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More than a grocery:

# The Kirksey General Store

By Bobbie Smith Bryant, Jefferson County

**T**he village of Kirksey in Calloway County was the center of my universe when I was a child. One of my favorite childhood memories is of going to the general store in Kirksey. Smith's Grocery was located a short walking distance from the elementary and high schools, and there was a church on each side of the school grounds.

My grandparents, Hal and Geneva Smith, owned the general store for several years. Anytime I spent Saturday night with them in the 1960s, Granddaddy Hal took me to the store with him. I'm sure one reason I was allowed to go was to get me out from under Granny's feet as she prepared the noonday meal for our family to gather after church.

Granddaddy Hal usually opened the store sometime before daylight, and there was always a string of mostly men coming and going. They might have come in to buy something their wives needed, but I suspect most of them were there to shoot the bull with one another.

The things I loved best about the store were, of course, the Coke bin and the candy counter. There were always fireballs and bubble gum, but my favorites were Tootsie Pops, SweeTarts and—oh my—those Sugar Daddy suckers. I even had an occasional candy cigarette and lips, just for fun. My all-time favorite cold drink was Chocolate Soldier. And sometimes, we were fortunate enough to have our favorite summer treat—homemade ice cream.

But there was something else going on in that old country store. It had to do with those four or five elders who gathered each Sunday, holding court around the wood stove. I usually knew one or two of them, as they were the granddaddies of my school friends. There were a few others who went to the same church as my family.



Hal and Geneva Smith at Smith's Grocery in Kirksey, 1951.

Sometimes they'd play checkers, but most of the time, they just traded stories. I don't remember a thing about what they talked about, but I do remember how they treated me. They'd tease and pick at me, but it was never cruel or hurtful; it was sweet and kind. By talking to me and paying attention to me, they made me feel important and part of their lives.

Back in those days, between attending school, cheering on our favorite team in the hotly contested basketball games, and going to church each week, we knew everybody in the community to some degree. Either that, or we were related to them. Everyone was typically introduced as a cousin of so and so or as being kin to this person or that one.

You could never speak unkindly about anyone because they usually were related to you in some way. If you did say anything unkind, it came back to haunt you pretty quickly. It took only one or two rounds of Momma washing out your mouth with soap to learn not to say ugly things.

Times have changed since my young years of Sunday mornings at the store in Kirksey. Over the years, we've gone from mules to tractors and from outhouses to indoor plumbing. The general store of my childhood is gone, replaced by today's mega-markets. Most of the small communities such as Kirksey have disappeared, their importance a distant memory.

Regardless of today's modern conveniences, the lessons we learn from our families and our communities make us the adults we grow up to be. Those days at the candy counter in my grandparents' country store made for an incredible childhood, and I'm thankful for the rural Kentucky heritage I was lucky enough to have.