

Shades of Green

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

As many of you are aware, we are moving *Something Different* from the old country store in downtown Pinetree, known for decades as *Green's Store*, to an even older store in the middle of Urbanna, known for those same decades as the *Green Front* Grocery. More recently it has been home to several restaurants including *Awful Arthur's* and *Shuckers*. The building has just as much charm as our old store but there will be more room for seating. We have completely remodeled the inside and plan to extend our hours to serve dinner. We will close the Pinetree store after the weekend of the Fourth of July and will open in Urbanna on the 17th if all goes according to plan. We will keep the ambiance and character of the old store as far as possible, including the butcher-block tables and milk-crate seats for our regular customers, but we will also have tables and chairs for normal people. As a result of the hectic process of remodeling and moving, I was unable to finish my planned article on pimento cheese and dusted off this story about the evolution of country stores and how they related to "town" stores such as the *Green Front*. Even though we will miss the old store and there will be some adjustments, this will be a good move for our business and for our customers.

Ride out through the countryside just about anywhere in Virginia, and you will find the remnants of old country stores. Easy to recognize, they are modest clapboard structures with an open porch roof facing the road. Hardly any still fill their original role of serving the daily needs of small rural communities. Most are abandoned or have been converted to antique shops or some semblance of the original store geared to attract tourists. Most were built between 1900 and 1930 toward the end of the horse and buggy era and into the time when automobiles were still a luxury and travel was an adventure. In those days, and on into the fifties, the country store was the heart and hub of each little community of farmers, watermen and workers within walking distance. It served as a combination post office, gas station, community center, candy shop, meat market, grocery store, hardware store and snack bar.

In the days of dirt roads and horse carts, there were always benches and front steps in the shade of the porch roof where folks could sit, watch the world go by and exchange pleasantries with passing neighbors. The pace was slower then, so they could have a tolerable conversation just going by. That is one reason many country folk still wave even if they don't know you. Another is they are afraid you may be related. The overhang was also used to suspend small game to "ripen", but that was before my time.

Even into the fifties, a trip to town was a major undertaking so folks did their main grocery shopping for the week on Saturday. While the wife was shopping at the *Green Front* or *Park Place* grocery stores, the husband hung out at Max Hibbles service station and the kids went to the *Rappanna* movie theater – if they had 25¢ for admission and a nickel for a coke. Local stores had to fill all of the daily needs for the rest of the week.

In the country, supper was ready promptly at 5:30. After supper, the men gathered at the store (pronounced sto – as in "let's go sto") to discuss matters of historical, social and philosophical import. In other words, they sat around the pot-bellied stove on upended drink cases, chewing tobacco, drinking soda pop and telling whoppers. Kids fortunate enough to sit around the periphery received an education in local and world affairs, weather, local history and life in general from a unique perspective.

Bob Green's store was typical though slightly larger than most because Bob and his family lived upstairs. I remember it well. As a kid in the fifties, I often walked or rode my fat-tired Schwinn bike two miles to Bob's store to buy penny candy. On the left side, behind the worn pine counter, there were shelves to the ceiling displaying gum-boots, brogan shoes, work clothes, straw hats, gloves, oyster knives and other necessities. Toward the back there were cubbyholes for mail and a drawer for stamps. In the very back, there was a large cooler with wooden doors where locally grown beef and pork was hung until Bob cut them to order on a massive wooden butcher block just like our tables. The deli case was on the right side. In addition to local seafood and meat, there were hot dogs and cloth wrapped bologna. On the counter, there was a large wheel of cheddar called hoop or rat cheese, and scales to weigh stuff, which sometimes included the proprietor's thumb. Now, I don't know that Bob ever "thumbed the scales," but my Grandmother in the Northern Neck often said that she had "bought old man Jim several times over." On shelves behind the deli there were groceries, breads and canned goods, including sardines, Vienna sausages, saltines and pork and beans for a quick lunch in the fields or on the water.

Bob spent most of his time on a stool behind the front counter where he could keep an eye on the whole store and look out of the window to see who was passing by or needed to pump gasoline. Special things were kept in this corner of the store: the candy case was built into the counter with a glass top – just at eye level but out of the reach of kids. Behind the counter were pocketknives, chewing tobacco, cigarettes and some hardware. Bob kept some fireworks under the counter, including cherry bombs and other explosive devices that are illegal now. In those days, there was a two-cent deposit on drink bottles redeemed when returned. They were then sent to the *Coca-Cola* bottling plant in Urbanna to be washed and re-filled. We kept a sharp lookout along the road because each bottle was worth 2 *BB Bats* or *Mary Janes*.

There was little in the way of "self service", only a drink box and an ice cream freezer. Bob shuffled along behind the counters pulling stuff off of the shelves and adding everything up on a paper bag. As with most country stores, Bob ran it by himself and was open every day except Sunday for about fifty years. If he needed a break or things got busy, he would call to his wife upstairs to come down and give him a hand.

After Bob retired, the store changed hands several times and evolved into more of a convenience store with a drink and beer cooler covering one whole wall, grocery shelves in the center and a small deli area for sandwiches. We transformed it into "Something Different," specializing in fine Neanderthal cuisine (meat, fire, good!).