

YPSILANTI GLEANINGS

PAST SCENES and OLD TIMES

YPSILANTI HISTORICAL SOCIETY - PUBLICATION -



Ypsilanti Historical Museum
 ~ 220 N. Huron Street ~

February 1974

HISTORY OF THE KING AND LAMB GROCERY STORE
 by Charles King Lamb (1893-1970)

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HISTORY OF THE KING AND LAMB GROCERY STORE
By Charles King Lamb (1893-1970)

The founding of the King Grocery Store in 1838 followed the settling of Ypsilanti by only fifteen years. At the time there were about 120 houses in the village. Many log structures remained but among them were ambitious edifices of stone, brick, or frame construction.

The food problem was often a pressing one and much reliance was of necessity placed upon wild game. At first all groceries were brought from Detroit. The road was almost impassable to an ox team and it sometimes took three days to make the thirty-mile trip. For years, after its opening, the Detroit road ran through seas of mud and over miles of jolting corduroy; no teamster thought of leaving home without an axe and log chain to cup poles to pry his wagon out of the mud. For a time the road was so impassable that travellers had to come from Detroit by way of Plymouth and Dixboro. For visiting and trading, settlers gladly endured a twenty or thirty-mile ride over bottomless roads. As early as 1829, settlers in the St. Joseph Valley journeyed 150 miles to Ypsilanti to get a few rolls of wood carded at Mark Norris' mill, to buy a little tea and dry-goods, or replenish the whiskey barrel. The transportation of heavy freight was dependent on the Huron River; flat-bottom boats were poled up the river to the Rawsonville Landing, some getting through as far as Ypsilanti.

The King Store was founded by George King on New Year's Day, 1838, on the site where the Schaible Garage recently stood on East Michigan Avenue. (40-42 E. Michigan). Mr. King and his two sons had come to this country from England in the latter years of his life. For a year previous to the founding of the store, George King operated the Stack House, an hotel founded by a Mr. Stackhouse several years earlier. I have often wished that I had a picture of this original store and knew how they conducted their business under all the existing handicaps. In 1840 the store was moved to a frame building at 101 West Michigan Avenue, where it remained until 1858, when the present building was erected. (101 W. Michigan). During the construction of the new building business was conducted around the corner on South Huron Street, where the Barker Electric Shop now stands. (10 1/2 S. Huron).

Charles and Edward King, sons of George King, took over the business from their father, and were partners under the firm name of C. & E. King. Edward later withdrew, and Charles King and his son, Charles E. King, were partners under the name of King & Son. Charles King passed away in 1883; John G. Lamb entered the business in 1887, and the firm name was changed to Charles King & Co. Charles E. King and John G. Lamb operated under this firm name until the death of Charles E. King in 1913; the same year Charles King Lamb entered the business and the firm name was than changed to John G. Lamb & Son. John Lamb was in the store for fifty-three years, until his death in July, 1926.

In the early days it was the custom for farmers to bring their produce to the store to trade. Due bills were then issued for the cash transactions and the buyers, in turn, used them as negotiable paper in making other purchases in the village. At the end of the year the merchants met to settle up their accounts; in fact, merchants' accounts with each other were balanced only once a year. Charles King & Co. was the first store to start cash transactions; that is, they closed each deal instead of allowing credits and debits to continue for a period of time.

Nearly everything was sold in bulk and there were no canned fruits or vegetables. Coffee was sold in the green berry and later roasted in the home. The main staples at this time were flour, which was often sold by the barrel, sugar, tea, coffee, soap, and potatoes; also a complete line of bulk seeds, lime and cement, the latter being purchased by the car load. Common barrel salt was also purchased by the car load and was the only kind used at that time. The original account book of the store, dating back to 1838, shows a wide range of commodities; among these are hay, spring water wheat, buckwheat, cigars, venison (indicating that deer meat was not uncommon), also poultry, pork, whitefish, beer and whiskey. The King store always aged their own cheese. They would purchase about one hundred cheese, which came packed in thirty-pound molds, open them periodically, grease them on top and bottom and then turn them. This process was continued for from four to six months, until the cheese was ready to sell. Cider was purchased in barrels and held until it turned into vinegar; the third floor

of the store was used for the storage of these barrels of⁴ cider vinegar. Dairy butter was another item of which a very large volume was sold. The buying of butter was a great problem because no farmer's wife wanted to be told that hers was not up to par. In fact the store, in its efforts to be tactful, sometimes purchased butter when they knew it would have to be sold to the packers for a few cents a pound. To be a good butter-tester was quite an art and a store-keeper prided himself on his ability to distinguish good butter. The process used to keep dairy butter sweet was to place a layer of cheese-cloth on top, then cover with a layer of salt, about a half inch, then another layer of cheese cloth. A paper was then tied tightly over the top and the crooks packed in barrels placed in the basement. This process would keep it sweet for several months.

