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Aging in the aisles

By Julie Kirkwood

Staff Writer

In the 1930s a "self-serve" trend was sweeping the nation's grocery stores.

It wasn't a check-out line where shoppers could scan and bag their own groceries -- it was the shopping cart.

Customers for the first time could walk the aisles of the store with a carriage and grab their own groceries. Before that, they had to ask a store clerk to fetch grocery items from behind a counter.

Supermarkets have come a long way since 1930. This year the supermarket industry celebrates the 75th anniversary of the first supermarket, King Kullen, on Long Island.

As supermarkets have changed since 1930, so have our lifestyles.

In the 1930s women canned tomatoes to make them last through the winter. Today tomatoes are available fresh every day of the year, not to mention raspberries, strawberries and exotic tropical fruit.

Meats, vegetables and whole dinners are sold preassembled, pre-marinated and ready to pop in the oven.

While typical supermarkets today carry more than 30,000 products, food costs have dropped relative to family income, claiming only 6 percent of disposable family income, down from 21 percent in 1930, according to the Food Marketing Institute.

Supermarkets are an interesting part of American history that is often overlooked, said David Gwynn, founder of a supermarket history appreciation site www.groceteria.com.

"It's such a universal, everyday thing in most people's lives," Gwynn said. "Historical preservationists seem more concerned with grand buildings such as opera houses or mansions rather than with the sorts of places that normal people actually spend time in.

"Comparatively few people live in 20-room castles on a hill, but almost everyone goes to the grocery store."

Shopping every day

The supermarket concept quickly swept a nation desperate for bargains during the Great Depression. Early supermarkets boasted more than 1,000 items, compared to a typical inventory of 700 in neighborhood stores.

The gimmick was they sold canned goods, baking supplies, vegetables, fruits, meat and bread all under one roof.

In Lawrence, the supermarket revolution of the 1930s began with

three stores on Essex Street: Brockelman's Market, Ganem's Market and Mohegan.

"These markets, they had everything," said Susan Ricci, who was a child in Lawrence in the 1930s.

Ganem's and Brockelman's specialized in meat and Mohegan's had baked goods, but they also carried vegetables and a variety of other products.

Supermarket gimmicks appear to be as old as supermarkets themselves.

Phyllis Hutton, 78, of Methuen recalled how Brockelman's positioned its doughnut bakery in a window so people could stop on the street and watch.

"Right at the corner," she said, "there were doughnuts they were making constantly."

Though these early supermarkets made shopping more convenient, buying food in the 1930s was still a time-consuming activity.

Many families continued to shop at the small ethnic markets in their neighborhoods during the Depression because the shopkeepers let them buy on credit.

Even those who shopped at the supermarkets also shopped at specialty stores.

Mothers dragged their children to bakeries, to butcher shops and to Kennedy's stores, which sold butter, cheese, eggs and coffee in bulk.

"They would go shopping every day because they'd get everything fresh," said Leno Lucas, 80, of Methuen.

The first rudimentary home refrigerator wasn't created until 1927 and wouldn't be widely adopted as a home appliance until after World War II. Most families in the 1930s kept their food in ice boxes.

"There was no such thing as 'Put it in the freezer and keep it for six months,'" Lucas said.

Driving for bargains

As the nation moved out of the Depression, supermarkets grew more popular and started putting the strain on smaller neighborhood markets.

John Hardacre, 79, of Methuen remembers when his family stopped shopping at their local store.

"I can remember my mother saying, 'OK go over to Frankie's, the corner store. Give him a buck on the bill,'" Hardacre said. "'Now go (to a supermarket) downtown and buy the food that he's selling,' because it was like a penny cheaper."

It was not just low prices that drew shoppers to supermarkets.

When soldiers came home at the end of World War II in 1945, they got married, found jobs and moved out of the tenements in downtown Lawrence, said history buff Ned Leone, 71, of Methuen.

As bigger supermarkets opened and people bought cars, they traveled even farther for groceries.

National supermarket chains, such as A&P and First National, opened stores in the Lawrence area.

By the 1950s, people were still driving to Lawrence to shop at the smaller supermarkets and specialty stores, but it took effort.

There were so many cars on the road by then, it was almost impossible to find a parking space, Leone said.

"Everybody started getting more affluent, you know," said 83-year-old Theresa Skorupka of Lawrence. "Then women started to work and we had two pays coming in. And then we all had cars and we'd go further and further out. We'd go to New Hampshire to save tax."

Customer appreciation

By the mid-1960s a new craze had caught on with shoppers: S&H Green Stamps.

Shoppers earned the stamps by shopping at certain supermarkets and gas stations. Families collected them faithfully in books and redeemed them for kitchen appliances, toys and other household items.

"I got a beautiful bundt pan I still use today," said Christine Plonowski, 78, of Lawrence. "We got clippers for the bushes. We still use them."

Margaret Wawszkiewicz, 75, of Lawrence saved up for a special gift.

"I bought my daughter a rocking horse for Christmas," she said.

What Bonnie Sisson remembers as a child in the 1960s is dropping off a grocery list at Merrill's Market in Methuen Square on her way to school. The store filled the order and delivered the groceries to her family's home.

On the way home from school she could stop in at the store for a Coke in a glass bottle.

Lynne Moss, 46, used to save her money as a little girl for the toy aisle at the A&P near her home in Methuen. She liked the toy necklaces and earrings in the plastic packages.

"My girlfriend and I would ride down on our bikes with our little money," she said. "We thought we were rich."

The modern era

Technology began to revolutionize supermarkets in the 1970s.

On June 26, 1974, a company called PSC scanned the first UPC bar code on a supermarket product -- a 10-pack of Wrigley's chewing gum -- at a grocery store in Ohio, according to the company.

Supermarkets and retailers like Wal-Mart are now looking ahead to the next technological advance, radio frequency identification tags that will tell them at a distance and through packaging which products need to be restocked.

The large supermarket chains that have stores in the Merrimack Valley are upgrading their technology with each store redesign. The newest Shaw's and Stop & Shop markets now offer self-checkout aisles and computerized deli orders.

Stop & Shop is offering a "shopping buddy" tablet computer to shoppers in a few of its South Shore stores.

The computer displays a running total cost of everything in your cart, flags sale items based on your shopping habits, and lets you order deli meat from anywhere in the store.

As supermarkets introduce new innovations and gimmicks, traditions silently slip away.

Most newly designed supermarkets no longer have coin-operated horse rides outside the front entrance, and many have done away with the capsule-toy vending machines.

Instead, children can now take a ride in plastic race cars attached to the front of shopping carts at some stores.

While Skorupka and her friends at the Lawrence Senior Center are nostalgic for the stores of their youth, she wouldn't trade them for supermarkets today.

"This way you're done in an hour," said Skorupka, who shops at Market Basket. "You go and you pick up your stuff and you go home. You have one store, that's it."

Wawzkiewicz disagreed. She preferred shopping the old way.

"It was nice that you met people, people from different stores," she said. "There was camaraderie. It made it nice. ... You can't get that in the big markets."

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