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(Interviewee, print) (Interviewer, print)

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Audrey L. Miller
(Interviewee's signature)

Address 2750 Co. Rd. 44
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Phone (334) 874-9673

Date 3-30-96

Dorothy Taylor
(Interviewer's signature)

Address 4663 J80
Jacksonville, AL 36265
Phone (205) 782-6435

Date 3-30-96

Feb 26, 1996

Interviewee Background Information

Name: Audrey Luter Miller
Address: 2750 County Road 44 Selma, AL 36701
Phone Number(s): (334) 874-9673
Approximate age or date of birth: 61 5/2/34
Mother's name: Mrs. Mabel Augustus Luter
Father's name: Mr. Jesse Luter
Places lived and when: in Marengo County, Dallas County, New Jersey, Georgia, Orville,

Education: _____

Religion: Baptist

Business, political and social memberships (past and present): _____

none

Present occupation: Retired (homemaker) and seamstress

Former occupation(s): _____

Special skills: sew

Major Accomplishments: ran successful business

Local events in which you have participated: none

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: _____

none

National events in which you have participated: _____

none

International events in which you have participated: _____

none

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: NA

Country from which you emigrated: NA

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession:

none

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: NA

Additional information: NA

NAME : DOROTHY
TAYLOR

COURSE # : HISTORY 444

PROFESSOR : DR. HARVEY H.
JACKSON

CLASS TIME : M-W-F 08:45

TITLE: GENERAL
STORES

DESCRIPTION : ORAL HISTORY
RESEARCH
BASED ON AN
INTERVIEW

DATE: APRIL 1, 1996

Chronological List of Events from 1920-1970

1920

Jan. ----Prohibition Amendment goes into effect

May ----Socialist Labor Party

June ----Merchant Marine Act

Federal Power Commission

Water Power Act

July ----Farmer/Labor Party

Prohibition Party

Aug. ---Nineteenth Amendment

Nov. ---Warren G. Harding elected President

Calvin Coolidge - Vice President

1925

Jan. ----First female governor in U.S.

July ----Scopes Trial

1927

Apr. ----Television first demonstrated

Mechanical cotton picker invented

Black Tuesday - worst day in history of N.Y. stock exchange

1928

Jan. ----Amelia Earhart becomes first woman to fly across the Atlantic

July ----First color motion picture

Aug. ----Kellogg-Briand Pact

Nov.-----Herbert Hoover elected President

Charles Curtis - Vice President

1929

Apr. -----First Birth Control Clinical Research Center established

June -----Agricultural Marketing Act

July -----Immigration Act goes into effect

Oct. -----N.Y. stock exchange collapses (Black Thursday)

1930

Mar. -----Public Building Act

July -----Veterans Administration established

Aug. -----American Lutheran Church formed

Sept. -----First electric train tested

Immigration prohibited

Oct.-----Committee for Unemployment Relief appointed

Nov.-----Democrats gain control of the House

Dec.-----Bank of the United States, NYC, closes

1931

Mar.-----"The Star-Spangled Banner" designated as national anthem

The Scottsboro Boys Case

1932

May -----" Bonus Army" descends on Washington

July -----Relief and Reconstruction Act

Federal Home Loan Bank Act

Nov.-----Franklin D. Roosevelt elected President

John Nance Garner - Vice President

1933

Feb.-----Twentieth Amendment Adopted

May-----Federal Emergency Relief Act

Agricultural Adjustment Act

Tennessee Valley Authority

Federal Securities Act

June----Roosevelt's 'Hundred Days'

Reforestation Relief Act establishes the CCC

U.S. Employment Service created

Jul-----Home Owners Refinancing Act creates HOLC

National Industrial Recovery Act establishes PWA and NR

Banking Act of 1933 establishes FDIC

Nov.----CWA established

Dec.----Twenty First Amendment

1934

-----The Dust Bowl

1939

Sept.---World War II begins

1941

Dec.----Bombing of Pearl Harbor

Draft Act

1944

June-----D-Day

1945

Aug.-----Atomic Bomb dropped on Hiroshima

Oct.-----U.N. established

1947

Mar.----Twenty-second Amendment

1950

June-----Korean War begins

1951

-----Women in industry peaks

1952

May-----First woman Ambassador to U.S.