Even more recently, the store handled wash-boards, lamps, wicks, chimneys and burners. The only laundry soap available was yellow soap in bars, and sal-soap soda was the only water-softener; blueing came only in quart bottles, not the concentrated type of today. Black pepper came in 150-pound barrels, and the old-fashioned cracker-barrel containing Vale & Crane crackers was a regular store feature. Pickels came in 50-gallon casks and molasses only in 60-gallon barrels to be sold in bulk. Lamb & Son was the only store to continue the sale of molasses in bulk, and people would come from as far as Detroit to get it.

The Civil War Period was a very difficult time for the store. As in the wars since then, prices soared very high and

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and price adjustments following caused many difficulties. Revenue stamps were used to tax many commodities. I might add that, a good many years afterward during a cleaning-out process, two bushels of invoices on which revenue stamps had been placed were offered for sale at \$5. a bushel. A man bought two bushel for \$10, and later realized over \$2000 for their sale.

One of the difficulties of merchandizing in the early days was the lack of containers, boxes or bags. Cornucopias were used in handling some bulk goods. I can imagine the difficulties encountered in wrapping up twenty pounds of sugar or salt. I have heard that housewives had specially-made sugar containers which they took to the store to have filled.

King & Co. had its own delivery service which, in the beginning, was very difficult to operate. As there were only 25 telephones in the city, boys went from house to house by bicycle to take orders which were later delivered. When the delivery-man had finished his trip he would spend the balance of his time working in the store. The Merchants' delivery was started about 1910, and was a cooperative effort on the part of the merchants to give better service at a lower cost. This was successfully operated until 1933, at which time it had to be taken over by the individual stores. Before the days of automobiles, which enable people to go to the country and do much of their own buying, the volume of store buying was in much larger quantities. During this period, the Dunlap Store, (206 W. Michigan), joined us in purchasing car-load lots of peaches, stone ware, salt and sugar. My father used to go

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to the store at four o'clock when a car-load of peaches had arrived in order to get them in shape to sell.

At the time John G. Lamb went into the store, the wages paid were \$3. a week in contrast to the present wages of from \$40 to \$50 a week. Up to 1920, store hours were from 5:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays and midnight on Saturdays. On holidays, stores were always open until noon. This is quite a contrast to the comparatively short hours of stores now-a-days, seldom open more than 9 to 6.

The policy of the store was always cleanliness and orderliness but not until after 1920 was any effort necessary for display. The windows were more or less used for holding bulk containers to relieve congestion in the store. From 1920 to 1925 more attention was given to windows and they were used really to display merchandise. In 1925 new fixtures were introduced which were to revolutionize the grocery business; display was the new element; counters in front of the shelves were removed and price tags placed on each item. This enabled the customer to examine the merchandise and know its cost. The Lamb store was remodelled, adopting these new ideas, in 1929. This new era was largely brought about by the chain-stores who were masters in the art of mass display. They forced the service stores to be on their toes every minute; the problem was to buy in large enough quantities to get the best possible prices in order to meet the competition of the chain-stores. The service store prices were unfailly compared to the chain-store prices without sufficient allowance being made for the service rendered. Telephone, delivery service,

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and charge accounts were costly items of expense. It was quite rare after this time for a store to have 100% of its customer's business; the housewife would take advantage of the week-end specials at the chainstore and then have her daily delivery from the service store on possibly very small items. It is an interesting conjecture whether, after these hectic days of wartime buying, the busy housewife and tired war-plant worker, now spending hours over her shopping and carrying all of the merchandise herself, will wish to return to the service type of store where she can telephone in her order in luxury of luxury have it deposited for her on her own kitchen table. The swing may again be to this type of store.

