

The Corner Store

First published May 25, 2017

Corner stores in the city are rapidly disappearing, replaced by big box stores. In my neighbourhood, near Fisher Park, there were two family-owned stores within a three block radius of my house and in the general area there were six or seven. Sometimes the owners lived upstairs and the store created part-time jobs for their kids of high school age. These little shops carried basic staples such as milk and bread as well as a colourful wall of cigarettes prominently displayed behind the cash register. The variety of merchandise was endless. Aspirin, shoe polish, cat food and dusty cans of peaches were packed side by side on the shelves.

Every store had a soft drink cooler with dozens of bottles standing in cool water. Pure Spring, owned by the Mirsky family of Ottawa, provided flavours such as Minted Grape, Swiss Cream Soda, Honee Orange, Grapefruit 'n Lime and of course their famous Ginger Ale. There was Coke, Pepsi, RC Cola, and, for those on a diet, sugar free Tab.

The counter at the front of each store was the most exciting section for me and my friends. Beside the cash stood boxes of penny candy, some of which really did cost a penny. Even better, we could buy three blackballs for one cent. Of course we had to spit them into our hands every few minutes to check how their colours were magically changing.

Red and black licorice twists were two cents apiece and the black licorice pipes and cigars, at five cents each, were so rich and delicious. The powdered sugar candy Lik-M-Aid is still available and now includes a candy stick to pick up the powder. The price used to be one cent per package, so we would spend a nickel and buy five different flavours. There was no candy stick, so we would lick our fingers and poke them into the envelope. The colour stained of course, and by the time we finished the five flavours, we had five different coloured fingers.

Wax candy was all the rage for a few years, wax lips in particular. We would each buy one, place the little ridge between our teeth and walk around the street sporting a set of big red lips. Sometimes the stores would sell wax fingernails too, so we would buy ten and add long red nails to our cool look. Little wax pop bottles filled with a mysterious sweet syrup were popular too. The best part was, when we were finished wearing our red lips and nails, we could just chew them up and spit them out when we got tired of them.

Wrigley's or Beeman's gum was six cents so, if we were on a tight budget, for five cents we could buy Bazooka Bubble Gum (comes with a comic) or Thrills which tasted exactly like Cashmere Bouquet soap. In fact Thrills are still available, in a package that now notes, "Still tastes like soap".

Candy cigarettes were a hot item and such a bad influence. Popeye's version was hard white candy with a red tip made to look like a lit cigarette. Chocolate cigarettes were available too, and tasted much

better. The names of these have all been changed from cigarettes to sticks.

Family operated corner stores still exist here and there, selling mainly cigarettes and lottery tickets. In most neighbourhoods we have to hop in the car and drive to one of the big stores where penny candy is sold by the bag. How much easier it was for our parents when they could send one of the kids to the corner for a quart of milk and a loaf of bread, with fifty cents and let her keep the change. Oh boy! Wax lips and a little brown paper bag full of enough penny candy to last all day!