1953

Apr.-----Department of Health, Education and Welfare

1954

Feb.-----Polio vaccine administered to schoolchildren

May-----Brown v. BOE of Topeka ruled upon by Supreme Court

1955

Jan.-----First televised presidential press conference

Nov.-----Racial segregation on trains and buses banned

1956

Feb.-----U of A enrolls first black student

1957

Aug.-----Civil Rights act of 1957

1958

Jan.-----First U.S. satellite launched

1959

Jan. -----Alaska enters Union as 49th state

Aug.-----Hawaii becomes 50th state in Union

1960

May-----Civil Rights Act of 1960

Nov.-----John F. Kennedy elected President

Lyndon B. Johnson - Vice President

1962

Oct.-----Cuban missile crisis

1963

Aug.-----Freedom March on Washington

Nov.-----President Kennedy assassinated

1964

July-----Civil Rights Act of 1964

1965

-----Military advances in Vietnam

Mar.-----Selma to Montgomery March

1966

Mar.-----Cold War GI Bill

May-----Anti-War Demonstrations in Washington

1967

Feb.-----Twenty-fifth Amendment

Aug.-----Thurgood Marshall becomes first black Justice on Supreme Court

1968

Jan.-Feb.----Tet Offensive

Apr.-----Martin Luther King assassinated

Nov.-----Richard M. Nixon elected President

Spiro T. Agnew- Vice President

1969

Apr.-----First artificial heart implant

July-----First man on moon

1970

Apr.-----Cigarette advertising banned from television and radio

June-----Voting Age lowered to 18

Dec.-----EPA activated

World Trade Center completed

Personal Chronology of Mrs. Audrey Miller

1920- 1933 : Unborn

1934

May 2 -----Born in Marengo County

Lived in dogtrot house

Went to school in Magnolia

1948

-----Got married at age 14

Moved to Selma

1954

-----Moved to New Jersey

Had two little boys

1957

-----Moved to Georgia

1960

-----Worked at sewing factory

1979-1993

-----Bought the store in Orrville, Alabama

1994

-----Husband became disabled

Sold the store

Retired and moved to Selma

Questions for the Interview With Mrs. Audrey Miller - February 1996

What were your parents and/or grandparents like?

What were their respected occupations?

Can you describe your childhood?

Where were you educated?

What was the school like?

Describe your home and your chores?

Did you receive any formal training?

When were you married?

What was your husband's occupation before and after you all were married?

What occupation did you have before and after you were married?

Why did you leave Marengo County and when?

Where did you and your husband live afterwards?

When did you and your husband come to Dallas County and why?

What difference did you notice between Dallas County and other places you had resided including your home county?

Where in Dallas County did you and your husband live and why?

Did you have any children during this time?

What impact did any national, state, or local events have on you and your family?

Did your husband serve in the armed forces?

Where did you open a business in Dallas County?

What made you decide to do so?

What type of business was it?

Can you give details about running this business?

How were the relationships between you and your customers?

What was the race percentage of the customers you served?

Did the Civil Rights movement alter the relationship between you and your black customers?

What differences do you notice now as opposed to when you first opened this business?

What is your current occupation?

Table of Contents

Introduction...

Background of Interviewee...

Childhood experiences...

Education...

Jobs held by interviewee and husband...

Places resided...

Children and family...

Ownership of the store...

Affects of events...

Present status...

After the Revolution many people were scattered throughout the country in rural areas with little or no transportation. During these times supermarkets and department stores were yet unthinkable. People grew most of their food at homes and the furniture and clothing were hand made either at home or passed down from one generation to the other. It was at this time that a phenomenon started to pop up around the country but chiefly in the South and the Midwest that came to be known as general stores.