The John G. Lamb & Son Grocery Store was closed out in July, 1942, completing nearly one hundred and four years of service to four generations or more of Ypsilantians and their rural neighbors.

This article was first published in the WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS #5, 1944 for the Washtenaw Historical Society. The author, Charles K. Lamb, was born in Ypsilanti in 1893 and died February 8, 1970. He was the son of John G. Lamb, (1858-1926) and Minnie Cremer Lamb (1866-1948). He graduated from Ypsilanti High School and attended the University of Michigan. In 1916 he married Helen Gertrude Sherzer, (1893-1968), daughter of William Sherzer and Maud J. Sherzer. Charles K. Lamb was also Chairman of the board of the First Savings Asso.; on the Board of Highland Cemetery and in 1966 the Chamber of Commerce conferred upon him a lifetime membership. 101 W. Michigan is now the location of the Beneficial Finance Company.

Sunday, February 17, Mr. Alister MacDonald will talk informally about Antique Furniture, specifically about our Museum pieces.

Sunday, March 17, Mrs. G. L. McPeck of Ann Arbor will demonstrate bobbin lace making. Hopefully Mrs. McPeck will be able to show us how to use our 1903 loom and bobbins.

And don't forget the Museum "Treasures Galore" Rummage Sale from 9:00 - 5:00, May 18 at the Carriage House behind City Hall. You may call Miss Milliman 483-3236 or Mrs. Walton 482-8354, for information if you have items which you wish to donate for the sale.

We hope that all who contributed so generously to the front hall redecoration fund are as pleased as are all of us at the Museum. Funds for this project came from many sources; personal contributions, organizations, and contributions in memory of Mrs. Mabel Stadtmiller. Aside from our thanks to all involved, we owe much to Mr. Lynn Holly for his advice, long hours and most especially for his patience. Do stop in to see the results!

LaRea Swarts

At the February General Meeting of the Society the following were elected to the Board of Directors: Mrs. Arthur J Howard (2nd term), Miss Doris Milliman and Mr. Thomas Tobias, Jr.

At the Board meeting following, Dr. William Edmunds was re-elected President and Dr. Elizabeth Warren, Vice-President.

The Board members are: Dr. Edmunds, Dr. Warren, Mr. Carl Scheffler, Mr. T. Tobias, Mr. Alan Stewart (former President), Mr. James Westfall (Treasurer of the Society), Mrs. Howard, Miss Milliman and Mrs. Ward Swarts, Museum Director.

