

Do You Remember?

By Anne Homan



DEL VALLE MERCANTILE

Have you ever visited a small town and stepped into its general store? I remember the smell of such a store—I'm not sure what contributed to it—maybe the pickles in the jar on the counter or all the different sized nails in wooden drawers or the bulk spices and coffee. The smell was not unpleasant or flowery, just distinctive. Some of you might remember Livermore's general store, the Del Valle Mercantile that closed in 1956.

The Foresters' Hall on the west side of J Street between First and Second Streets was built in 1914. A photograph of that era shows a sign downstairs at the south end of the building: "Geo. Beck and Sons GROCERIES." Beck's store had originally been on First Street. However, when the new Hall was built, he signed up for floor space in the new building. After George's death, his business was run by a partnership that included his son, Chester. When Chester Beck retired in 1924, Louis "Lou" Gardella bought Beck's share of the business. About 1930 Gardella became the sole owner and changed the store's name to Del Valle Mercantile. Although the original sign said "groceries" in large letters, the store actually dealt in groceries, hardware, farming implements, housing utensils, and, according to Louis, "almost any commodity we could sell."

In 1981 Tillie Calhoun interviewed Lou Gardella about the store for the Livermore Heritage Guild. The Guild published a six-page pamphlet of the inter-

view. Most of the information for this column comes from that pamphlet, which is for sale at the Carnegie Building.

The major portion of Del Valle Mercantile's business was based on credit. Many customers were farmers. They were given credit so that they could make their once-a-year payment in October after their crops were harvested. The rest of the customers were given 30 days to pay their bills. By this time many people had telephones. A major part of the business was by phone. Delivery was free. Delivery men took orders all over the city and out to nearby farmers and even to sheep ranches out in the Corral Hollow area with wagons and later pickup trucks. Gardella said, "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."

The 1914 cash register used at the store was about six feet high and had an individual drawer for each clerk. "At that particular time it was the elite of cash registers," Gardella recalled. The store used the same register for all the years it was in business—from 1914 to 1956 without any mechanical problems. The store goods were on shelves that

went from floor to ceiling. At each section of the store—grocery, hardware, and household utensils—they had traveling ladders so that the salesmen could reach the top shelves. "We operated with clerks waiting on each customer separately; they would take the order from the customer and then put the order up," Gardella said. "It isn't like today where you help yourself and then check out at the cash register. No one waited on themselves."

Their produce was shipped in from Oakland three or four times a week. "We had the full line like fruits, vegetables, oranges, potatoes ... We had carrots, turnips, beets, and everything in season—melons ... strawberries." A dealer purchased Gardella's order at the Oakland produce market and then brought everything out to Livermore by 8:30 a.m.

The Del Valle Mercantile sold coffee in cans as we know it today at the supermarkets, but they also sold it in bulk in 100-pound bags. They would grind it, fine or coarse, according to the customer's fancy. "The Italians, French, Spaniards, Greeks ... wanted chicory in their coffee." The store clerks wouldn't mix it, but customers could buy a pound or two of chicory and mix it into their coffee at home. Flour came

in bulk in 100-pound printed sacks of good fabric. Gardella remembered that his mother would wash the material and make towels out of them. "As a matter of fact, a lot of the girls' intimates were made from flour sacks. My mother would make their panties of flour sacks."

The hardware department included nails of every kind and horseshoes. In later years, customers from all over the Bay Area came to buy horseshoes, as not many places were carrying them anymore. The household side included lanterns, lamps, chimneys, and kerosene. They also sold kerosene cook stoves.

An early ad for the store listed Grape-nuts for 17¢, large size Super Suds for 15¢, oranges at two dozen for 25¢, medium size Log Cabin syrup (in its log cabin-shaped container) for 40¢, and Pillsbury's SnoSheen cake flour at 28¢ a pack. In his interview with Tillie, Gardella remarked: "We were a general merchandising store. ... We had a tremendous variety of articles and so many people would remark when they came in there, 'how can you find things?' But we knew where everything was."

Besides running his mercantile business from 1924 to 1956, Lou Gardella served on the Livermore City Council for 16 years—four terms as a council member and then as mayor from 1950 to 1954. City flags flew at half-mast when he died in June 1984.

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