They were called general stores for a variety of reasons. The stores usually carried different items ranging from apples to zippers. But it was also called the general store because they provided a number of services such as barber, post office, and the meeting place for the most prominent of politicians. "In their heyday general stores owned and operated by individuals or partners quickly followed peddlers into newly occupied regions even though prospective customers still grew much of their own foodstuffs and made much of their own clothing."¹ Many of the general stores had been established to fit the needs of the communities they served and when those communities grew, the general store grew and became bigger and more efficient. The general stores added departments as the community grew and space became available.

The general store also served the purpose of educating those interested in money and commerce. The storekeepers not only sold their goods, they also gave credit to customers and traded goods for other valuable things that were not monetary. During the early years, after the Civil War, the storekeepers were known as furnishing merchants.

¹Lewis E. Atherton, "General Stores" *Dictionary of American History*, 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 416.

This merchant replaced the peddlers that existed throughout the regions. When the population grew dense enough to support a store, the merchant became the center of the township. "Because frontier conditions prevented specialization, the storekeeper performed many functions that later passed to special agencies or special types of merchants."² In his store, the merchant carried items essential to survival on farms. He carried dry goods, groceries, hardware, medicines, and even horses. The merchants would sell or trade these items to farmers but at a very high interest rate. "Such an arrangement was necessary in sparsely settled areas, for otherwise there was insufficient business to maintain a store."³ The merchant could not rely on cash because only the wealthy had money and they would usually import their goods from other areas of the region or country.

These merchants were usually very prominent people in the community who had come from wealthy families and were well educated. The merchants usually owned land and houses. But the merchant usually had a crude post office and in some towns might be the mayor, sheriff, or doctor. In towns with very scattered population the merchant may also have served as an informal banker. The merchant's store was usually the center of the meeting place of many social gatherings. Most of the influential members of a town would come to the store to mail and receive mail to get the latest local, state, and national news, and to come to announce their interest in running for public office. Although most merchants ran stores that sold a variety of goods, some chose to specialize.

²Ibid. , 127.

³Ibid. , 127.

Banking, manufacturing and exporting became specialized functions separate from merchandising. As towns developed and populations grew larger, merchants expanded also. The times changed and more and more people took on other jobs. Although cotton was still the biggest crop in the South and in Alabama, mills began to appear in isolated areas. Most all of the textile workers lived in the mill towns as they came to be known. So there was a need for company towns ran exclusively by the mill owner or the mill owner's son. The company sold a variety of goods to the mill workers who sometimes paid cash and sometimes borrowed against their pay. This resulted in a lot of workers being indebted to the mill owner and therefore, many mill owners became corrupt.

Once the merchants expanded, the stores were known chiefly as general stores. In large towns, there were often a down stores as well as several general stores: drugstores, bookstores, hardware stores, bakeries, and jewelry shops. Most often, the original owner sold off some of his land and building to other merchants and this resulted in the expansion of a town into a prospering city. This caused great rivalry among merchants and other stores. Sometimes if a store was really successful, a merchant "would own the stores but hire others to manage them giving him free time for other ventures."⁴

These general stores underwent significant changes when the railroad came through a town. This meant that the storekeeper could readily ship goods and receive goods from other part of the regions.

⁴Carol Priamo, *The General Store* (Toronto et.al : McGraw-Hill, 1978), 12.

The store usually had a porch which came to be known as the storefront and wooden steps. When general stores were being built, they were built from wood and so many caught fire and burned. Although this style of building was usually used only for stores, some other buildings took on this architectural design as well. Many stores took on box shapes. This was done generally by building a false front onto the upper story. This also gave the store the appearance of being two story.

Most of the upper story of general stores were used for storage, but sometimes the storekeeper and his family lived in the upper story of the building. Even though the exterior of most stores were similar, the interior was far from identical. The types of articles that each store kept in stock depended on the number of people and the kinds of people that the store served. If the store served mostly farmers as most general stores did, it would keep every farming tool available along with seeds, food, clothing and furniture. The general store also served as a hardware store for building material supplies. The store also carried a booklet known as the almanac for farmers that helped them know what crops to plant in what precipitation percentages, and the crop prices.