A most cordial welcome to our new members -

ANDEPSON, Wendell G. & Family
1139 W. Huron River
Belleville

ANGELOCCI, Angello
963. Sherman

ARDIS, Evert
505 Fiarview

BINDER, David A., Mr & Mrs.
1014 Nash

BIRD, Paul George, Mrs.
1302 Collegewood

BUTLER, Gerald
1930 Roosevelt

CICARELLI, Suzanne
1001 Washtenaw

COX, Joe H., Mr.
1215 Pearl

DIEBOLD, R.J., Mr. & Mrs.
479 Douglas

HOLLOWAY, Amy
1806 Whittier

HARRIS, John
1824 Roosevelt

HARRIS, Victoria
1824 Roosevelt

HARRISON, Albert G. & Family
214 W. Forest Avenue

HEFLEY, Theodore & Family
1005 Grant

JACKSON, Frederick & Family
312 W. Ainsworth

KIRKENDALL, John
1407 W. Cross

LAMMING, Dorothy
775 Washtenaw Apt #6

McGAFFIN, David, Mr. & Mrs.
2165 Midvale

MAY, George, Mr. & Mrs.
1480 Collegewood

MILLER, Jack C.
206 Middle Drive

MORTIMORE, J.A., Mrs.
420 N. Huron

OBERMEYER, Maxe A., Jr, Mr & Mrs.
1344 Arroyo

POITRAS, Warren E.
2696 Lowell Rd.
Ann Arbor

SMITH, Herbert C., Mr. & Mrs.
1318 Collegewood

SPRATT, O.B., Mrs.
213 Oak Street

RECENT ACQUISITIONS

Mrs. Fred Dieterle

HISTORY OF WASHTENAW COUNTY-1881
STANDARD ATLAS OF WASHTENAW
COUNTY 1915

Mr. Martin D. Opem

Eighteenth Century U.S. Naval
Coat

Mr. Ray W. Binns

Antique wooden mail box

Miss Evangeline Lewis

"Sigma Nu" Spoon & pin

- Miss Gertrude Murray
Black fur cape, sewing baskets, Valentines, lace & embroidery pieces, "Almanacs"(1896-1911), high buttoned shoes, 3 pictures
- Mr. James Westfall
Photographs of G.A.R. encampment Ypsilanti 1911
- Mr. Vann Seiber
"Bank of Ypsilanti" five dollar note, dated 1839
- Reverend Elton Weatherly
His hand painted mural of "Old Depot" - given to Museum last summer but until recently in Sesquicentennial Hall.
- Dr. & Mrs. George May
Three pair of long lace curtains for second floor windows.
- Mr. James Weir
Ann Arbor
Old lithograph of G.Washington greeting Mary. McKinley's Spanish American wartime cabinet (Photograph).From estate of late Mrs.R.E.Weir
- Mr. Jerome Lamb
Old photograph of Alice Gilbert taken along Huron River. Copy of obit. of C.K.Lamb.
- "The Advisor"
Ann Arbor
Inside pictures of Museum taken last summer at time of Sesquicentennial.
- George Edmunds
Illustrated chart showing the development of Colonial candle-making.
- Mrs.A.D.Allen
Bay City, Michigan
Plate racks to be used for display purposes
- Miss Eileen Harrison
Old valentine-photograph of Marna Osband, Postal card of old Prospect School and many negatives of the disasterous "Ypsilanti Press" Fire
- Mrs.Walter E.Tubbs
(from the estate of the late Mrs. F.S.Leach)
Two wooden bowls, vegetable chopper and butter mixer which came from the hardware store of H.C.Stoddard, Mrs.Leach's father, in Reed City, Michigan and are at least 110 years old.

RECENT ACQUISITIONS

Mrs. Albert Walton
(estate of Mable Stadtmiller)

Large crockery churn used by Mrs. Stadtmiller's mother - over 100 years of age. Identification tag -Civil Defense.
Mrs. Stadtmiller's letter of resignation as City Treasurer-1951.

Mrs. John Pappas

Advertising card from "H. Hutchins & Co 5 & 10 Store" Ypsilanti from 1923

Miss Donna Baker

"Ypsilanti Centennial Clippings" scrapbook June 1923 - given to Miss Baker by 1973 Centennial Committee

Mrs. Lorenz Kisor

Formal suit once belonging to H.P. Glover-Mrs. Kisor's grandfather. Two pocketbooks purchased in Paris in 1923 by Mrs. Kisor-one containing quaint cigarette holder.
Beeded purse belonging to Mrs. Kisor's mother-containing her calling cards.
Various types of hand-made lace

Mrs. James Weir
Ann Arbor

Gold headed cane given to Mr. Don Louis Davis by his mother, Mrs. Parmenio Davis. Don Louis Davis' maternal Uncle, Delos Showerman was Village President 1852, his father, Dr. Parmenio Davis was Mayor from 1861 to 1870 and he was Mayor 1898-9

Miss Doris Milliman, Museum Director for the last three years, has resigned her position. Much was accomplished at the Museum during her tenure. We know that she will continue her interest for at the February General Meeting of the Society she was elected to the Board of Directors. Mrs. Ward Swarts, already an active worker at the Museum, has taken over as Director.

MUSEUM GREETINGS FOR 1974 - - - - -

The Museum Christmas Party was so well attended that we are already making plans for a bigger and better one for 1974.

If you remember the overwhelming success of the Children's Heritage Day last July 3rd, you will be interested to know that Mrs. Albert Barrett and her co-workers have done it again with a Childrens' Valentine Making event on Saturday, February 3rd. We wonder how many of those cherished "originals" will find their way to future museums.

On Saturday and Sunday, January 19-20, Mrs. Jorge Calzado skillfully demonstrated the craft of ceramic painting, using the fascinating Beatrix Potter characters. Mrs. Calzado and her daughter also displayed many of her beautifully painted ceramics.

The Antiques Group of the faculty wives of E.M.U. visited the museum on Thursday, January 29 with Miss Doris Milliman as hostess.

Mrs. Robert L. Isaacson will bring her Cub Scouts to see the Museum exhibits on Thursday, February 8th.