

Visiting Our Past, Shopping, Sharing, and Surviving
Perry Sprawls.

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With many of our usual activities canceled, being socially separated, facing major health concerns and uncertain economic conditions it is sometimes difficult to think about anything else and especially, when we are staying at home and need to find something to do. It can be an opportunity to think about something more pleasant and visit one of the real landmarks of our rich Barnwell County Heritage, the grocery *and general merchandise store*. Virtually every town and rural community had one where the residents shopped for most of their material needs.

These stores served the communities in many ways including during economic challenges and times of limited travel.



An example and the one we will visit was operated by Thomas Pickens “Pick” Mitchell for many years in Williston, SC. Their stories are a significant part of our history and heritage. It was often the families that owned and operated the stores that gave them a special significance within a community by knowing every customer along with their family life and needs. A very different service compared to our large chain stores of today. .

Pickens Mitchell was born in 1877 and grew up on the family farm near Williston. In his youth he continued with the farm but his goal was to become a merchant. First he moved from the farm and began working as a clerk in a grocery store. In 1908 he married Lessie Sprawls from a neighboring farm and they settled in Williston where they established the Mitchell Grocery and General Merchandise on Main Street.

Here I share with you what it was like to walk into the store almost a century ago. I am a nephew of the Mitchells so the store was both the place for shopping and visiting with family when we went into town from our farm.

As we entered the front door we would be greeted by my Uncle Pick who was often the only person working. The store was well organized and he knew where every item was located. Groceries were on the right side and other general merchandise on the left. The candy case with the glass front is on the right. It was a first stop for kids where candy could be purchased for a penny a piece. Fresh vegetables and fruit were in baskets and boxes around the center area. There was no refrigeration and milk was delivered to homes by the local dairy farmers and local butcher shops provided fresh meat. On the counters near the rear were two sharp-bladed cutters. One was for cutting cheese from large round "hoops" and one for cutting chewing tobacco from larger pieces. Kerosene was dispensed from a tank in the rear used by rural residents for lighting.

With the shelves located behind the counters that was no self-service. A customer would either tell Uncle Pick what was needed or give him a shopping list. He would gather everything at the cash register for checking out. The groceries were usually packed in cardboard boxes. The credit file was located near the cash register.



**Credit File with place
for sales records for each Family.**



**Cheese Cutter
Gauge measures size
to be cut.**



Chewing Tobacco Cutter

These are similar to original items in the store.

Many families of the time had to buy groceries on credit. Each family had a place in the file where the sales slips were fastened until the bills were paid.

The items carried in the general merchandise section on the left side of the store evolved over the years to meet the needs of customers and what might be available in other stores in town.



**Thomas Pickens and Lessie Sprawls Mitchell
Mitchell Groceries and General Merchandise
Williston, SC in the 1930s**

In the earlier days shoes, hats, and clothing accessories were sold. This became less frequent as styles changed and other clothing stores began to provide these items. What continued for years were the patent medicines, tonics, personal care items, cleaning and laundry supplies, tobacco products, household items, and much more.

This store was a community institution not only for the extensive range of produce and products provided to the community but also the special personalities and many contributions of the owners to the community. Pickens was a gentleman who did not drive an automobile. He walked back and forth from home to work. Lessie was the family driver. When the community elected Pickens to serve as Magistrate, the rear of the store would sometimes become a temporary "court room" as needed.

In addition to being a partner in the store and family driver, Lessie opened and operated a florist shop adjacent to their home on Church Street.

The store and serving the community was Pickens's purpose in life until the early 1950s when his health brought to a close this special part of our rich heritage. It was that special time in our

history when the small towns and communities were essentially self-sufficient with local residents providing the needed services and products along with personal relationships.

It was a time for some when, “the times were hard” but for most “living was good”.