

**THE GENERAL STORE**

Life Experience (Autobiographical)

Cherokee/Clay Senior Games/ Silver Arts

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There are certain words, such as "general store" that evoke nostalgic thoughts of the past and remind us of the people who ran them. Years ago, these mom-and-pop shops offered a wide range of items for purchase including jars of jam, sacks of flour, bolts of fabric for sewing and nails. People carried gallon jugs to the store to fill with kerosene. Back then, fresh beef cost five cents a pound, and a dozen eggs were only eighteen cents. Glass display cases housed a cash register and a set of scales, as well as penny candy that the store owner's wife was often willing to share with youngsters.

These retail places served as the town's social hubs, with men gathering around a pot-bellied heater to discuss current events, share fishing stories, and engage in casual gossip. One elderly resident shared a story saying, "Radios were very rare back then. People were even sitting on a bench outside one store sharing a transistor radio."

Before the 1950s, car ownership was uncommon. Most people traveled by foot or by horse and wagon. It was important for businesses to be easily accessible to the people. My Grandfather Wishon built a store beside the White Oak Creek, close to the intersection of Otter Creek Road in Nantahala.

With the establishment of their country grocer, my grandparents were following in their family's footsteps. For generations, dating back to my great-great-grandparents, my family had operated grocery stores in our small community. My Great-Grandfather Wikle, operated a business at the foot of the Winding Stairs Road, where he also served as justice of the peace, and postmaster.

Part of the years that my grandfather ran his store were during the Great Depression, a time when many struggled financially. Grandfather extended credit to his regular customers. He also operated much of his business on a barter system, allowing customers to exchange anything he could sell at market for items they needed. Once a week, he would travel to market at Knoxville, loading his truck with goods he exchanged through bartering, such as corn, apples, chestnuts and chickens. In between trips, he would let the chickens roam freely in the yard, much to the amusement of my aunt who fondly remembers the havoc they created when the family tried to capture them.

Besides my grandfather's weekly trips to market, traveling salesmen would often visit the store, selling their products. My grandfather usually talked to the salesmen, but when he was away, this became my grandmother's responsibility. A job that she said she hated. One day, while Grandfather was away for one of these trips, a salesman stopped by the store. My uncles decided to handle the situation, and thought

that this was the perfect opportunity to use a b-b gun. They took their rifles in their hands, and chased the terrified fellow for two-tenths of a mile. Laughing, as they continued the chase out the dirt road that led to the store.

Grandfather also owned a grist mill and a small sawmill. Before funeral homes came into existence, in the Great Smokey Mountains, he would reserve a pile of lumber from his sawmill, for him and a group of men in the community to use to build a coffin. They built it out of pine boards, and my grandmother took soft cotton fabric from the store to make a sheet to cover the casket and a pillow to cushion the head.

He closed the business when I was only two. However, the country store became a memory embedded in the minds of the Nantahala community. He would always say "One thing that you can be is honest," and he always tried to treat the people with kindness and fairness. For the next twenty years, after the store closing, people were still telling me stories about how they remembered buying groceries there.

These days, I follow my ancestors in a more modern way, selling at the flea market. I sell everything from baby strollers to nail guns, following the example set before me in the old general store.