

Food stores' histories feed man's hobby

8-2-04

News & Record

David Gwynn is one of those people who likes to know what used to be where in a city.

That's perfectly normal, but what may seem odd is what Gwynn wants to know was where.

Old supermarkets.

"I've gotten e-mails," he says, "that say, 'You are a little strange.' But I'm comfortable with it."

He has made a hobby of searching old city directories and locating the sites of long-gone Piggly Wiggly, A&P, Colonial, Big Star, Kroger, Winn-Dixie, Big Bear, Bi-Rite, Ivory, Penders, Bestway, Food World and other chain stores.

In Greensboro, it takes an old-timer to know the Fashion Avenue store in a Summit Avenue shopping center was an A&P from 1950 to 1975. Behind the modern front added to the store, the old arched brick facade of the A&P can still be seen.

A&Ps seemed to be everywhere in Greensboro until the last one closed in the 1970s. The building occupied by Fleet-Plummer gifts and hardware store on Battleground Avenue began as an A&P in 1965. A building that is now Fishbones restaurant at Walker and Elam avenues housed an A&P from 1935 to 1947.

The chain returned to Walker in 1950 to a building that is now a Bestway. The A&P went head-to-head against an Ivory Grocery Store across the street. The Ivory store is now the Suds & Duds laundry and tavern.

Gwynn's research indicates the Bestway building may be the longest continuous grocery store site in Greensboro.

Carcasses of old supermarkets recycled for new uses can be found all over the city. The Burlington Coat Factory on High Point Road originally was a Big Star, a chain bought out by Harris Teeter. A Kroger store on Spring Garden Street is now a CVS.

Gwynn tracks these Greensboro stores and old grocery chain sites in the California cities of Fresno, Stockton and Sacramento. There's logic to his choices of cities. Gwynn grew up in Greensboro, where he graduated from Smith High School and UNCG. After college, he moved to San Francisco, where he still lives and works (not for a supermarket). He visited Fresno, Stockton and Sacramento enough to become curious about their supermarket history.

"My interest just developed over the years," says the 39-year-old Gwynn, whose mother took him as a child to an A&P on Commerce Place downtown, a store that opened in 1936 and closed in 1970. It's now an office building.

He believes the Commerce A&P and a Big Star at Greene and Washington, where the municipal parking deck now stands, were the first genuine supermarkets in the city. Supermarkets were bigger than conventional grocery stores. The bigger stores had lower prices and made their profit by selling in volume. They offered self-service rather having clerks fetch cans of beans from shelves for customers.

Gwynn's mother also shopped at another downtown A&P, near the South Elm Street railroad crossing. It closed nearly 35 years ago, but the white stucco structure remains virtually unchanged and is now used for storage by a used office furniture business. The A&P logo remained visible on the facade until it faded away a few years ago.

All of Gwynn's findings -- maps, chronological lists and historical summaries by decades -- are posted on his web site, . The site is titled "Did You Bring Bottles?" Supermarket clerks used to ask that when customers bought soft drinks. Stores paid refunds on returned empties.

Gwynn's research spans from 1930 to about 1980. Supermarket survival, his findings show, has always been fleeting. If profits fell, chains quickly closed stores and opened elsewhere in Greensboro or left altogether. Piggly Wiggly has come and gone twice from Greensboro.

Even when a grocery store remained in one location, the name over the door often changes. A building in Northeast Shopping Center at Summit and East Bessemer avenues began as a Big Bear in 1960. It became a Food World in 1971, after Food World bought Big Bear. In 1980, Harris Teeter took over the building, after it bought Food World. After Harris Teeter left in 2002, the Galaxy Foods chain moved in. Galaxy is gone, replaced by Compare Foods.

Starting in the 1950s, most new supermarkets were built in the suburbs. Before that, the majority of the chains -- Piggly Wiggly, A&P, Colonial, Big Star, Penders, Ivory -- were downtown.

Downtown has been without a food store for decades, and the increasing number of downtown dwellers are clamoring for a return.

Gwynn says there's hope because chains have begun returning to downtown in many cities, building smaller versions of suburban stores. Harris Teeter has a store in Charlotte's Fourth Ward neighborhood downtown.

Gwynn may eventually organize his research into a book. But he says he doesn't see himself signing books anytime soon at the Barnes & Noble in Friendly Center. By the way, a Winn-Dixie Store was demolished, along with several other buildings, to make way for the row of retail stores that includes Barnes & Noble.

Gwynn says he's thinking of moving back to the East Coast. If so, he should attend the opening next spring of the new minor league baseball stadium under construction at Eugene, Bellemeade and Edgeworth streets.

Until 1970, a Kroger store stood in what will be the infield and part of the outfield.

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