

Noggins, Firkins, Piggins, and Kegs, Salt Pork, Peppermints, Gun Shot, and Eggs



It is hard to imagine the many kinds of items that filled Vermont's general stores one hundred years ago. Merchandise cluttered the shelves, was packed in barrels, or stored in tins. The inventory ranged from the ordinary to the fancy. There were milk pails, hoes, and butter tubs; ribbons, silks, and goose feathers; nails, buttons, and twine; washboards, umbrellas, and spectacles; whole nutmegs, oysters, and pickled fish; **sealing wax**, ink wells, and **blotting sand**; grass seed, **chamber pots**, and **tallow**; sheep sheers, skillets, and suspenders. Stenciled on the drawers of the tall **apothecary** chest were mysterious sounding names of roots, bark, and other ingredients used for home remedies. Large and small bottles of **elixirs** and patent medicine occupied another shelf. Most everything a family needed that could not be grown or made on the farm could be found at the store.

For a Vermont farmer, who may never have traveled beyond the town where he lived, a trip to the local store meant seeing what the world had to offer. Green and black teas came from faraway Japan and China, fabrics from India, and china from England.

But Vermont's general stores offered more to farmers than just merchandise and a place to shop. The country store served as a community gathering place and social center. Like our present-day bar; meeting hall; convenience, hardware, drug, clothing, and food store all rolled into one, it was the place folk gathered to talk politics, share news and local gossip.

Many of Vermont's general stores also served as town post offices. Mail and newspaper deliveries brought news of the outside world to **remote** Vermont communities. In a time when many miles separated hill farms, it was often the country store that brought families together.

Of course, country stores did not spring up overnight. As towns were settled, peddlers with wares to sell farmers appeared on the scene. They traveled from home to home with goods of all sorts in their wagons, saddlebags, or strapped to their backs in large sacks. But as soon as a small community could support a store one was set up. Sometimes the shopkeeper had started out as a peddler. Sometimes he was a **shrewd** fellow who saw the opportunity to give up farming for another trade.



The store owner was a busy fellow. Besides **fetching** items; measuring and cutting cloth; weighing grains, flour and cheese; and wrapping and tying bundles for customers, he often held a town office or two like justice of the peace or constable. He may also have cut hair, tailored clothing, or dug graves when time allowed. He worked daily from sun-up until long after dark. Holidays were few and far between. Even special events caused only short closings as this notice posted by Solomon Aines of Middlebury shows:

"The store will be closed from 8:45 - 9:45 tomorrow a.m. as I am to be married at

that hour. I shall not want to stop and count eggs or weigh out bird seed.”

Storekeepers made semiannual buying trips to market centers like Boston, Massachusetts, and Albany, New York, where they traded butter, eggs, cheese, maple sugar, and other goods from their hometowns for supplies to stock their shelves back in Vermont. They bought the usual shop goods and an occasional luxury item like lemons or some elegant hat trimmings. While in the city, the store owner might also do errands for his neighbors, many of whom never traveled out of Vermont.

Most Vermonters were fairly self-sufficient, depending upon what they could raise or make for all the family's needs. The typical farmer tended a garden, raised chickens and stock, mended and whittled, built and repaired all manner of things needed to survive

on the farm. Since garden produce and handmade items were available and coins were rare, most shopping was done by **barter**.

How bills were paid is as fascinating as what was bought. The payment reflected the occupation of the customer. A blacksmith might trade door latches for groceries, a cobbler - shoes. The farmer brought in all manner of produce to cover the family's bills. Dried apples, live turkeys, **noggins** of butter, **firkins** of lard, **piggins** of oats, and kegs of cider were all accepted at the store **in lieu of money**. Some accounts were settled with services instead. A customer might weave cloth, cut firewood, shoe a horse, mend a wagon wheel, or hay a field to pay his store bill.

Much of what we know about trading in Vermont's country stores comes from the shopkeeper's account book. If you can read the old-style writing, the



Mr. and Mrs. Davis in their West Dover general store in 1909.

No 2 Yds Print	90	25
" 3 rd Salaratus	90	21
" 1 Wash Board	1-	17
" 4 th Fish	50	24
" 1 Bag Flour		2.83
" Steel Pen		.2
		<u>3.72</u>

On June 20, 1854, Thomas Pray purchased print fabric, salaratus (baking soda), a wash board, fish, a bag of flour, and steel pens at the Kent store in Calais. His bill was \$3.72.

transactions come to life as do the personalities of sellers and buyers. Notes scribbled in the margins may describe the loan of a horse for a trip to a nearby town or a customer's promise to pay up on the next visit. The book, usually a large leather-bound volume, kept track of the comings and goings, likes and dislikes, hobbies and occupations of a town's residents. Each page gives clues to how our ancestors lived. By examining the carefully scripted entries, one can tell who was making a dress, mending boots, decorating a hat with ribbons and feathers, repairing a cabinet or painting a barn by what they purchased.

Passing time and changing ways have transformed the general store. The automobile, prepackaged goods, advertising, supermarkets, and specialty shops forced Vermont's country stores to change with the times. Today, those that are left bear little **resemblance** to the ones that graced the state a century ago. But despite obvious changes your local store may still be the place to hear news about town residents, pick up your mail, or buy a fistful of candy.

VOCABULARY

- sealing wax** - wax that when melted and pressed with a stamp was used to seal envelopes
- blotting sand** - fine sand that was sprinkled onto writing paper to absorb ink blots
- chamber pot** - a portable pot, usually china, used in a bedroom as a toilet
- tallow** - animal fat used to make candles and soap
- apothecary** - druggist or pharmacist
- elixir** - medicine held in solution by alcohol
- remote** - isolated
- shrewd** - clever
- fetch** - to get
- barter** - trade
- noggin** - a small mug or cup holding one quarter of a pint
- firkin** - a small wooden barrel
- piggin** - a small wooden bucket
- in lieu of** - in place of
- resemblance** - likeness



	Carlos Jacobs		
	Cr by Horse four days	1	00
No 27	Cr by Cash by H.P. Wilson	0	17
1850			
June	Cr by two days work	1	33
		<u>2</u>	<u>50</u>

This entry shows that Carlos Jacobs of Calais paid his store bill with the loan of his horse, cash, and two days work.