

My Grandfather's General Store

Charles Deming was my Grandfather. I never met him but I find his life very interesting. He was born in 1845. He grew up on a farm and became a farmer himself. In 1868 Charles Deming married his first wife, Nancy Hammond. They farmed sixty acres of land on 92nd Street just east of M50 on the north side of the road. Today, twenty acres of the land is known as Tyler Creek camping grounds and golf course.

In 1871, Charles and Nancy Deming left farming and took over the general store owned by W.W. Pierce in the town of Hammond Station, Michigan. Hammond Station was named for Stephen Hammond who settled there in 1870. Stephen Hammond was Nancy's father. At that time the land sold for \$1.25 per acre. The railroad was put through in 1870.

As the town grew, businesses included two grocery stores, a large grain elevator, the freight and passenger depot and a telegraph office. Later a hotel, a livery stable, a blacksmith shop, a drug store, a barbershop, an apple drier business(which dried apples for longer storage), a school, two churches, and a Christian school for girls were added to create this town of Dutton, Michigan.

The first general store was located in a house on 68th Street near Hammond Ave. As business grew Charles and Nancy moved with their two daughters, Rose and Eliza, into a new building he built across the street and a short way from the corner. They made their home in the upstairs of the store. However, in 1877 when Nancy was thirty one years old she passed away.

In 1878 Charles Deming married Mary Etta Knapp. She became the mother to Rose who was now 6 and Eliza who was 4. Charles and May Etta has four children of their own: Lily, Matie (Mary Ann), George, and Ruth. Ruth is my mother.

The Deming General Store expanded and a third L-shaped store was built just east of the second store on the corner of 68th and Hammond. The second store was used to sell farm implements. A Buggy Shop was on the south side of the store that stands today. The upstairs was then rented out.

In 1883 the town's chief exports were wheat and hardwood lumber. The unimproved land sold for \$20 to \$50 per acre and the improved land sold for \$50 to \$75 per acre. At this time there were ten passenger trains going through the town. Hammond Station was known as "Little Chicago". This year the name of the town was changed because the freight was always getting mixed up with Hammond, Indiana and they made it official that a post office could not be named after a man. They then changed the name to Dutton which still stands today. The post office was located in the Deming General Store with groceries and dry goods as long as a Republican was in office. It moved to the drug store across the street, owned by Charles Keefer, when a Democrat held office.

In 1899 the telephone came to Dutton. It was the Citizen's Phone Company. It was located in the Dutton General Store. Charles Deming became the office manager. My mother, Ruth Deming, remembers answering the calls on the switchboard. They also had a small room for private calls.

The general store supplied people with products they needed. "Every farm family, no matter how self-sufficient, had to buy its salt, sugar, and spices. Meat could be preserved only by the time honored method of salting, smoking, or pickling. Most of the people in the area had their own cows for milk and chickens for eggs. In 1870 nearly half of the forty million Americans lived on farms. Roughly speaking seventy five per cent of the entire population was considered residents of rural areas."

The wholesaler, who sold groceries to the Dutton General Store, was Lemon and Wheeler of Grand Rapids. The dry goods were purchased from Steketees of Grand Rapids. Salesmen came to Dutton from Grand Rapids on the 7:00 passenger train and returned to Grand Rapids on the 9:00 train with their orders for products.

The railroad delivered most of the products for the store. The groceries and dry goods were unloaded from the train and put into a horse drawn wagon and brought across the street to the store. The railroad also delivered baked goods from the City Bakery in Grand Rapids. In trade for the baked goods, my grandfather sent back eggs and maple sugar bars to be used at the bakery. The maple syrup was collected from the sugar bush on his land and boiled down into bars. "An early cash crop which pioneer women worked with the men to prepare for market was maple syrup."

"Possibly every household boasted a click reel for measuring off thread as it was spun. With such reels, women wound off skeins of woolen thread at home-sometimes the storekeeper furnished the wool-and turned them in at local stores for trade."

