

Some Sketches
by
A Grocery Boy in Kent, Ohio
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About Christmas time of 1944, I was a senior in high school and had been working at the Smith News Agency for George Smith when I was offered a new job and went upstairs to work for the Longcoy Grocery Store. Smitty's establishment was in the basement of the Longcoy Store, on the Franklin Avenue side. I was about 17 years of age and it was during WWII and I had been driving for George for some time and I was hired to drive one of the delivery trucks for Longcoy's. Christmas time was a busy delivery time and extra help was needed. As it turned out, it was more than a temporary job for me.

Longcoy's was an old grocery store, had come down through several generations, and was now owned by Harry C. Longcoy.

He was called "Mr. Longcoy" and spoken of, by his employees as "H.C." He was a kindly man, an exemplary citizen, and a hard worker of the first degree. He never scolded, led by example and, I think, was beloved by all who knew him.

Longcoy's had two delivery trucks. A gray long bed panel Dodge of about 1942 vintage, and an earlier vintage yellow International, conventional bed. Bob Amick was the other driver. I believe there had only been one truck on the road before I started, though I am not sure of that. Ruby Bran was the lady in charge of the little corner office on the main floor of the store, and every morning she prepared a black purse, with a shoulder strap for us to carry on the route. It had sufficient change that we could collect for groceries as we delivered them. I think we only carried that purse for a short while after I started because by then almost all of the delivered groceries were on a charge basis.



In the morning, Ruby and whoever else was close to the phone in the office, wrote the orders out on carbon copy pads and passed them to the "back room". There was a vocabulary of abbreviations for many of the things that were ordered. Some of them that Jean and I remember are: "CC" for Cottage Creamery butter. "Sum" for Sumner's butter. "Gbf" for ground beef. "C&S" for Chase and Sanborn coffee. "Max" for Maxwell House coffee. "WW" for whole wheat bread. There were many others because out of the hundreds of different groceries that were carried, many were very commonly ordered as staples in the kitchens of Kent.

Kent was divided into four routes for the purposes of deliveries: SW, NW (including Twin Lakes), NE, and SE. Two quadrants were delivered on two week days, and two on the other two weekdays. On Saturday, the entire town was covered.

Orders were made up in the "back room", which opened onto Franklin Avenue. It was pretty well stocked with most of the items that would be ordered and those that were not stocked, were picked

up from the front room (main sales floor and meat counters) by the person assembling the order.

The orders were placed into collapsible wooden boxes of two sizes and placed, arranged by route, close to the door opening onto a platform in the alley on the south side of the store. (Our fellow tenants of the alley were Fred Bechtel and Ray's Place.)

The driver assisted in the assembly of the orders and loaded his truck, until all of the orders for his route were filled then left. The other driver did likewise until his route was filled and he left. In the meantime, if it was Saturday, the backroom people filled the orders for the other two routes and arranged them by the door for pickup when the drivers returned.



If items had been missed, or there was a late order promised, we went back out to take care of that.

After returning (on weekdays after school) we drivers did other jobs as needed in the store. Generally we were responsible for cleaning out the accumulated trash from the basement and making a run to the city dump at some time during the week.

Driving the routes and delivering groceries was rather interesting and sometimes memorable experiences developed.

Mrs. Jones (not really) ordered a pint of oysters. When I placed the pint can of oysters on the kitchen counter she instructed me that she and Mr. Jones were from Maine and appreciated good, fresh oysters and never ate canned oysters and I was to take the can back and bring fresh oysters. I took them back and Mr. Hammer, our butcher, instructed me that she would get %@##**++=@# fresh oysters, whereupon he opened the can, poured the oysters into a pint bucket and returned it to my hands. Upon delivering the fresh mollusks to Mrs. Jones, she thanked me and instructed me again that she and Mr. Jones were from Maine and....

The next time I delivered groceries to Mrs. Jones, I could not resist inquiring about the oysters. Whereupon Mrs. Jones again instructed me that she and Mr. Jones... and that the fresh oysters were certainly much better than canned oysters...!

On one occasion I had a larger than usual load of groceries for my route and had stacked the boxes 3 or four high in the truck. It happened that we did not have the passenger front seats in the trucks to make more room. The top box on front stack on that side was filled with jars of baby food and when I had to make a sudden stop for one reason or another, the box toppled forward, many of the jars broke and I learned why babies made the faces they did when offered spinach, beets, and the like.

As I continued as delivery boy and at times worked at various jobs in the store, I guess I inspired more confidence from Mr. Longcoy and was given other jobs with more responsibility. I was always at work on time and remained as long as needed and did not need much supervision. I even did some of the purchasing.

George Hopkins was the produce manager and he and I got along well and I was always glad to help him get the produce up from the coolers in the basement and placed in the counters in the front of the store on Saturday mornings. (The produce, and other supplies that were kept in the basement, were brought up on a hand operated elevator. The hand power was supplied to a large, endless rope, about 2" in diameter and needless to say, it was not very fast). George was a large man, slow and methodical, and a good teacher. He always called me "Johnnie" as did my girlfriend and other contemporaries. After I came back to Kent and started in my medical practice, both he and Mrs. Hopkins became my patients and I cared for them to the end of their lives.

That reminds me that by the time I retired from practice, I had delivered newspapers, groceries,

and health care (by way of house calls) to many of the same homes in the city. I consider that quite a privilege.

Another employee, who later became my patient, was Frances Wagner. She was a maiden lady, a devout Catholic and had worked at the store for many years. She was a sort of “jack- of –all- trades- and- master-of- all”. She was a very hard worker. At times she worked in the little corner office and when she answered the phone, she always said something like “Lung-kys.” When Frances was working putting up orders, we could hear, or feel, her coming up through the store by the pounding of her feet.

