

Round Up

a collection of interesting people,
places, events, wildlife & history

Nostalgia on Main Street

Sine's 5 & 10 Cent Store, just like when you were a kid, almost

Text and photo by Pamela Varkony

IN THE DAYS BEFORE WALMART, KMART AND TARGET, when I was growing up in Quakertown, Bucks County, the Sine's 5 & 10 Cent Store was like a child's wonderland filled with toys, gadgets, cherry Cokes and a train that chugged around the walls near the ceiling. A trip to "town" was always an event, but when it included a walk through those double wooden doors, it became an adventure.

My first lesson in "it is better to give than to receive" was learned at Sine's. It is a lesson firmly hardwired in my child's brain because it was combined with my first taste of independence.

For a year, I had dutifully gone with my father into Merchants National Bank each week to deposit 50 cents into my Christmas Club account. I'll never forget how I felt the day that check arrived in the mail. Next to my name and a picture of Santa and his reindeer was written the unbelievable sum of \$26. It represented freedom. I was going to be allowed to shop for my Christmas presents, alone.

Wandering through the aisles of Sine's, with my fortune in my pocket, I felt like a princess. In housewares, I looked at shiny custard cups with a soft beige pearl glaze that were nothing like the plain clear glass cups that Mother used. Yet I decided those custard cups were not quite glamorous enough, so I moved on to cosmetics.

I can only imagine the smiles and nudging that followed me as I made my way through the aisles with the serious and earnest look of a child on a mission. It wasn't as if I were among strangers. As in most small towns in the '50s, people in Quakertown knew each other by name.

Eventually, I found the perfect gifts for my parents—a pair of knit gloves with leather palms for my father and Evening in Paris perfume in a beautiful, round blue bottle for my mother. That bottle remained on her dressing table many years after it was empty.

DECADES LATER, SINE'S REMAINS OPEN in Quakertown, and when I walk through those doors today, a flood of memories comes rushing back. Almost nothing has changed here: the soda

fountain where I met my friends after school, the long glass cases filled with penny candy, the boxes of Ball mason jars ready for canning season, and the large display of Rit Dye, which my Depression-era mother frequently purchased to give new life to old curtains or a stained dress.

Bill Harr and his wife, Marlene, are the third generation to operate the store, which was founded in 1912 by Bill's grandfather Howard B. Sine. The Harrs' children, Linda Henderson and Bill Harr Jr., and their children are continuing the tradition.

Throughout the day, the lunch counter is packed with patrons who come for Marlene's made-from-scratch soups, real mashed potatoes with old-fashioned meat loaf, and a "Betty sandwich" of pork roll, cheese and egg, which was named for a longtime customer. Gossip and news move up and down the counter almost as fast as the salt and pepper shakers.

Long known for its wide variety of unusual and hard-to-find items, Sine's attracts customers looking for a special zipper or real wool yarn in the store's extensive sewing and knitting departments. If you need new rubber tips for a pair of crutches or a coal bucket, you'll find those, too.

The year-round Christmas room, added in the '70s, also brings people into the store, but Bill Sr. admits that business has been hurt by the explosion of "box" stores at nearby malls. "People think that those stores have everything, so that's where they go," he says.

Yet the folks who have been coming to Sine's for decades know better. Whether you want to fix a leaky faucet, fry your bacon in a cast-iron pan, or cover the kitchen table in a new sheet of oil-cloth, you can be sure that Sine's 5 & 10 Cent Store has what you are looking for and at reasonable prices.

As Harr walks through the store, greeting customers by name, he points out the decades of history on display—photos, posters and pennants of area high school sports teams, an early 20th century stove made at the Quakertown Stove Works, and walls filled with letters of appreciation from generations of customers.

He can always spot the new customers because they are usually



The five-and-dimes was the original variety store, and Sine's in Quakertown has been there since 1912, offering merchandise and a lunch counter with scratch-made food.

looking up. No wonder. Model airplanes from Bill Jr.'s extensive collection, including a 1/72 scale, 10-foot-long model of the airship *U.S.S. Akron*, are hanging throughout the store.

For nearly a century, Sine's 5 & 10 Cent Store has been a Quakertown institution supported by the appreciation of a community and the love of a family. ♦

—Pamela Varkony lives in Allentown.

When You Go

Sine's 5 & 10 Cent Store is housed at 236 W. Broad St. in the heart of Quakertown's shopping district. Located in upper Bucks County, Quakertown's quaint downtown is filled with antique shops, bookstores and boutiques. For more information, call Sine's at 215-536-6102.

Pennsylvania was once home to many five and dime stores, and many still dot our state, such as Fryer's in Schuylkill County (210 E. Market St., Orwigsburg, 570-366-2258), and Lindgren's Variety Store in McKean County (311 W. Main St., Smethport, 814-887-2276). If you know of another classic five and dime store still operating in Pennsylvania, send a note to us, and we'll include it on our Web site at www.pa-mag.com. (To find the stores on our site, search for the term "five and dime.") ■