

Del Valle Mercantile

The Livermore Heritage Guild has over thirty oral history tapes consisting of interviews with past and present Livermore residents and merchants.

In February 1981, an interview was held with former Mayor Louis Gardella about the Del Valle Mercantile that he owned and operated from 1924 until he closed it in 1956. It was located in the Forester's building on J St. between First and Second Streets.

In 1914, when first built, the Forester building housed George Beck and Sons Grocery Store which later became Beck and Beatty and finally Del Valle Mercantile.

Here are excerpts from that interview conducted by Merilyn Calhoun:

We would like you to tell us about your 32 years in the grocery business from the time that you joined Beck Beatty in 1924.

I joined Beck Beatty on February 1 of 1924 and I bought the interest of Chester Beck, who was a partner at the time. The company was formed in about 1920 and Mr. Beck retired in 1924 and I became an active partner and also an employee of the company. The place of business was located at Second and J in the Forester's building constructed in 1914. Actually for the purpose of housing George Beck and Sons, the original founder of the business, and we proceeded with the business along the same lines as Mr. Beck did. Mr. Chester Beck, who was one of the partners of Beck Beatty, retired and I assumed the ownership of his end of the business. Then later on Mr. Beatty became ill and had to retire



Forester Building 1914

and Mr. Hern Sr. came into the business. His son came out from Florida after his father became ill and took over the interest of his dad. Then we carried on the business as Beck Beatty for awhile and afterward there was just two of us remaining, Mr. Ray Hern, who at one time was Treasurer of the city of Livermore, and I took the business and we changed the name from Beck Beatty to Del Valle Mercantile. I don't recall just the year, but I think it was around 1930 or thereabouts. I guess that's about the basic operation of the place. We were involved in groceries, hardware, farming implements, housing utensils and almost any commodity that we could sell.

Did you take orders by telephone?

Yes, we had a delivery business and

actually our biggest volume of business came over the telephone and we delivered. We had delivery wagons and we delivered to our customers in the city of Livermore and we did at times go out into the country for farmers with large orders who were not able to get in; particularly in the summer months when they had harvesters and hay pressers (running) and whatnot and we delivered out there to them. Also there were a large number of large sheep farms, the McGlinchey's, the Kelley's, Connolly's, and we serviced them. Their farms were out in the Corral Hollow area and we would bring groceries out there to their employees, sheep herders and whatnot sometimes as much as two or three times a month.

Some of your business was credit business.

Yes, that's true, the major portion of our business was credit. We had a large group of farmers, the local population, and we operated supposedly on a 30-day basis. Most of our accounts were 30 days but some of them would run to 90 days. After 90 days, we would kind of get rough with them. But the farmer clientele was run almost on the basis of an annual payday -- one payday a year. It entailed large sums of money and the farmer, generally his crops and his harvest, was done by the first of October; his money was in and so they would come in and pay up their grocery bills or whatever. We had hardware and almost everything on that the farmer needed and they would come in and make their payment on about the first or the middle of October which would clear them up. Of course the local population, we would try to hold them as near as we could to a 30-day basis, that didn't always work out. So that was the basis of our credit operation and actually the major portion of our business was

credit. Our cash intake was not too large. The whole business predicated based on our credit and fortunately over the period of years we were able to manipulate without borrowing any money. I was in the business 32 years and in order to carry our load, I never at any time borrowed any money. The business paid its way all the way through.

What about the depression? What effect did that have on the business?

Well, we were very fortunate on the depression. We probably were the best fortunate of anybody in the state. At that particular time, during the depression years, the Hetch-Hetchy was in here with a large payroll and we were very fortunate in acquiring a lot of that business. It helped carry us over the depression years. They were here four or five years and had a tremendous payroll and then the city of San Francisco would even buy supplies from us for their shops that they had here. So we were, this area, considered at the time a very fortunate area in regards to the Depression.

Your business was one of the first businesses in town to have a cash register?

