

The general store — a spirit of friendliness

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD. — Part of New England Americana is the old general store, few of which operate today. Here country folk gathered to shop for a wide selection of commodities, swap home grown produce for other goods and to exchange gossip.

For 130 years there was such a store in Westford, Wright & Fletcher's, operated by two Yankee families at 40 Main St. overlooking the town's picture-postcard Common.

Although the store was a jumbled array of many items, it offered the necessities of day-to-day life. Here the spirit of friendliness prevailed amidst the smell of fresh ground coffee — and perhaps with a nibble of strong cheese and a Westminster soda cracker.

Transformed now into the Williamsburg Flower and Gift Shop and five attractive apartments, the building presently is owned by Dr. Andrew R. Kusman, who regrets that he couldn't duplicate the old emporium.

But for those who remember, and those who wish they could, a small replica of the store is being reproduced by the Westford Garden Club as part of their Christmastime exhibit in the newly-opened town museum on Dec. 4 and 6.

For many years, Sherman H. Fletcher was the "front man" in the Wright & Fletcher partnership. His side-kick, Harwood L. Wright — known as Dick to adult and child alike — was not far behind in authority. They made a good pair and as far as ever noticed, there was never a squabble between them.

Sherm was tall and dignified with blue eyes twinkling behind gold-rimmed glasses. A commanding figure, he started each day's work by putting on a long light brown clerk's coat. He loved his home town and his fellow man.

During his lifetime, he filled many town offices, most notably as a selectman, for which he received \$90 a year. Perhaps he lavished too much personal time on town business, but

he liked the authority and was greatly respected.

Wright was a slight man who dressed immaculately. He was a favorite among the ladies although he never married.

In addition to his many duties in running the store as business manager, he kept the books. For many years, until his death, he was town treasurer at a salary of \$175.

Genial Fred Hartford was a long-time clerk and was permitted to sell life insurance as a side line. Sherm's soft-speaking daughter, Julia, assisted with the books.

Small boys, from time to time, were allowed to sweep the floors or fill kerosene cans — a nasty job as was bagging potatoes — in exchange for a bottle of Moxie or birch beer and a napoleon.

Business was transacted at a slow pace those days. The pleasantries which passed between clerk and customer were some compensation for unlocking the doors in the morning at 7 and putting out the cat and dousing the kerosene lamps at 9.

A porch extended along the front of the building with settees where men and boys (never the ladies) would gather in good weather. When winter came, they moved inside, to sit around a sheet iron stove fed with coal, brought up from the cellar by the boys.

No small person ever entered this store but who would not cast a quick glance to the right. Here was where the candy case was perched upon a counter, most tempting to eager young buyers, holding tightly a few pennies!

Should a little brother or sister be too small to obtain a full view of all the goodies, he or she could stand on a small box in front.

Most popular were the chocolate covered nougatines. Two cost but a penny and invariably lasted longer than old-fashion creams, another popular choice, also called a "twofer."

For the courting young man, there was a goodly assortment of Schrafft's and Lowney's chocolates, in fancy boxes with ribbons.

In constant use over generations, the glass on the showcase showed a distinct patina ingrained by pennies scratching the surface.

When it was a Republican administration, a post office occupied a prominent place to the left of the entrance. When the Demos took control in Washington, the mini-office moved across the Common to the country store operated by John M. Fletcher and son, Hobert.

Next to the post office, a long showcase displayed the sundries for dress-making and not much of a selection of yard goods. On shelves against the wall was a grouping of patent medicines, with even a colic cure for horses.

The building had one chimney, in the center of the store. Bucked up to this were square tins of Nabisco cookies and Bradt's soda crackers in bulk. Choose your own mixture.

On a counter in back of the store the stock of men's work clothes was stacked and below an assortment of rubbers and boots. A clutter of farm and garden tools occupied a side room and here one found a goodly assortment of nails loose in wooden kegs.

If one was not too fussy about the color, there was an ample supply of paints for in and outside usage. Hars, too, were various hardware items; glass was cut to size.

Principal commodities on sale were the staple groceries. Sugar, beans, rice, corn meal and rolled oats came in bulk.

Former clerks, Austin D. Fletcher, H. Arnold Wilder and Gustave Peterson remember well the tedious job of scooping these items into paper bags in various unit sizes, carefully weighing on a balance scales each sack as it was being filled. These were neatly tied with the string pulled down from the ceiling hanger and neatly stacked, ready for the next customer.

It was assumed that Westford cooks were the best and to choose the correct flour for pans of home-made bread was done with great care. They could buy King Arthur brand (still unbleached) and Pillsbury's Best,



WRIGHT & FLETCHER IN 1900

...an old country store which stood for 130 years

but long gone are these brands: Cere-sots, Bridal Veil, Beacon, Allen's and Silver Patent.

The store maintained a covered express wagon for picking up goods at the railroad and making deliveries around town. The wagon was stored nights in a shed whose walls were redecorated yearly, courtesy of Barnum & Bailey's Circus. This meant a couple of free passes.

Orders were solicited in person, not by phone, throughout the Center for same delivery, twice a week. Outlying districts received orders only one day per week.

As a small boy, Teddy Green remembers well his many trips to Wright & Fletcher's to survey the candy counter and to pick up a couple

of loaves of Friends's bread.

Now, Teddy and his wife Barbara, live in approximately the space used to store the delivery wagon, keep the grain and seed supply and the kerosene master tank.

The store was modernized probably only once during its 130-year history. During the World War I period, the front porch was removed and bay windows added.

This meant the old windows, liberally covered with Salada Tea Porcelain lettering, old posters and stickers, and fly specks all had to go. This made for a more "modern" appearance and possibly a better place to display merchandise, but these displays were rarely changed.

Old timers fondly remember the

old store as it served the needs of their parents and grandparents faithfully.

Huntington Wells remarked last week, "I don't go by the old building but what I recall the time Edgar Peterson and I were passing by, fresh out of Sunday School. I touched a match to the bottom of the big thermometer tacked alongside the front door. The bulb exploded and that was the end of that weather station!"

For part of this display, Austin Fletcher is loaning a set of post office boxes from the old store, also a nail keg complete with the "claw" hand-wrought iron tool used to "claw" the nails from the container.