

The Era of The Corner Grocery Store

“Neighborhood” or “corner” grocery stores, at one time common fixtures in our communities, are now little more than a fading, sentimental memory. They bring to mind a kind of nostalgic reflection of days gone by. These were places where you could get almost anything, from friendly conversation to items needed at the spur of the moment for baking, cooking, or something else. They were almost always open, and they seemed to have whatever was needed that may have been overlooked or forgotten when buying the weekly supply of groceries.

A random sampling of a few of the local neighborhood grocers from a 1960s Fairmont telephone directory includes Nolte’s Grocery located on North Park Street by Lincoln School, Colvin’s Grocery on Lake Avenue, Park Street Grocery, Mocol’s Food Market on North North Ave., East Side Grocery on North Hampton, and Weber’s Super Market on Albion Avenue. There were undoubtedly many more that came and went during the last century. However, as the major chains gradually became the predominant distributors of grocery items, the local neighborhood “Mom & Pop” stores could no longer compete. The following is a brief historical account of one such store, Fossum’s Grocery, located for many years at 801 E. 4th Street in Fairmont.

Thorvald and Hilma Fossum moved to Fairmont in 1928 and purchased a small grocery store known as Buhr Grocery. After about one year, they moved their store across the street to the 801 E. 4th Street location and converted the upstairs into living quarters for their family as well. Mrs. Fossum, a native of Swea City, Iowa, and a graduate of Gustavus Adolphus College in 1916, was a teacher before she married. After being married, she and her husband lived in California for a time prior to moving to Fairmont.

However, shortly after their move to Fairmont, Thorvald Fossum passed away. His wife, Hilma, continued to run the store while at the same time providing a home and an education for her three daughters, all of whom graduated from Fairmont High School.

During her life’s work in the grocery business, Mrs. Fossum developed a great fondness of her neighborhood customers, both adults and children. She genuinely felt that the neighborhood she served had been wonderful to her. Throughout the years she learned to know her customers very well and, as a result, she developed a personal bond with each of them. It was easy to understand why her customers were devoted to her store because she always seemed to be there for their immediate needs, while at the same time knowing no real closing hours. She would sometimes be open from 6:00 a.m. until midnight. She confided that she intentionally stayed open until midnight, especially during canning season, in the event that a housewife might run out of sugar,

spices, or some other canning supplies. In addition, her store was open every day of the year, including Sundays and holidays. She was committed to always being there for her customers.

However, as was the case with most of these small businesses, her little neighborhood grocery store would not last forever. Finally, on Wednesday, October 21st of 1965, the little bell announcing the arrival of a customer to her store rang for the last time. Mrs. Fossum locked the door at 5:00 p.m. and quit her business after thirty-six years in Fairmont. She said that her immediate plans involved taking some vacations and spending time visiting her daughters and grandchildren.

In the supermarkets of today, shoppers can certainly find virtually everything they need, and sometimes things they don't need. The employees in these stores are always very friendly and accommodating. Nevertheless, in reflecting on that moment in time, the "corner" or "neighborhood" grocery stores of the past will be remembered as being inherently unique in their value to the people and the neighborhoods they served. The friendly greeting, the personal attention, and the convenient location are things that those recalling that period of time will always fondly remember. Those memories are undoubtedly indelibly etched in the minds of everyone that experienced the era of the "corner" or "neighborhood" grocery store.

For more information on neighborhood grocery stores, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



801 E. 4th St.