Well, I wouldn't say we were the first business in town that had one. Everybody had a cash register, but not the type that we had. There were 3 cash registers sold in Livermore at one time in 1914 purchased by George Beck, McKown and Mess, the druggist, and the Livermore Commercial Company. It stood about 6 feet tall, had a drawer for all clerks, individual drawers for all clerks to operate out of and it was at that particular time the elite of cash registers. And we used it all through the years, clear up to the time that we decided to go out of business -- that was from 1914 to 1956 and they were as efficient as

you could get them. Of course, entirely different than what they are now.

You said that you had three sets of scales in the store.

Yes, we had three sets of scales. They were the Toledo-type scale and we had one in the grocery department, one in the hardware department, and then we had one in the meat department, cold meat department. These scales were tested regularly by the Bureau of Weight and Measures from the state of California -- rigid inspections, at least twice or three times a year. If they were the least bit out, everything would be done to correct them and put them back in good shape. As a matter of fact, the inspectors would do a lot of that, unless the scales were too far out and we would have the Toledo people come in and rectify and straighten it up. Now, these scales were accurate but not like the modern scales that are predominantly used by the chains of today -- they measure right down to the last half ounce -- and ours was just plain ounces and pounds, that's all. And of course, each scale had the chart that showed what price to charge, whatever price it was, say if it was 50 cents, we would use the 50 cents chart. It was on a big roller and this thing would roll around and we could figure exactly what the thing cost without any trouble at all.

What did you weigh in the hardware department?

We had nails, and then in those days there was a lot of paint powders that the farmer would use to paint his tools and the different colors, and we weighed them and we weighed the nails and then the horse shoes. We had horse shoes; they were sold by weight. We had all kinds of nails, regular nails for building homes,

horse shoe nails, and horse shoes. It was interesting because there were very few stores in the bay area that carried them (in the later years). We had customers come all the way from Palo Alto, San Mateo, and weigh points to buy horse shoes from us. We operated with clerks waiting on each customer separately; they would take the order from the customer and then put the order up. It isn't like today where you help yourself and then check out at the cash counter. We wrote the orders up on regular sales books, and then we filled the order and then either delivered it or the customer would take it with him. No one waited on themselves, we did all the waiting ourselves. And as far as produce was concerned, we had the full line like fruits, vegetables, oranges, potatoes, everything. It was all shipped in from the market in Oakland. It was a man who was in the vegetable business or the delivery business of vegetables and he would come up three times, sometimes four times a week to bring us fresh vegetables. And by fresh vegetables: we had carrots, turnips, beets, and everything in season; potatoes, melons, fruits of all kinds, strawberries -- all kinds, berries -- and they were all purchased on the produce market in Oakland by this dealer and he would take orders each day. He would take his orders from all the stores in town and then he would go on to the produce market the next morning and buy up the orders and then deliver them the same morning. It was a job that entailed early rising at 2:00/3:00 in the morning and he would be here in Livermore at half past 8:00 with the orders for all the stores.

You had a coffee grinder and ground coffee for customers.

Yes, of course we carried all the canned coffees. I think we had four brands at the time -- Hills Brothers,

Del Valle Mercantile Inc.

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Service and Quality



Phone 16

SPECIALS FOR THURSDAY, FRIDAY AND SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 23 AND 24

BARGAIN OFFER! LIPTON'S TEA



Green Label 1/2 lb. 1c
WITH 1/2 lb. 30c
YELLOW LABEL—BLACK
1/2 lb. 36c

MORE CUPS, MORE ENJOYMENT PER POUND

Willapoint OYSTERS

A Treat at Any Time
NO. 1 TALL CANS

21c

SO MANY WAYS TO SERVE THEM—
FRIED—BREADED—SOUPS—PATTIES
ALL APPETIZING!



GEISHA CRAB

No. 1 Quality Always



No. 1/2's 24c

SO MANY WAYS TO SERVE THEM—
FRIED—BREADED—SOUPS—PATTIES
ALL APPETIZING!

