

Brothers of the Broom

By Carl Goodman

We were a monopoly and didn't know it.

With a tight grip, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, my three brothers and I swept the dry goods department of the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company Store in Tracy City, never once relinquishing that broom. The job never paid more than \$5 per month, but unlike our many other jobs, it was a salaried position, and they were few and far between.

That \$5 may not seem like a lot of money today, but it had the buying power of more than \$40 in today's currency. And it was steady work. The broom gave us not only a steady income but a Wall Street style line of credit. When we needed a pair of socks or shoes, we could charge them against our salary. (I love that word salary. It comes from the Latin word *salarium*, originally salt money, or money to buy salt. Roman soldiers received part of their pay in salt.)

We were already familiar with the store. Our father, Dillon Goodman, a coal miner, was once paid in script redeemable at coal company stores in Tracy City, Coalmont and Palmer. That pay system eventually disappeared, freeing miners and their families to shop wherever they pleased.

We swept the store five days a week. That did not include Wednesday, when the store closed at noon, or Sunday, when the store was not open at all. It took about an hour to sweep, or about five hours a week, or 20 hours per month. That's about 25 cents per hour. The Federal minimum wage at that time was 40 cents per hour.

My oldest brother Robert, now a retired forestry professor in North Carolina, was the first of the broom brigade. To be eligible for the job, he had to have a Social Security number, at the ripe old age of 11. He remembers going to the Post Office, then in the heart of downtown Tracy City, and receiving his card in an official U.S. Government envelope from Post Master Clarence Kilgore Sr. It was a proud day. He went to the store directly from Shook School and reported to Hazel Geary, a pleasant but no-nonsense business manager whose tenure with the store continued until its closing. In the meantime, Robert kept his other jobs milking cows and grading eggs for Ray Ingman.

He admitted, in a telephone interview from his home in Goldsboro, N.C., that he rarely saw any money from the company store job. "I took most of it up in trade," he said. "It was an easy way to stay in socks and underwear."

I would receive the broom from Robert at the ripe age of 11 with an equally valid Social Security number. It was 1955. Tennessee Ernie Ford's "16 Tons" was at the top of the charts, and I was in the

eighth grade at Shook School-the only “salaried” student in my class. With my earnings, I proudly paid for my own shoes (\$6) and haircuts (50 cents).

Constructed in the 1890s, the company store was a commanding, two-story brick building downtown with offices in the back. You could access the dry goods department either from downstairs through the grocery store or from a parking lot in the back. Inside, you climbed an enclosed stairwell. From outside, you walked up an open wooden ramp. Most dry goods customers entered by the ramp. While the downstairs had a concrete floor, the upstairs consisted of well-worn, heart pine flooring.



The dry goods department was a warren of counters, shelves, boxes and enclosed glass cases. Mannequins were few and most merchandise was either behind the counter or in a case. Dress patterns were available for leisurely inspection, and along a wall nearby were countless bolts of fabric. A multi-drawer case contained spools of thread of every color. They equipped the many customers, mostly ladies, who made their own clothes. For those who didn’t, there were “store bought” shirts, blue jeans and overalls for men and shirt waist dresses, skirts and blouses for women. There was a dressing room behind dark curtain toward the back. In a far corner of the store, near a window, was an area to try on shoes.

Customers would pay for their purchases from across a wide wooden counter and the amounts would be tallied on an old cash register that displayed its numbers at the top and clanged proudly with each purchase. When change was needed, the clerk used a dumb waiter system that connected the dry goods and grocery departments.

I remember the smells, a mixture of sawdust, dye, fabric and shoe leather. Occasionally, the smell of coffee being ground would waft from downstairs. Since there were few windows, light came from the ceiling fixtures.

On Saturdays, families came to town from every direction, and the company store was the hub of activity for the coal mining community of Tracy City. It was a joyous day for our Aunt Alma Shook, a part-time clerk at the store. She loved waiting on customers and knew everyone—from Hobbs Hill, where she had taught in a two-room school house, and Myers Hill to Flat Branch and Brown’s Hollow. “Howdy, Miss Alma,” was a constant refrain.

As mentioned earlier, it took about an hour to sweep the floor with a steel-brush broom. Periodically, we would sprinkle an oil-soaked sawdust on the floor beforehand to help “clean out the cracks,” as we called them. Most of the floor’s planks fit snugly but overtime, some had begun to separate and trap debris. Besides sweeping, there was a bathroom to clean and boxes to burn. The burn barrel was in the back near the parking lot, an area shared by neighboring stores. Burning could be a challenge on windy or rainy days. It was wise to have a stick handy to poke the fire to make it behave.

Sometime during my sophomore year in high school, when I took a more lucrative job washing dishes at the Monteagle Diner for \$20 per week, I passed the broom on to my younger brother Donnie. He retired recently after many years as an electrical engineer with Lockheed in Marietta, Ga. Like our brother Robert, he doesn’t remember seeing too much cash at the end of the month. “I usually ‘owed my soul to the company store,’” he said in a telephone interview from his home in Ellijay, Ga., repeating the then familiar refrain from Tennessee Ernie Ford’s song, “16 Tons.” He also had a job at the bakery and a paper route.

The last to wield the broom was our brother Paul, now English teacher-turned restaurant manager in Columbia, S.C. By then, the early 1960s, coal mining was in decline and so was the company store. When the store finally closed, he had the good fortune to be hired as the sexton at Christ Church in Tracy City. His salary rose dramatically from \$5 monthly to \$5 weekly. You might say he had won the sweep stakes.

For sure, monopolies come in all shapes and sizes. And, as I said at the beginning, the Goodman brothers of the broom were one and didn’t know it.

About the Author:

Carl Goodman was born in Monteagle, Tenn. He attended Shook School and Grundy County High School and worked briefly for the Grundy County Herald. He earned a bachelor’s in English at

Berry College near Rome, Ga., and a master's in communications from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Following a career in university and government communications, he retired in 2004 from the U.S. State Department, where he had edited a monthly magazine and gathered stories firsthand in China and Egypt. A freelance writer, he lives in Signal Mountain, Tenn., with his wife, the former Hilary Sharkey of Nashville, an interior designer.