola. There were usually two or three loungers sitting on benches, playing checkers (using the ubiquitous bottle caps) or discussing farm crops. If the thermometer reader is a familiar face around the community the loungers will speak; otherwise they will just nod at him.

Upon opening the door (by the handle that says "Merita is Good Bread") the visitor's senses are assaulted. The sight of

impossibly jumbled merchandise, the hum of the soft-drink cooler, and the smell of oiled wooden floors, fertilizer, hoop cheese, and bubble gum rushes at him.

On the counter are two one-gallon glass jars, one containing orange slices and the other peppermint sticks (the pure sugar kind that melts sweetly in the mouth). At the meat counter, along with the usual packages of pre-cooked cold cuts there are big sticks of bologna. Upon request, the storekeeper will cut the bologna into thick slices, wrap these in brown butcher paper, and secure the package with wide white tape with "Thank You" printed on it in red letters. The vegetable counter, according to the season, may have an abundance of plump, red tomatoes and glossy green bell peppers, both locally grown. At other times, the only vegetables available are a few pithy carrots or wilted heads of limp lettuce, brought in by truck from far away. A pair of old-fashioned scales are fastened to the counter so the buyer can be sure to get his money's worth.

Toward the back of the store there is a pot-bellied stove and sitting in cane-bottomed chairs around it are the counterparts of the front porch checker players. These men (for rarely is a woman in the group) are busily engaged in whittling, talking politics, or just sitting and wisely nodding from time to time. To the casual observer, these men may appear to be loafing. This observation is correct, but there are worse ways to while away the time than engaging in these fireside chats.

All the preceding characteristics are merely descriptive; they don't convey the heart of a country store. This "heart" comes across more clearly when a country store is compared with a modern convenience store.

Convenience stores are very clean, very efficient, and very dull. One is exactly like the other. Country stores, too, had many common features, but each had a distinct personality. The trouble with convenience stores is that they have no personality at all and are bland to the point of sterility. A person can live right next to a convenience store for years and still not have any personal feeling for it. A country store was the focal point of the neighborhood. Convenience stores have signs forbidding people to loiter; the country store, on the other hand, was the accepted place to loiter.

Convenience stores have the popular soft drinks such as Coca-Colas and Dr. Peppers; the country stores had these as well as more original flavors. These included peach and strawberry Nehis, Nu-Grapes, and Old Dutch Chocolate Sodas. Also, after buying a soda pop in a country store, the customer hung around and visited (i.e., loafed) until he had finished drinking it. Then he gave back the bottle for the deposit. In convenience stores one has to pay the deposit on the bottle and go away; staying to drink it would be considered loitering.

The country store offered conveniences that convenience stores will never have. An example of this is credit, which in many cases ruined the storekeeper. Still, he extended credit; he couldn't turn down his neighbors and fellow churchmen.

The main convenience a country store gave, however, is difficult to describe because it was intangible. The customer always felt like somebody: not just a pair of hands giving money and receiving groceries in return. A customer was always treated with friendly courtesy, or at least treated with friendly inquiry.

The country stores are disappearing, and perhaps this is symbolic of present-day attitudes. Americans want everything pre-packaged and disposable. Living has accelerated to an unbelievably fast pace. There is no longer any time to sit and talk or lounge and relax. Someday, Americans may want to slow down; but the chance to do so, like the country stores, will be gone.