PACIFIC BELLE COD FISH

NORTH PACIFIC'S FINEST SEA FOOD

1 lb. Pack 19c

REAL ALASKA COD—FLAKES EASILY—
MAKES A FINE DISH, CREAMED

Crystal White Soap

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Soap

10 bars
23c

EASY TO USE—EASY TO BUY



FRUITS

ORANGES 2 doz 25c
552 SIZE

Pippin Apples 6 lbs 19c

Carrots, Turnips, Beets 5c
3 BUNCHES

CABBAGE large heads 5c

CAULIFLOWER 5c
LARGE HEADS

SPINACH 4 lbs 10c



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FOR TRUE ECONOMY—A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY

CLOROX quickly
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Qts. 13c Pints 2 for 15c

BLEACHES, REMOVES STAINS, DEODORIZES AND DISINFECTS IN ONE OPERATION!



Pillsbury's Sno Sheen CAKE FLOUR

PACK 28c

The Brand New Sifter Package—Now
You Can Really Sift Your Recipes

GROCERIES

Milk 3 tl cans 17c | Dog Food 4-25c
MORNING HOLSUM CANS

ANGEL FOOD CAKE large 39c

PINEAPPLE Westlake No. 2 1/2 can 18c

CHOCOLATE Ghirardelli 1 lb can 29c

GRAHAM CRACKERS 2 lb pkg 30c
UNBREADED BAKERS

Salt 2 for 15c | Shrimp can 12c
LESLIE—SHAKER WESTLAKE

WESTLAKE HONEY

Clear and Delicious

5 oz. 9c
20 oz. 21c
32 oz. 33c

TRY IT FOR BREAKFAST OR "PARTY" WAFFLES

WESTLAKE Salmon



No. 1's

12 1/2c

A FINE HEALTHFUL FOOD FOR A
VARIETY OF DISHES

DEL MONTE Vacuum Packed Corn



2-12 oz. Tins for 25c

WHOLE KERNEL—GOLDEN BANTAM

AS FINE AS YOU'VE EVER TASTED—AT A BARGAIN

FOLGER'S COFFEE

DRIP OR REGULAR

1 pound cans 29c



Selected and Ground for the Finest Flavor—Try It

GRAPE-NUTS

FOR BREAKFAST!



17c

THE OLD FAVORITE

Log Cabin Syrup



Small 21c
Med. 40c
Large 79c

LOG CABIN HELPS TO MAKE APPETIZING BREAKFASTS

Our Mother's COCOA

A BARGAIN



2 lbs. 19c

Delicious—Refreshing

Super Suds

Large size

15c

SAVES TIME, YOUR HANDS,
DOES THE JOB



Thompson's Chocolate MALTED MILK



1 lb. 39c

IT MUST BE FINE FOR YOU—
THE YOUNGSTERS LOVE IT

GROCERIES

SARDINES 2 for 15c
WESTLAKE—OVAL CANS

OLIVES No. 1 can 15c
LINDSAY

GELATINE all flavors 5c
ROYAL

PRUNES 2 lb pkg 18c
DEL MONTE

VANILLA 2 oz bot 21c
SCHILLING'S

GINGER ALE 3 bots 25c
SCHWARTZ

All prices subject to State Sales Tax

We reserve the right to limit

MJB, Folgers, and Schilling. But we also had coffee in bulk, we would buy it in hundred pound bags and it was a little cheaper than the cans and we sold a considerable amount of that. We had a grinder -- we would grind the coffee for the people who purchased it -- some wanted it fine, some wanted it kind of course. There was a graduated scale on the coffee grinder that ground the coffee as you wanted -- the style that you wanted it. And we did sell a considerable amount of bulk coffee, what we called bulk coffee. We had an element -- the European element, particularly the Latin people, like the Italians, the French, Spaniards, Greeks -- they wanted chicory in their coffee. We wouldn't mix it for them, but they would buy the chicory, it used to come in hundred pound sacks. We had a bin for it and they would buy a pound or two pounds, whatever they wanted and then they would get it home and mix it with their own coffee that we ground for them.

We were a general merchandising store. We had everything in stock that we could sell. Anything that people were interested in, we would buy and we would stock it. We had a tremendous variety of articles and so many people would remark when they came in there, how could you find these things. But we knew where everything was and that was part of the merchandising plan at that particular time.

Now the things went up to the ceiling, didn't they?