"In the case of local procedures, the storekeeper would trade his imported goods for those brought in from the farmers."⁶

During the early years of general stores unpaved roads and ill-weather prevented the storekeeper from shipping and receiving goods from larger producers. Many store operators depended on local farmers for handmade goods.

⁶Ibid.,18.

Although merchants successful, it also proved to be devastating to "local manufacturers who could no longer compete."⁵ Another blow came to general stores with establishment of mail order catalogues because this meant goods of any kind could be obtained more efficiently; variety was greater; and quality was assured. But even with this new way to acquire goods, only the wealthy or upper middle class could afford to do so.

Many of the poor still depended on local stores for their needs and supplies. In almost all regions, general stores also served as pharmacies. During the early part of the twentieth century, little advancement was made in the way of medical technology. Most blacks and poor Appalachian families depended on herbal or traditional medicines for their sick. Most towns had only one doctor if there was one available at all. Most of these doctors had no formal educational training. The early 19th century had seen the creation of pharmaceutical schools and doctors became more common place to keep up with the changing times of modern medicine. Although most people could describe what a general store carried as far as goods, most could not describe the architectural form of the building of most general stores. Most of these stores especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, were built along the same pattern.

Although there was some accounting in size and decorative detail, most general stores were plain houses. The houses were usually 1 1/2 stories in height and had a pitched roof. The stores usually were built with the short wall facing the street, with large shop windows placed symmetrically on the second story. There was usually one entrance and this door was also the sole exit.

⁵Ibid.,14.

had one telephone and it was located in the general store. One of the things that has helped to keep the now existent 50,000 general stores are the courteous storekeepers. Sometimes when people come in town they stop first at the general store and may stay for hours just browsing or chatting with the storekeeper on the porch of the store. Most of the general stores today are found generally out in the Western United States or Canada. "In Southern Ontario a great number and variety of general stores have survived, many of which are being run as general stores, while others have been converted to craft shops, and small trade stores."⁹

A lot of people have been drawn to general stores because of the personalities of the store owner. A woman who ran a general store in Dallas County, named Audrey Miller said in an interview that she "liked to meet the public." This was one reason most people preferred to shop general stores rather than the beginning to emerge small specialty and grocery stores. Sometimes weary travelers found lodge at the home of the shopkeeper when traveling through unfamiliar areas. This was another hospitable act that was very much a part of the general store owner's image.

The storekeepers generally were very concerned about the community they served and usually knew the needs of the people that shopped the store regularly. This impact on the community was often stores were established. Sometimes when other tradesmen could not afford a shop of their own, they would use the general store to render their services to the customers and in return they paid the storekeeper by trading with him and buying his products. This way, customers that generally did not come into the store, came for other services and might buy something while they wait.

⁹Ibid.,27.

When a farmer had no cash to pay for items in the general store the store owner would either give the farmer the item on borrowed interest, barter the item for another item of value, or let the farmer perform a service to pay off the debt. In this manner of business, many solid relationships developed because "credit was easily established, since trust was essential."⁷ If a farmer got items on credit he may put his house up a collateral. Sometimes, if it was a good year and conditions were favorable, as farmer would pay off his debt and make a profit. But if the year had been bad, the farmer was usually in debt to the merchant until the following year. When the conditions of roads improved a lot of salesmen came through and asked merchants to buy their products and buy them to sell in their own stores. Since the stores often doubled as the post office, many people ordered items and placed their orders at the general store and received the item there also. Even though "quantity and variety was often limited, the store was always well stocked with a conglomeration of local produce and import items."⁸ Most of the merchandise in the stores was not packaged and was neither displayed on the counter or on shelves behind the counter. Most of the five and dime stores originated from general stores. Handling goods was the main function of stores, but often a storekeeper would act as a banker and would oversee credit transactions between two or more parties. Storekeepers also held valuable information on how a farmer could buy and save stock.

Some stores also served as taverns until prohibition and afterwards. Storekeepers provided a number of other services such as marriage licenses and morgue services. When the telephone was invented, many towns only

⁷Ibid., 18.

⁸Ibid.,20.

