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## Broome Center Store

*Clyda B. Mace*

Daddy ran a country store in Broome Center. They say the day I was born my brother was in East Conesville with the grocery wagon, drawn by a team of horses. Word of the new arrival had been telephoned ahead to a cousin on his route. Apparently, it was an event awaited with great anticipation for he turned immediately for home, whipping up the team so joyously that Lena, the cousin, screamed, “Don’t kill the horses! She’ll be there!”

Of course, I was and my big brother became a great favorite in my life. Alas, the horses were gone before my memory developed, a fact I’ve always mourned. But the store was a fact of life and, with a child’s gift for acceptance, I wasn’t impressed. Only now, looking back through the mist of years, do I realize we were living in the end of an era.

That store wasn’t a pretty or quaint affectation. It wasn’t a handy convenience of odds and ends to save the neighbors a trip to the supermarket for some forgotten item. There were no supermarkets. That was The Store. There they bought their supplies and I’m amazed now at how few supplies were considered necessary. I never heard of anyone starving, and cleanliness was considered a virtue. “Water’s free and soap is cheap” was an oft-heard reproof of those who didn’t worry overmuch about it. Daddy’s store supplied the necessities for keeping body and soul together in decently clean self-respect. Nor did it contribute to one of our modern problems, the Great Garbage question.

Flour, sugar, brown sugar, rice, cornmeal, tea, etc., were stored in large metal barrels. We weighed them out, poured them into the proper sized paperbag and tied it with a string. Nor were those bags tossed in the garbage when the customer got home. No, sir. They were carefully saved and used. Bacon was drained on brown paper bags, as were the delicious, crisp-on-the-outside homemade doughnuts fried in lard. There were dozens of practical uses for them in those pre-papertowel days. Cheese, cut from the big wheel of cheddar, was wrapped in heavy paper from a large roll in a castiron holder firmly anchored to the counter. Anything not bagged was wrapped in that paper and those sheets were saved for many a household use, too.

About all the tinned goods my sister and I can remember the store stocking were sardines, salmon, mackerel, Vienna sausages, and a small supply of canned tomatoes and peaches. Everyone grew their own vegetables, most folks had a pig and a few hens. They didn’t buy that stuff, they canned their own.

As I haul my crammed bags of garbage to the garage for the garbage collector, I marvel. This is Progress, I ask? What is all this junk? It's dog food cans (unheard of back then, our dogs ate what we ate), wads and wads of plastic once swaddled around fresh fruit and vegetables, plastic trays that held meat, plastic cartons, plastic packing squiggles, everything is throw-away packed. What I pay to have it hauled away would have fed a family in my childhood. And what the Town pays for a place my garbage collector may take it boggles the mind; almost half the amount of the entire Town budget in 1952!

Daddy's store wasn't fancy. There were large windows across the front, one each side of the door. Mom painted the shelves, oiled the plain wooden floor, and kept the windows bright with flowering plants. The counter was across the back and the shelves beneath held a glory of penny candy and nickle candy bars. A stack of glass-topped cookie cartons sat along the front. In a back corner was the hand-cranked kerosene pump. Shelves held essentials: Argo starch, bluing, bars of yellow laundry soap, Lifebuoy and Ivory soap, flystickers, oatmeal and (for the affluent) cornflakes, yeast, baking powder, salt and pepper, crackers, matches, tinned goods, etc. A rack behind the counter contained some home remedies like spirits of ammonia and nitre, wintergreen oil for toothache, camphorated oil, castor oil (of "ugh" memory), iodine, aspirin. Another rack held notions—thread, shoelaces, safety pins, buttons and snaps, and so on.

I grew up behind that counter. Early in life I was adept at pumping kerosene, weighing out flour and other staples, totting up totals and making change. No wonder I won the arithmetic prize in third grade!

Best of all, I knew everyone in the countryside, all their kids, most of their dogs, and just about where everyone was at any given moment. The little store was a focal point, a social center, and an information booth. I could tell you who had pigs for sale and who wanted to buy one. A stranger didn't stand a chance. One trip to that store and anonymity was lost. I once covered myself with glory by directing the troopers to a guy even the mailman didn't know.

Yes, the store and the mail order catalogs supplied most of life's needs back then. Sometimes, as I hurry to the car, tear through the supermarket, haul my purchases into the house, lug out the garbage, and only see my neighbors as they drive rapidly past the house, I think we've sold our birthright for a mess of plastic.

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March 4, 2010

