

## History - Those Wonderful General Stores.

Those wonderful general stores made for some lasting memories.

Plainville has had its share of large mercantile establishments. The first one came out of the spurt of development on the Farmington Canal at Blossom's Corner in 1829. Then the action, rather quickly, moved to the west bank of the canal in the center of town. Here the Whiting Brothers kept a large establishment, from which just about every imaginable item was dispensed for many years..

The Welch store was first established on the west bank opposite Whiting. During the ensuing years, both big stores conducted a great amount of business with local farmers, who exchanged farm products for store goods. These in turn were shipped to the cities at each end of the canal, New Haven and Northampton. These two stores sold among other things, plaster, farm tools, lumber, dry goods, and groceries. Goods came in by canal boat and were hauled overland to the Litchfield area, bringing back farm products.

When Welch gave up his last business and moved to New Haven, one of the buildings was hauled across West Main Street and used as a store until the disastrous fire of 1883 that wiped out that whole business area. The other Welch building was an appendage to the first knitting mill building, which also burned shortly after it was built in 1850.

Another member of the Welch clan ran the West Main Street store for awhile and then sold out to the Plainville Trading Company, which was incorporated Valentine's day in 1853, with capital of \$8000.00, consisting of 320 shares @ \$25.00 each. High Finance!!

The idea was to run the Whiting Brothers merry race for locally business, but alas, the brothers were not to be uprooted. The Trading Company failed in 1855, giving way to another unsuccessful owner, who failed in one year.

This location continued to be popular, and in the 1920's was the site of a popular drug store and Frisbie and Hemingway's grocery store, a new building. The Whiting store harbored business until the 1930's, when it was torn down.

For those lucky enough to remember the old time, "sell everything stores, the outstanding thing that resonates through the years is the smell. Cheese, leather, spices, fruit, and lamp oil. Some of the things I remember on the shelves were fly paper, mothballs, dry starch, bluing, Octagon Soap, canning jars, and jar rubbers and many other items I would be hard-pressed to find today.

Things were one on a larger scale, even 150 years ago. Families were larger, working days longer and harder. The meals were heartier as well as harder to prepare. And so groceries were purchased in quantity. Barrels of flour, bags of sugar, hogsheads of molasses, cheese came in big wheels. In those days of open kegs and barrels, samples

were free for the tasting. Since flies and the customer's dogs frequented the stores, one wonders about the cleanliness. Does anyone else remember the "pickle-downers", for lack of a better name? These were pincher-like on the end of a long handle, which allowed the storekeeper to reach and obtain items on the top shelf. There was a thumb latch which he pressed to close the claws over the desired item. There is one in the Plainville Historic Center 's Museum Store and it is handy for chores all over the building. I never saw the storekeeper 'up home' miss a thing that he toppled down.

I remember yearning for a harmonica. This, with other wonderful articles, was displayed in a velvet-lined case on the counter. Barlow' knives, and watch fobs were among the other treasures. But, gosh, I really wanted that harmonica. And on my birthday IO received it, and enjoyed it for several years, learning quite a number of simple melodies.

Of course, the big attraction for the small fry was the penny-candy counter. The glass on the front had to be cleaned every day to remove the prints, nose not finger! There were big jars on top of the counter that offered still more sweets. The almost unbearable selection of goodies was viewed with a variety of expressions on the children. Hungry eyes might gaze with great desire but even greater sadness, if the pocket lacked that magic penny.

Many a lifelong friendships were started when a kind-hearted grocer slipped a licorice string to a freckled-faced kid.

In some of the stores, such things as harness parts and ax handles might be found. Piled in a corner might be a mess of parts for some new-fangled contraption left on trial by a salesman. Many of these unsung labor-saving devices would have to prove themselves to the thrifty Yankee, and many of them did.

In the 1900's, stores were still carrying a wide range of items we would find strange today. But things were changing fast. As soon as folks got phones they could call an order in and have it delivered by wagon. In 1917, the Hird Grocery Store in the Russell Block on Central Square took a huge and even shocking step. They offered motorized delivery. But let's think about that for a moment. When you are on vacation, one of the favorite stops is a recreated General Store, right? Cheese crackers penny candy are still the best sellers. And fresh made peanut butter? I saw at least 20 people in line waiting for it to be made on a trip to Vermont. Ha! Hird was doing that in 1917.

So there is nothing new. Say, I wonder if any of those new general stores might stock harmonicas?

Respectfully submitted - Ruth Hummel.