The storekeeper was always busy and usually worked long workweeks. Most shopkeepers worked six days a week, with only Sunday off and fourteen hours a day. Working this amount of hours per week took its toll on the shopkeeper. Mrs. Miller stated that when she owned and operated a store while her husband worked at a lumber company she had to get someone to help her. In Mrs. Miller's case, she chose a black woman to help her in the store. Most store owners in rural areas with Blacks, but they always served them the same goods at the same prices as they would sell them to whites. During the days of the Civil Rights movement, most general stores were not affected by the sit-ins and boycotts. Mrs. Miller put it mildly when she said humbly "I treated them (the Blacks) like I wanted to be treated."¹⁰

Most blacks felt no resentment toward store owners because often times they had needed help and were given credit at the store. Race was not an influencing factor in some transactions between general store owners and their customers. This was partly because in a lot of rural towns, the majority of the customers were black. Most store owners were fair with prices, but many were corrupt. Some of the corruption that evolved during the times of general stores happened because the merchants often borrowed supplies on credit and then sold those same goods to their customers on credit. When the customer did not repay his debt the next year for whatever reason the storekeeper also became indebted to his suppliers. Although this was a major problem for both the store owner and the supplier, "there was no fine or imprisonment for nonpayment of debt and no interest was charged."¹¹

¹⁰Interview with Audrey Miller, February, 1996, Selma, Alabama.

¹¹Priamo, *General Store*, 24.

Although most articles and books written on the subject of general stores tell the tale about how the storekeeper, the husband or father, ran the store, it failed to highlight some of the contributions made by the women who helped in its success. Sometimes women had more significance than they are given credit for. Because most of the men who owned general stores were often involved in politics and/or other business ventures, they were often called away from the store. When the owner was away on business, the woman would oftentimes run the store along with hired help or children. This was also the case if the owner became ill, unable, or died. If the woman of the house was unavailable or if there were no women to run the store in the owner's absence, the eldest son would take the reins or the business in hand. To find children working in a general store was not at all uncommon, because this was the way the store could be passed down and still remain in the family. Three of Mrs. Miller's sons helped her run the store. If there were no family members available or willing to run the store, then it would be run by a trustee or someone appointed by the owner. In this case, most often the store remained in this person's hand either through legal ownership or inheritance. Some stores may be bought and sold numerous times and owned by more than one family at any given time. Even if women did not run the stores entirely, they did other indirect things to help the store draw in customers. One store, owned by Henry Baldwin in Toronto had a section added onto the left side in which "Mrs. Baldwin and her sisters conducted a dressmaking and millinery business." ¹²

¹²Ibid.,86.

The women of the community often made clothes and other garments that could be sold in general stores. In addition to clothing, women also contributed food such as homemade cakes, pies, candies, and canned vegetables to the general store. Since most of these women, who made their own clothes at home, needed cloth, most store owners would purchase fabric from a variety of places and sell it in the store. Along with fabric, storeowners also sold many of the other tools used by women homemakers. Some of these may have included thread, thimbles, needles, knitting tools, buttons, and spindles with which to weave cotton into thread. As technology advanced, some women started to use the sewing machine to sew fabric and would then need parts and oil for repair. The general store would supply these too.

Some of the things women bought that were also of necessity were dishes, eating utensils, spices, and canning jars for food preserves. During World War II, many of these stores and larger department stores also, took stamps in the place of money for goods. Mrs. Miller's only memory during this time is of her mother having to use stamps to buy shoes at the store. A lot of professionals received promissory notes for pay to be received at a later date. The general store would accept these notes for the purchase of a good. With the invention of the automobile, most general stores began to sell gasoline and this is where the convenience store got its beginnings. Some general stores have survived because it sold goods to people when they were small children. Most general stores did in the past and still do sell candy for one cent, three cents, and a nickel.

After going to this store when they were younger, some people later worked for, bought, or built a general store. Storekeepers appealed to all kinds of different people for a variety of reasons. Some prominent businessmen got their start as an apprentice in their family's or community's general store. This was a common way to train young boys in the ways of business, to provide jobs for the people in communities, and to also offer services for the elderly and disabled customers who would be unable to pick up needed items from the store.

