

The Grocery Store in 1908

Today, food and groceries seem to be purchased from stores that are part of a chain, either regional or nationwide, and the small, family-owned grocery is all but a far-distant memory held by some of the older members of our society.

There is not a great deal of difference between Stop and Shop, Big Y or Super Saver, either in the commodities they carry or the prices they charge. The buyer is not given many options, because what you see is what you get, generally. Once in a while a situation will arise that completely is beyond comprehension, but for which there is no answer, and there is no way to address the problem. Take, for example, the case of the vanishing brands. For generations, my family, which has ties to Nova Scotia and the Canadian Maritimes, has purchased Crosby's brand of Barbados molasses, headquartered in St. John, New Brunswick. It was sold (in the latter half of the twentieth century at least), first in Canadian gallon jugs (five quarts), then the standard U.S. four quart gallon, then two quart glass bottles, then later in one quart paper containers, and finally in 12 fl. oz. Glass bottles. This was sold side by side with Grandma's and Brer Rabbit, both of which were the black strap variety, meaning high sulfur, low sugar content, vastly different from the light colored, high sugar content Crosby's. Most grocery chains carried these three brands, but as the century progressed, Crosby's had smaller and smaller shelf space allotted to it, compared to the other "American" brands. Finally it actually would be absent, and you would have to shop around to find a store that had some in their inventory. I actually asked the manager of one of the local chains (I think at the time it was Finast) what the problem was and he told me that the demand didn't warrant keeping it on the shelf. I reminded him that every shipment they received flew off the shelf, and that I, personally would buy an entire case from him if that was possible. He replied that it was not store policy to special order purchases, this could only be done by visiting one of their "super stores", (the nearest one being in Bloomfield, if I remember correctly.) So much for customer relations - at the time of this writing, I haven't seen the brand on any shelf for at least two or three years.

It was not like in the day of the local grocery store. In 1908, for example, many products arrived at the store in bulk, to be repacked by the clerks for the customer's convenience. Take coffee, for instance: It was shipped as whole beans in sixty pound bags, to be ground and packaged in one-pound glazed bags and sold for the princely sum of twenty-five cents per pound. A smaller percentage was kept as whole beans, to be ground at home by those who wished to have a freshly ground brew.

Chase & Sanborn was one of the larger brands, and they delivered their product to the individual stores. Some of their varieties were: Mocha, Java and Maleberry Java. If the storeowner wanted other brands, he had to make arrangements with the individual companies for delivery.

Tea also came in bulk. Lipton's Salada and Chase & Sanborn's Orange Pekoe came in small packages, but there was usually a row of canisters on a shelf. There might have been four: one each for young hyson, oolong, gunpowder and spider-leg Japan. Coffee, however far outsold tea, so incoming shipments were infrequent. Bulk tea was shipped in big cubic containers of paper-lined lead foil. These were covered with straw matting, bound with split bamboo and marked with Chinese and Japanese characters.

The grocery store of 1908 still sold many kinds of food in bulk only. On the floor stood paper-lined bushel baskets containing navy beans, marrowfat beans, kidney beans, lima beans, dried peas, split peas, oatmeal, and rolled oats. (Oatmeal and rolled oats are not the same.) The shopper could find tubs of salt mackerel and kegs of sour, dill and sweet pickles. Cheese came only in wheels or bricks, and it was all natural; processed hadn't been invented yet.

Vinegar, more often than not, came in wooden barrels, as did molasses, and the customers brought their own bottles or jugs, which were filled by the clerk. Molasses was occasionally dispensed somewhat differently. Instead of having a bung from which the liquid flowed, the barrel stood upright, and the contents was pumped out by means of a crank having a gooseneck spout. Youngsters were led to believe that it was great fun to stand upon a chair and laboriously crank the slow moving molasses out of the barrel and into your parent's receptacle. It quite often took up most of the time your parents were shopping. I know that in my case, at least, the revelation of how I had been "used" all those years didn't dawn in my brain until I had gained enough height and bulk that I no longer needed the chair to stand on!

Tapping barrels took both skill and muscle. A full barrel weighed over two hundred pounds. The first step in the procedure was to swing it up on end, pry out the wooden stopper and drive in the spigot, making sure that it was turned off. Then the barrel had to be lowered onto a low cradle, like a sawhorse, with the spigot at the bottom and the bung at the top of the barrel.

The next operation was to use a wooden tool shaped somewhat like a hatchet and having a handle just long enough and supple enough to allow it to loosen the bung by pounding the barrel around it. This tool, as well as the bungs themselves, was made from the wood of the black tupelo tree, also called the Pepperidge tree. The wood is extremely hard and does not have a grain in the normal sense of the word. It is nearly impossible to split, which is the main reason it is not used as firewood. About the only commercial use for the wood is the manufacture of bungs and the tools to work them with. After the bung was removed, it was wrapped in a piece of burlap and fitted lightly back into the bunghole. The burlap was porous enough to admit air that was needed before the vinegar would flow from the spigot, and yet dense enough to keep out flies and insects – or most of them.

Tobacco was a steady seller, but primarily as loose cut, packaged in tins and used by pipe smokers. Chewing tobacco came as "plug" or coarsely cut loose tobacco. And there were many brands of snuff, packaged in small tins similar to a hockey puck. Cigarettes were available, but prior to World War I, they were not big sellers. If the "tailor made" cigarettes didn't sell, "roll your own" were quite popular, especially "Bull Durham". This brand came in a small cloth pouch equipped with a long string with a hexagonal red paper tag at the end. The purpose of the tag was to facilitate removing the pouch from your shirt pocket so that some of the contents could be shaken into a cigarette paper, and then rolled into a cigarette. The tag also served an additional role of announcing to your friends, if you happened to be a teenager, that you were sophisticated.

Historic Bytes

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