We had a “company” dog named Skipper at the store. He stayed in the basement most of the time, partly because that was his place, and partly because he bit. He was a good mouser and had the run of the store at nights. He and I became good friends and he even became trusting enough to get on my lap and let me pet him. However, if I let him down too quickly or made a sudden movement, he would bite me. I never scolded him, figuring he had started that for some good reason and we remained friends.

Skipper met his demise when he was out in the alley and a lady came walking down past him, and apparently unprovoked, he snapped at her. He had to be put down after that happened.

Longcoy’s had always killed and dressed chickens and rabbits on site in the basement and was still doing that while I worked there. I learned to do both of those operations and will spare the details. Suffice it to say, it was unpleasant work, but at the same time it was a new experience and I felt satisfaction in being able to be entrusted with the job as my total responsibility.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the jobs relating to the truck was to clean up the trash in the basement and haul it to the city dump. In those days, “free goods” were offered with certain items to encourage sales. For instance, we received a rather large shipment of glass salad dishes, square, about 6” on a side and molded to give the appearance of cut glass. (Jean and I still have several of those and they are often in use after 60 some years.) Those were to be given away with the purchase of, say, a box of Oxydol. However, for various reasons, they did not all get distributed and they ended up riding with me to the dump. I can’t tell how many times in recent years I have seen those (or their siblings) for sale in flea markets, antique shops, and second hand stores.

Friday evenings were frustrating because the store was open a little later than other days, closing I believe around 6:30 or 7:00 and there was often a high school football game to go to and when there was not, there was a date with my girlfriend. It seemed like I was always hurrying and always late those evenings.

Saturdays were long work days at the store. H.C. of course arose and arrived at the store early every day, but on Saturdays, because I was not in school, I got to the store at 6:30 or 7:00. If I greeted Mr. Longcoy with a “how are you?” he invariably replied, “I was never better in my life!” There was much to do and I seemed to do a little of everything, beside my primary job of delivering groceries.

After the deliveries were done in mid afternoon I worked stocking shelves or out on the floor. Saturday was “clean up night” and my part in that involved cleaning the meat band saw and the meat cases. The latter was a bad job because the trays had to be removed from over the cooling fins deep in the recesses of the case, and the fins and coils cleaned using a solution of soap, water and ammonia. The fins scratched and abraded my knuckles and the ammonia burned.

At one time, I felt that for the work I did and responsibility that I was given, I was underpaid. I complained to Mr. Hammer (because he was a friend and I did not understand at that time that I should have gone to the “boss.”) One day not long after, Mr. Longcoy found me upstairs in the cereal storage room and reached into his pocket and peeled off \$100 and handed it to me, saying that he guessed I had earned it and gave me a small raise. I was impressed.

H.C. fell one time and broke his ankle. He was laid up for a while and forbidden by his daughters to go to the store. One day I took the truck up to his house on Park Avenue to put it in the garage for the night. I put the truck away and walked around to where he was sitting on the porch and, trying to reassure him, told him how well we were getting along. He looked very disappointed. I don’t recall

what he said, but I hastened to assure him that he was badly missed-as he was.

After that injury, his ankle did not seem to heal normally and he walked with a slight limp. From then on we could identify who was coming up the floor by his “clumping” footfalls.

Harry Longcoy, “Jr.” was being groomed to take over the store. He was called into Army and was killed in Italy and this was a terrible tragedy for Mr. Longcoy.

His rather favorite grandson, Jack Dreese, was recalled into the Air Force during the Korean War and was killed. A nephew, Stephen White, whose father worked in the store as a butcher, was also killed in WWII in 1943. Mr. L. never showed much emotion but we all knew that it was very difficult for him to bear the loss of these fine young men.

In February of 1946, after High School and one quarter of college, I enlisted in the Army and returned home in the Summer of 1947. I returned to college and continued to work at the store.

Mr. Longcoy retired in 1946 and sold the store to a gentleman who had called on the store as a wholesale grocery salesman. Mr. Longcoy said, in a memoir, that “...I sold it to the wrong person”. He had had little or no retail experience and before long Mr. Longcoy bought the store back and sold it to David B. Longcoy. “Dave” (as he was called) was H.C.’s cousin, a grandson of one of the former owners, and had worked in the store as a younger man in various capacities.

In the summer of 1950 I was home from Medical School after my freshman year and working for Dave in the store. There had been a bakery in one of the upstairs floors and it was no longer in use. Dave decided to remove the equipment and I was doing that job. It was hot, dirty, miserable work. Dave had a daughter, Jean Ann, two years my junior, who I had known for several years and with whom, a couple of years before, I had spent an enjoyable New Year’s Eve. We had both been in serious, but unsuccessful relationships in the interim.

One day when I was suffering greatly (or so I thought) from the heat and labor of dismantling the bakery, Jean came to the store from her job across the river, to get a ride home with her father later. She saw my distress went across the alley to Ray’s place and brought back a beer, won my heart, and we were married at Christmas time that year.

I became one of the family and attending physician to some and cared for H.C. in his terminal illness.

Of interest to me is the fact that two of my good friends from high school days also worked in downtown Kent grocery stores. Jim Lanham and Jon Sally both worked for the Acme store on East Main St. Both went on, as I did, to become Osteopathic Physicians. Jim went into General Practice and later specialized in Radiology in Summit and Portage Counties, and Jon joined my colleague, Don Ulrich and me in our Family Practice. All three of us were inspired by and mentored by Dr. Nick Ulrich and his son Donald. Dr. Nick was the Longcoy family’s physician and a friend of Harry’s.

It is a small world.