

Wright and Fletcher's country store

A treasure house of the past

By Gordon B. Seavey

A small replica of the interior of the old general store on Main Street known as "Wright and Fletcher's" will be reproduced by the Westford Garden Club for their Christmastime exhibit in the Town Museum on December 3 and 4.

A nostalgic touch will be a set of post office boxes from the old building, loaned by Austin Fletcher. He also has a nail keg complete with the handwrought iron tool used to "claw" the hard-to-handle nails from the wooden tub.

Can anyone come up with the old penny candy counter? Wouldn't those kids of yesteryear once again thrill to the pointing of pennies to peppermint patties!

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. The area newspaper was printed but once a week.

For 130 years there was such a store in Westford, overlooking the town's picture post card Common.

Although this store was a jumbled array of many items, it offered the necessities of life for day-to-day living. On occasion, one could travel "to the city," which in this case was Lowell, but it meant a time consuming trip by train, street car (two changes) or even horse and buggy.

This store was known as Wright & Fletcher's and was operated by two Yankee families. 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.

This type of operation is not to be confused with today's conven-

ience store where the stock is limited and the customer pays cash to a disinterested clerk.

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

Sherm was tall, dignified with blue eyes twinkling behind gold rimmed eye 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 fellowman. 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.

Adults and the kids called his partner, "Dick" Wright, 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, as a long-time clerk, 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 neapolitan.

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

at nine.

Electricity did not come to Westford until 1911 and then only "for a test period of five years." Therefore most every home had a five gallon can for kerosene regularly filled at Wright & Fletcher's. The duty was usually passed along, when possible, to the boy. A stinking duty, especially in winter.

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 coal fed stove, brought up from the cellar when possible by the boys.

Taking in the snow shovel from the porch in the spring and were at the same time installing a swinging, squeaky screen door, later when the flies came, long strips of Tanglefoot flypaper were hung from the ceiling.

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-fashioned creams, another popular choice, also called a "two fer."

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 show case 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, Herbert.

The post office was small, a cluster of about 60 boxes surrounding a grilled opening in the middle. Usually a small group of

hopeful recipients would congregate in front until the mail was sorted. Most people received their mail and newspapers via rural free delivery.

Next to the post office, a long showcase displayed the sundries for dressmaking and not much of 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, backed up to this were square tins of Nabisco cookies and Bradt's soda crackers in bulk. Choose your own assortment. On a counter in back of the store the stock of men's work clothes were stacked, below was an assortment of rubbers and boots. Overalls that were too long could be rolled at the bottom.

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, inside and out. Here, too, were various hardware items and 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 jobs of scooping these items into paper bags in various unit sizes, carefully weighing on a balance scale each sack. These were neatly tied with string pulled down from the ceiling and neatly stacked, ready for the next customer.

It was automatically recognized 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, but long gone are these brands: Ceresota, 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 day delivery, twice a week. Outlying districts received attention only one day per week.

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 specs 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. In hard times or off season, credit was given for months at a time. This method of doing business and the rapid changes to modern merchandising caused the demise of this type of store.

Memories do linger, however.

Huntington Wells made the remark recently, "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!"

Dr. Andrew R. Kusmin, now owner of the building, regrets he couldn't duplicate the old emporium. It has been carefully renovated with space for the Williamsburg Flower and Gift Shop, plus five attractive apartments.

Teddy Green remembers well his many trips to Wright & Fletcher's as a small boy, to survey the candy counter and to pick up a couple loaves of Friend's bread. Milk, a popular commodity today, was not sold, as there were milk routes all over town. Or the housewives would send a small girl to the neighboring farmer's at milking time in order to supply the household.

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

Not only has this store passed, but gone, too is the little man in a Ford touring car with a box in the rear, who weekly delivered only Fleischman's yeast cakes to Wright & Fletcher's. From there the yeast was distributed to those wonderful Westford cooks. How would one know of this reputation? Any young lad, making a delivery just about the time something was coming out of the oven of Ma Feeney, for example, would vouch for this reputation!

