

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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The following correspondence was received recently from Warren Thurber who grew up in Gaines and Albion back in the teens and twenties. His father's store which he speaks of is shown in the center of the picture taken during the Gaines Centennial Parade in 1909. To the left is the Welch Hotel, to the far right, the Universalist Church.

VIVID MEMORIES

By Warren Thurber

When I was three or four years old, my father bought a store in the hamlet of "Fair Haven" (now Childs). In those days, a "country store" was an important element in the community. Generally people didn't "go to town" often. Rather they drove to the "country store" for their needs. My Dad's store was located on the northeast corner of the intersection of the Ridge Road and the Oak Orchard Road, in a two-story building. Our neighbors were Welch's Hotel, Vagg's blacksmith shop, and a large, red brick farm house owned by the Dixon Family.

The store part of the building was a large room with shelves along each side wall. A long counter sat four or five feet in front of the wall shelves. On one end of the counter sat a large coffee grinder and under the counter was a barrel of coffee beans. When a customer ordered coffee, my Dad would pour a pound, or how much the customer ordered, into the grinder and cranked the side wheel to grind the coffee. The shelves were stocked with cans and packages and Dad "waited" on the trade by picking the can or package off the shelves. Self-service was unknown then.

Along the opposite wall were shelves and show cases where cloth and sewing supplies were displayed — this was where the ladies shopped. My Mother was the clerk in this area.

In the center of the store was a big stove which heated the place in the winter. The floor was planks. Dad swept the floor each morning and I would move the chairs for him — customers might sit and talk for a time before or after shopping. I discovered a knothole in one of the floor planks and I used to place a chair so the leg would be over the knothole. When an unsuspecting customer sat in the chair, the leg would drop into the hole and the chair would teeter, causing the sitter to squirm to keep his balance.

There are vivid memories of some happenings. One is Dad's peddling wagon. This was a four wheeled vehicle drawn by one horse. The body was a box about five feet high, four feet wide and six or seven feet long. The front was open and had a double seat for the driver and a passenger. Inside were shelves on which Dad would place cans and packages of flour, sugar, etc. Once a

week Dad would stock the wagon and drive out to farm houses to sell groceries. The farmers' wives would come out to the wagon and Dad would take out the packages they ordered. At times the lady would say, "I have no money today, but I've got a crock or two of fresh butter." Dad and the lady would agree on a price for the butter and the lady would get her groceries. Dad would sell the butter in the store.

When I was five or six years old, Dad would take me with him when he drove out to the farms. It was fun. Some of the ladies would see me in the wagon and would bring out cookies and a glass of milk.

One day a man came into the store and told my parents that Gypsies were coming up the Ridge Road. I had never heard of Gypsies and I became frightened when the man told my parents to hide me because, he said, "Ya know, these darned Gypsies kidnap children and take them away." The people in the community set up a "watch" and when the Gypsy wagons were seen down the road, the watchman shouted "Gypsies a-coming!" My mother took me into the kitchen and told me to stay there. She went back into the store. I wanted to see those strange people so after mother left me, I slipped out the back door and crawled under a side porch which was enclosed by slats. I could peek through the space between the slats. The Gypsies drove horsedrawn wagons which were decorated and brightly painted, they stopped in front of the store and some entered. The men wore colored shirts, baggy pants and high boots. The women had long black hair and multicolored dresses. I watched for a short time then dashed back into the kitchen before my mother came to check on me.

Not all of my time was spent in the store. On one corner lived Joe Vagg, the blacksmith, who had two children; Norris and Melva. A short distance up the street lived Ralph Staines.

After a few years, my Dad was appointed a mail carrier in the Albion Post Office. We moved from "Fair Haven." Not only has the name been changed to "Childs" but the corner area has changed. The old store building has been replaced. The Welch Hotel is now the Village Inn, and Joe Vagg's blacksmith shop is now a museum. But fond memories do linger.