Yes, our shelves went clear from the floor to the ceiling and on three sides. On the grocery side we had a traveling ladder that we would get up on the top shelves, and likewise on the hardware and household utensils. We had them on shelves along the wall; and to get the things on top of

the shelves clear up to the ceiling, why we would have these traveling ladders. On the household side we had lanterns, we had lamps, we had chimneys, and kerosene, we sold kerosene. At that particular time, before the advent of gas into the city, we sold a lot of kerosene cook stoves, the Perfection, as they called them in those days, and we had quite a run on kerosene. We sold a lot of kerosene each day because that was the only source of energy to use for cooking. Of course, later on as gas came in, those commodities kind of faded out of the picture.

Could you tell me about your refrigeration? How did you keep things cold?

Well, first, prior to the advent of mechanical refrigeration we had what they call ice boxes. We had several of those -- I forget how many. And the ice man would come around maybe every other day. There was a bin in these boxes where they kept the ice and the ice man would come around and check on the amount of ice they needed and kept the portion that held the ice packed all the time. And then of course with the advent of mechanical refrigeration, we did away with all of that and we put in the mechanical refrigerators, meat cases, displays for frozen foods -- frozen foods were just beginning to come in. So of course they weren't as plentiful as they are today but I believe the first frozen foods we had was Birdseye. They had a limited amount of frozen foods and then of course ice cream came along. We could handle it because of refrigeration. Up to that time, the only way you could handle ice cream was by having ice cream in bulk because then you could pack them with ice and that kept them frozen overnight, but it wasn't very successful until the advent of mechanical refrigeration.

Did you have the old black metal pots and ovens?

Yes, and they are still in use. The fry pans are so heavy though, and so awkward, but they're still in use. They're very very expensive, but once you get them hot, they're hot, they stay hot. That was good for frying meats.

What about the cleaning supplies? Now we have Cheer and so many different kinds of things. What did women use to scrub with during those days?

Well, the most popular scrubbing powder was Old Dutch Cleanser. Everybody wanted Dutch Cleanser and hardly anything else sold. We had other ones there but we never sold any. And then soap polish -- they were really made out of, I guess, tallow or fat. The trucks would come around and pick up the tallow from the restaurants in town. The most popular one at that particular time, up until the time I left, was White King and that's made by White King Co. in Los Angeles. The Palmolive people came out with what they call a peach washing powder. Then, of course, when Oxydol, and Vel, I don't know whether there's any Vel on the market now or not, but when Oxydol and Vel came out, that was the first synthetic washing powder. Now it has branched off into myriads of things, but in those days that's all there was.

For a time there, didn't they give dishes or cups?

Yes, they were inside the package. They would put up a bunch so it would keep you buying. You get a cup and then you want a saucer. Then you might buy 10 packages before you get the saucer. Also, the cereal people came out with a product that had dishes in it, but before you got a set

of dishes, you probably have to buy a ton of cereal. Of course, that was clear up to the time of the War. They eliminated that; I don't think they've ever come back to it.

Did you carry the printed flour sacks?

Yes, we bought flour from Sperry's (Sperry Flour Co.) and there was another one, Globe A One Flour -- we bought that. There was a lot of flour bought in those days, particularly amongst the Europeans. There was a special flour called the La Pina for the Mexican trade. They, I don't know what there was about it, they wanted La Pina and we had it. Of course, then the flour sacks were of very good material. My mother would take the flour sack -- we used to buy flour in hundred pound bags -- and she'd wash them and strip them and then she would make towels out of them. And as a matter of fact, a lot of the girl's intimates were made by flour sacks. My mother would make their panties, you know, and things like that out of flour sacks.

You did do some advertising?

We had advertising; it wasn't done too much, but actually it was just advertising to show the people we were in business and where we were located, that's all. There was no specials or anything like that -- the ad would probably be about 6 x 4, about that big, in the Herald, and then they had the Livermore Echo, you don't remember the Echo, do you? We had an ad running in there all the time, every week, never ever change, always the same format.

Copies of this article may be obtained from the Livermore Heritage Guild

CAULIFLOWER 5¢
SPINACH 4 lbs. 10¢
1 pound cans 29¢
VANILLA 2 oz. bot 27¢
GINGER ALE 3 bot 25¢