

## Welcome Aboard the Rolling Store

By Carl Goodman

Growing up in the pre-mall 1950s, I could walk to a half dozen grocery stores in Tracy City for a soft drink or chocolate candy bar. There was nothing novel about it.

When my family needed groceries, we went to the store. For many years, it was the Company Store. That's because coalminers like my father were paid in scrip. That would change.

What would change, too, was when I would visit my aunt and uncle in the country. They didn't go to the store. The store came to them.

By country, I mean rural Laager. And it was the novelty of the rolling store that I experienced staying with my Aunt Ethel and Uncle Clark Dykes. Laager was rural, in every sense of word. The post office, for example, was tucked into a corner of the grocery store operated by Herman and Maureen Schultz. Across the highway, or Junction, as it was known, was Lee Tate's store. He supplied my aunt and uncle with Double Cola which they kept on the back porch and drank at room temperature.

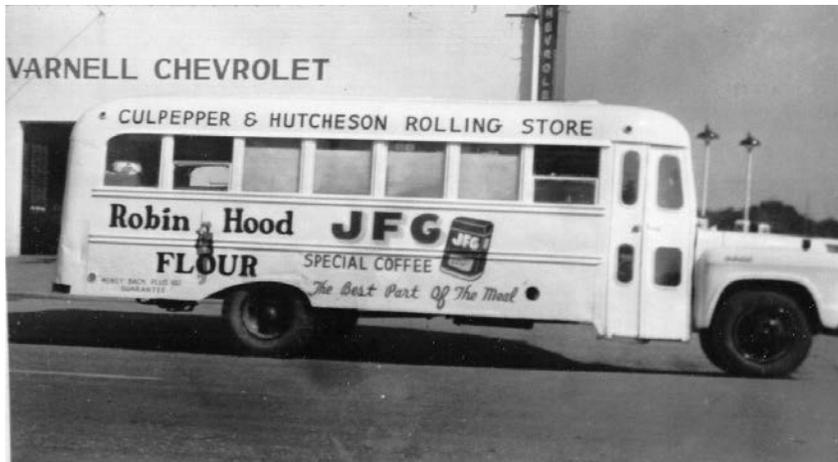
Unlike the stores that stayed put, the rolling store traveled the unpaved back roads of the county and met basic needs of the rural and poor. Families tended to be big then with little cash on hand. If they had something to trade, like eggs, the rolling store was happy to accommodate them.

The rolling store I knew from my visits to Laager was operated by Culpepper and Hutchinson. The merchants supplied the grocery on wheels from their flagship store at Sanders Crossing on Highway 56, between Tracy City and Coalmont. I believe Thursday was the day the rolling store came to the Laager area. My aunt would send me to the front yard as a lookout. Since it was usually summer and the road that ran in front of their house was unpaved, I could spot the store at least a half mile away by the plume of dust it raised. I walked this road often in the dark after rising early and riding with my dad and other coal miners who were headed to the Big Mines in Palmer. It was exactly one mile from where they let me out on Highway 108 to my aunt and uncle's door. Long before Motel 6 got the message, they left the light on for me.

Before assuming my duties as spotter, however, I helped collect the dozens of eggs my aunt would trade for coffee, sugar, flour and chicken feed. While researching this subject online, I learned that some rolling stores in rural Georgia accepted live chickens for trade. They were kept in cages atop the bus. That was not the case with our rolling store. The eggs came first, not the chickens.

Anyway, it was from these flour and feed sacks that my aunt made us stylish shirts and dresses from patterns she clipped from magazines and catalogs. She sewed beautifully. I often watched her at her old Singer sewing machine with a foot treadle. It was aptly named for she made it sing.

The Culpepper-Hutchinson Rolling Store was a fixture in Grundy County from the 1940s until the late 1960s. It was a service sorely needed by the county's many rural and poor families who didn't have cars. And much like the mail carrier, the rolling store was a weekly social event for the exchange of goods and news.



The store itself was a white converted school bus advertising coffee and flour on its sides and retrofitted with shelves on either side of the aisle to accommodate the many staples rural families depended on. They included coffee, flour, sugar, salt and spices. There were some canned goods, too, but most of the rolling store

customers raised and canned their own fruits and vegetables. For seamstresses like my aunt, there were needles, threads and buttons. My uncle could buy small bags of loose tobacco with papers so he could roll his own. And he did with great finesse, holding the bag in his mouth by its strings while he rolled. Like my aunt's sewing, his was a production to watch, too.

Since there was no refrigeration, the things you didn't find in the rolling store were meat or dairy products. Consequently, as my reward for gathering eggs, I had to satisfy my "sweet tooth" with hard stick candy, usually peppermint, instead of the more common chocolate bars I was accustomed to buying in Tracy City.

That was a small sacrifice. Stepping into that converted school bus was like entering another world, one filled with sights and smells that said Welcome Aboard!

*About the author: Carl Goodman, a Tracy City native, is a freelance writer and resident of Signal Mountain, Tenn. His most recent article was Brothers of the Broom.*