

Fond memories of a little country store

My first acquaintance with Grandpa and Grandma Portwood was when they owned and operated Soldier Creek Store.

This appealing little country store and filling station located alongside U.S. Highway 85 not far from the South Dakota line lay at the base of Soldier Creek Hill about 25 miles north of Newcastle.

The highway led a tortuous path down through ponderosa pine timber and flattened into a series of three wide curves in a narrow valley flanked by hills covered with pines and aspen. Nestled cozily beyond the last curve, the store sat between Soldier Creek and the highway.

I remember Walter L. and Sylvia Portwood, more fondly known locally as “Port and Silvy,” as popular members of the community. The store, due to its function, location, and existence, became a social center with the added benefit of availability of groceries, gasoline, motor oil, and many other things including ice cream on July Fourth.

Folks passing by would often say, “Let’s stop and see ol’ Port and pick up a few groceries, get our oil checked, and get some gas.”

In addition to her job of store co-proprietor, Grandma Silvy was a practicing midwife. She told me once that she had delivered most of the babies born in the neigh-

borhood for more than 40 years including three of my siblings and me. Scores of nervous fathers-to-be were ordered to, “Hurry up and go get Silvy.”

The store held various interests for me, especially the counter with candy, gum, and sweet rolls, and the pop

cooler. If I had money, which was not often, I could buy most candy bars for 5 cents, a pack of gum for 5 cents, a big bottle of pop for 10 cents, and a sucker or Tootsie Rolls for 1 cent.

I remember bread prices of 18 cents a loaf and many other items similarly priced.

Grandma pumped gallon upon gallon of gasoline from underground tanks by manually pushing and pulling a handle on the side of the pump stand until a glass canister on the top of that stand held its capacity of ten gallons, measured by numbered tabs on a slim rod within the canister.

Gasoline flowed by gravity through a nozzled hose from the canister into car’s gas tank. One pump was for bronze gas



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and one for white gas, which sold for 17 cents and 15 cents per gallon respectively.

We lived only about six miles away on the Canyon Springs Prairie and visited my grandparents often. My mouth watered as I examined candy cases and pop coolers.

Pop and beer companies bottled their products in those days. Scores of bottles were reusable and were worth a penny apiece if they had no cracks or damaged tops.

The store served as a good base for exploration, and I soon discovered that people were not litter-conscious. No laws existed prohibiting littering or drinking and driving. Roadsides proved fertile places for a boy to spend profitable moments gathering salable, recyclable merchandise.

The closest market for such bottles was in Newcastle. Results of one excursion netted me a burlap sack (gunnysack) full of beer bottles that I took the next time my parents allowed me to go to town.

My dad went with me to the Corner Bar. The bartender asked me how many bottles I had, and I told him there were 69 bottles in the sack. He didn’t bother to count them, but I had counted them several times.

Without comment, he reached into a bucket on the bar that was almost full of pennies, took out a big handful, spread them out on the bar, and told me to count them. I counted exactly 69 pennies and gazed up at him in wonder.

Did he know his count would be correct, or did he just get lucky?

I did the math and figured my pocket held enough money to purchase 13.8 of my favorite candy bars — Baby Ruth. If I got really lucky, and if I could get Grandma to wait on me instead of Grandpa, maybe I could get the last one for 4 cents.

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Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.