I have an old ledger which was used by my grandfather in the store from 1879 to 1883. Each day he would write out what each customer bought and at night he would transfer the purchases into the ledgers. Some interesting prices were:

One skein of yarn and five dozen buttons	.33
One dozen eggs	.14
Twenty five pounds of flour	.90
One washboard and one ball of twine	.40
One scoop shovel	.75
One spelling book	.50
One tie and one pint of perfume	.50
Four pounds of nails	.18

The Dutton General Store sold many products in bulk. Bulk products were usually stored in barrels. The barrels held oatmeal, peanuts, sugar, pickles, crackers, vinegar, molasses, kerosene, and coffee beans. "As products were put in smaller package instead of barrels, it was interesting to watch people's reactions. Package pioneers would often cause frustration. There was a deep core of prejudice against fools that could not be seen, sniffed, handled and tasted."

The dry goods area sold shirts, jeans, shoes, socks, materials, needles and thread. Most of the women made their own clothing for the family.

A coffee grinder was used to grind coffee beans for the customers. Cheese was cut from a big wheel. There was candy in cases,

which was my mother's job to fill. They sold matches, hardware items and lamp globes.

Most of the people paid cash for their purchases, but according to my grandfather's ledger, some of the people traded goods or labor to pay for their groceries. People would bring eggs, apples, or butter or fix fences, cut wood or do carpenter work in trade.

Many of the men did the family shopping. Later on the women came to town more often. The porches by the two main doors had rings on them to tie the buggies while the people shopped and caught up on the latest news.

One feature which was unusual about the *General Store* was that it had the first outhouse with a door on one end for the women and the other end for the men with a partition down the middle. Another interesting fact was that there were two holes in the stairway so that someone could watch a customer if they were suspected of shoplifting.

My grandfather did not advertise, but people were introduced to the new items in newspapers and magazines. "By 1890 multiple brands of baking powder, boxed cereals, bicycles, packaged soaps, as well as scores of patent medicines had become familiar retail items in the advertising pages of newspapers and popular magazines."

In 1902, Charles Deming's second wife, Mary Etta, passed away at the age of forty four. Ruth, my mother, was five years old, and her brother George was fifteen. The older children were grown up and had homes of their own. The same year, my grandfather married his third wife, Clara Renawa. Charles and Clara had three children, Crystal, Florence, and Charles.

In the year 1913, the telephone was moved to the home of Mrs. Butts. At this time the telephone service was changed to Michigan Bell Telephone Company.

In 1914, Charles Deming retired from Dutton General Store and the family moved down the street to a house just beyond the United Brethren Church.

George Deming, Charles's son, ran the store for two years and left to work in Grand Rapids. Frank Heintzelman, son in law of Charles Deming took over the general store and post office. His wife Eliza was from Charles's first wife, Nancy.

In 1925 Charles Deming passed away at the age of eighty. His wife, Clara was seventy one when she passed away in 1947.

"By 1930 the country general store had slipped into the past. Chain food stores, with low prices and wider selection, made possible by quantity buying were solidly entrenched in even the smallest towns."

As years passed, groceries and dry goods were sold less and less in the store. The Heintzelman and Leatherman General Store added a new area to the store. As they carried less groceries there was room to put in a snack bar. The coffee shop and restaurant was a gathering place for the people in the area. People stopped in for pop, coffee, ice cream, a hamburger, a good hot meal or just to visit. I remember it well because it gave me and others a part time job as waitresses while we were in high school.

"During the 50's and 60's business had gradually declined due to the large shopping centers opening in nearby areas." Faced with growing competition from national chain stores, the local grocers were losing ground fast. In 1979 the Dutton Snack Bar was closed and put up for sale.

In 1980 Shirley (Martin) Besteman and Kathy Warner decided to put their hobbies into a business venture. Gary Besteman restored pump organs. With the girl's talents, the Dutton General Store reopened selling antiques, crafts, art and pump organs. The store was

remodeled, but most of the interior and exterior was left as it was originally. People come from all over to visit and buy items in the Dutton General Store.

The first Dutton General Store was a successful business because by grandfather made changes and carried items people needed at that particular time. Dutton, Michigan never grew to be a large town because it was too near Grand Rapids. Jobs and convenience drew people to big cities.

I feel the Dutton General Store still stands today because it has met the needs of the community. It was started in 1871 and has survived for over a hundred years. The Dutton General Store lives on.