

LOOKING BACKWARD

A Nickel Bought Lots Of Candy

HUMBOLDT, Tenn. — E. L. (Uncle Dick) Nelson can tell you a lot about the good old days.

During his 83 years he has hauled fruit at 75 cents a day with a mule-drawn wagon, served as a board member of the Peoples Bank, dealt in real estate and handled farm machinery.

"Uncle Dick" also has worked as a clerk in one of the earliest grocery stores in Humboldt.

"There were no packaged items to speak of in the old stores," he recalls, comparing them to the modern supermarket. Standard items were hoop cheese and crackers. Sauerkraut was shipped to the grocer in 500-pound barrels. The kraut and the crackers were dispensed by a clerk, who may or may not have had clean hands.

Sugar, meal, salt, flour and vinegar were likewise shipped in barrels and were sold in paper bags. The vinegar was sold in old whisky bottles — usually provided by the customer.

Kerosene for lamps was sold in small containers, the fuel being pumped from metal containers by hand pump.

The clerk might go to a chicken coop at the rear of the store and snatch a fowl to be sold to the customer. A one-horse hack was often used for customer delivery.

A youngster could spend a nickel and get a fair-sized bag full of sweets.

Grocery stores, Nelson recalls, opened at 5 a.m. and usually closed at 10 p.m. — some opened occasionally on Sunday morning to permit customers to buy fresh meat for the ice box, an insulated box with ice on one end and perishables on the other.

"Buggy whips" were displayed at the front of the store in a circular rack. An extra good whip — which would last for a year or more — sold for as much as a dollar and a quarter.

"Uncle Dick" says it was unlawful to sell or give away cigarettes or cigarette papers, thereby creating a cigarette bootlegging business.

Tin cans of the early days were thought to poison their contents if stored for any length of time. One of the first things the customer did upon opening the can was to empty it into a non-metal container.



OLD-TIMER—"Uncle Dick" Nelson of Humboldt recalls the "good old days," with nostalgia, even though there were no conveniences and streets were little more than paths from one emporium to another.

\$100,000 capitalized project business. During World War I the facilities were used as a fibre plant for the manufacture of gun cotton for the Allies.

The Tri-County Fair was be-

gun in 1908 and featured harness racing.

At age 83, Mr. Nelson was born 17 years after the incorporation of Humboldt, which this year—without ceremony — is marking its centennial.

Two "open saloons" were operated in Humboldt, and Nelson recalls slipping up to the back door with his cronies to buy a 10-cent can of beer.

Two of the most influential early merchants were Felix Cates and Sam Lewis. They ran a general store as partners: they needed no bookkeeping department. Receipts were divided equally at the end of the day and when new stock was bought, each man paid his share.

Fresh meat and dairy products at the turn of the century were handled by men peddling their wares in small wagons. They would sell their products with one hand and "shoo the flies" with the other. Many people, of course, had their own cows.

A large well was located on the public square near the railroad depot at "The Crossing." Water troughs were placed at intervals in the uptown and downtown areas for livestock.

There were no automobiles, much less streets—just dusty or muddy paths between the stores. "There was a perpetual mudhole near the corner of the present Main Street and 13th Avenue," Nelson remembers.

The city water and lighting system was begun about 1895, the first water mains were laid in 1904 and the sewerage system was installed in 1920-21.

Humboldt's "bucket brigade fire department"—a volunteer organization — was started in 1901, the same year the city received a state charter for a Mayor-Alderman form of government.

The city's first "hard-surfaced" gravel streets were laid in 1906.