The general store was usually centered in the middle of the town, strategically located to allocate more business. In doing so, some stores were the site of the newspaper stand that became available after the invention of the printing press. The stores also served as artistic and historical references. Sometimes storekeepers had volumes of books that were passed down in their family or otherwise acquired. These books were usually first and second editions by prominent writers. Therefore the storekeeper was consulted by almost everyone in town on everything from crops to politics. The general store was the place that the whole town could count on for advertising, either by posters or by word of mouth. Politicians, especially made great use of storefronts to put up campaign posters, pass out buttons and literature, and shake hands with the people. A result of this campaigning strategy was evident because "In 1951, on the wall of the empty store room of Wilson Brothers in South Butler was found a thick bunch of posters."¹³

¹³Laurence A. Johnson, *Over the Counter and on the Shelf* (New York :

Candidates usually depended on the storekeeper for votes. Because even though most storekeepers lacked formal education, they were well informed because they read a lot of the pamphlets and periodicals that passed through the post office. Many storekeepers' opinions, although not always shared, was almost always respected as being the authority on political matters. "Political campaigns brought excitement to the crossroads and novelties and to the corner stores."¹⁴ One of the fastest selling items in a general store was the American flag.

The popularity of these stores were tremendous until they were replaced by larger, more efficient department stores such as Woolworth's Five and Tens and Sears Roebuck. The process of elimination of general stores has been quickened by the availability of "chain food stores, with low prices, wider selection, and quantity buying"¹⁵ which makes shopping more efficient, faster, and up to date. Also with improvements in communications, radios and televisions, the woman of the house became more adept to brand name goods which reached them through national advertisements. With the influx of larger food chains, specialty shops, and department stores, the general store was either run out of business or minimized to only neighborhood business. Most of the general store buildings were vacated and left to dwindle away into a forgotten era, their owners having died, sold, or simply moved.

Bonanza Books, 1961), 122.

¹⁴Ibid.,122.

¹⁵Ibid.,122.

Many of the people who have chosen to study general stores have "often discovered it nearly unchanged, but its surroundings have usually been altered over the years, as shops, houses, and taverns have been eliminated or transformed to suit modern needs."¹⁶ Some stores, however, have remained in the original family that owned it. These stores have usually been kept up with repairs by successive owners or restored after a number of years. "Changes such as improved exterior wall coverings, new paint, replacement of wooden porches with concrete, reinforcement of awning posts, removal of the upper balcony or lower verandah, and new signs are characteristics of stores which have been repaired and maintained over the years without altering the original character of the store building."¹⁷ Many of the original general stores have either burned down, been demolished, or condemned because of abandonment. Some have even been moved from their original site and the historical significance is not entirely recaptured.

Today the general stores in many small towns have been converted into museums, antique shops, or hardware stores. But interest has become anewed in owning and operating small town stores. Some of these individuals are Mr. and Mrs. Jim Lessing of Massachusetts. They moved to Vermont and bought a small store and ran it successfully for six years. The business of smaller store operations "often serves as a revolving door for urban and suburban refugees fleeing corporate pressures and the aggravations of the city for a quieter life..."¹⁸

¹⁶Priamo, *General Store*, 27.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁸Robert Hanley, "Store Trying To Balance Country and Countrified," New York

Mrs. Miller, when asked why she went into one of these small store businesses in a poor rural area, said that she had simply been tired of working for someone else. She had worked in sewing factories before with little rewards and had to hire someone to take care of her children while she and her husband both worked. When she operated the store, it gave more freedom to spend with her family and made her financially independent. Stores that have been well kept and preserved have had a rise in prices throughout good and bad times in the economy. " The shopkeeper or owners of present day general stores are friendly and hospitable and enjoy their store and its customers." ¹⁹ The present day storeowner usually reaps rewards not in just cash but in personal satisfaction as well. Although many of the general stores today are thriving and have a daily presence in some communities, they are not as significant as they were in the past.

Times, 15 April 1925.

¹⁹Priamo, *General Store*, 28.

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