A FRENCH wit once said, "Happy the land which has nothing for history," a sentiment which Carlyle turned into "Happy the people whose annals are blank in History-books." However the idea may be stated, it implies that a nation owes much to those unspectacular, commonplace institutions which do a routine job from day to day without notoriety or acclaim. Such an institution was the country store. For there was nothing romantic or racy about a country store. On the contrary, running such a business required hard, plodding, ceaseless work, the kind of work that did not get into the headlines. Nevertheless the country-store played a large part in the development of Pennsylvania, and of the United States as well.

It is proposed herein to describe the country or general store by portraying one such concern, under the assumption that it was fairly typical of others. We shall use as an example the business establishment of James E. Magee in the tiny hamlet of Kreamer, which is situated on Highway 522 about half way between Selinsgrove and Middleburg, in Snyder County, Pennsylvania.

Even though carrying on the business of a country store was an unexciting task, such a concern was often the beginning of a village and sometimes was the stepping stone to political office for its proprietor. Interesting confirmation of that statement is evident in three of the proper names given in the preceding paragraph: Selinsgrove, Kreamer, and Snyder County. Anthony Selin (founder of Selinsgrove) and Simon Snyder (the governor for whom the county is named) were partners in a general store at Selinsgrove in 1784. Congressman George Kremer (whose name, somewhat differently spelled, is carried by the village of Kreamer) was as a youth employed by his uncle, Simon Snyder, in the Selin-Snyder store. Moreover, before Kreamer was so
named, it was called Smithgrove, for Jacob A. Smith, who had a general store there from 1866 until his death in 1894. His business place therefore was in actuality the beginning of the settlement.

Readers who are over fifty and who grew up in the country will no doubt feel a tinge of nostalgia as they recall their childhood experiences in the crowded general store, with its characteristic smells. Who can forget the rock candy held together by string and the black straps of fluted licorice dotted with droplets of sugar candy? They will probably be able to bring to mind some details about the country stores they knew, a few of which details were not applicable to the Magee store. Yet an account of one such business will serve to evoke memories of many others.

James E. Magee clerked in a general store at Mazeppa, Union County, from 1890 to 1892, and then worked in a Philadelphia wholesale house for three years. Having gained that much experience in mercantile work, he bought out the Smith estate at Kreamer in 1895, and remained at the same stand for fifty-one years. The establishment is still a going concern, now run by a nephew and a niece; modern developments have changed its business, however, from what it was half a century ago.

We shall try to show the difference between merchandising in the 1890's and merchandising at the present time by discussing a few of the lines of business that were common in the general store about fifty years ago. For the proprietor of a general store had varied functions. Obviously he had to know more phases of mercantile activity than does the modern enterpriser who probably sells one line only.

**The Country Storekeeper as Buyer and Seller of Farm Goods**

Faced by limited markets, lack of money, and difficulty in transportation, the farmer of half a century ago sold his produce to a nearby merchant who in turn resold it to a correspondent or to a commission man in an urban center. Nowadays, instead of bringing his produce to Magee's, the farmer may huckster it himself, take it to a nearby city market, or sell directly to a chain. Additionally, instead of raising most of his food as was
done half a century ago, a farmer now will probably specialize
in one or two products and buy the rest of his provender at an
A. and P. store.

In those days, however, specialists and hucksters were not so
numerous. And Ford trucks and good roads by which the grower
could get his produce to market were nonexistent. If the farmer
did take his things directly to the city, it must have been within
driving distance; moreover, he had to leave home before day-
break and travel over almost impassable roads. Most farmers,
therefore, brought innumerable articles to the nearest country
store. Magee purchased everything that was offered.

Saturday evening was a busy time as the people lined the
counters with baskets of produce. The largest items were butter
and eggs, but the list included many items which sound old-
fashioned in this age of pressure canners and deep freezers;
such were dried huckleberries, dried cherries, dried elderberries,
and dried apples. Other offerings were lard, smoked meat, ham,
shoulder, bacon, turkeys, chickens, potatoes, and all kinds of
nuts.

Barrels and barrels of shell barks, walnuts, and chestnuts were
hauled in from the surrounding farms and were bought by the
proprietor. Magee likes to tell how, in one year when there was
a heavy crop of shell barks, he purchased between seven and
eight hundred bushels and could not get rid of them. Even after
a man who was hired to peddle them to Shamokin and Mt. Car-
mel had disposed of quite a few, Magee was still loaded up with
about three hundred bushels. He finally learned that if the nuts
were cracked, the meats might be readily saleable. Soon most of
the people of Kreamer were cracking nuts for him. He made a
tidy profit by selling the kernels in Philadelphia.

Buying farm products made of the general store a warehouse,
a packing establishment, and a crude refrigerating plant. For
example, special pens had to be used for live poultry. Moreover,
the butter must be kept in a cool place. It was shipped twice a
week in large sugar barrels, with a can of ice in each barrel to
keep the butter in good shape. Need of ice forced Magee to go
into the ice business. Each winter, when Middle Creek froze over,
he hired men to harvest the crop which was placed in an icehouse
holding twenty-five tons or more.
Because the country merchant bought up most of the farm produce from the section round about, he had to have outlets for his purchases in the urban and industrial areas. Magee sold most of his stuff in the hard coal region. Luckily a branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad ran through Kreamer so that shipments could be made as needed. Monday morning was another busy time for that was the day to ship most of the perishables to market. Magee sold regularly to Shamokin and Wikes-Barre, and sometimes to Philadelphia. One customer in Shamokin took eggs for twenty-five years and Magee never missed a shipment. Any surplus eggs were sent to Wilkes-Barre on commission. Consignees were either commission merchants, wholesalers, or grocers. If the produce went to a commission merchant, Magee received a check, less the commission.

In modern terms prices were low, but money had more buying power. Lard brought to the farmer four to six cents a pound; bacon six cents; shoulder eight cents; ham ten cents; live chickens six cents; live turkeys nine to ten cents. Magee says that the country merchant was forced to take both good and bad products in order to hold his farm customers. There was one price for all kinds of eggs. If some were bad the merchant took the loss.

This species of merchandising, which was so different from that of today, was a sort of barter. Seeing little money from year to year, farmers exchanged goods for goods. Each customer had a running account which was settled once or twice a year. For about thirty years Magee practiced this system and had remarkable luck with his collections. He lost only about $1,700 in bad debts, or approximately $60 a year. He maintains that people were more honest in those days. However that may be, the barter method caused the farmer to be continually bringing produce in to pay for what he bought. For that reason it was not the same as the credit system or "buying on tick." Because people stayed on their farms and were well known, they were less likely to become "dead beats." With the coming of the motor car, huckstering, and the farmers' markets, barter died out.

THE COUNTRY STOREKEEPER AS MERCHANT

Fifty years ago there was much less variety than today in the kinds of food on the store shelves. The staples were coffee, sugar,
salt, spices, and tea. Inasmuch as people lived mainly off their farms there was less call for varieties of groceries. When Magee began business, he sold only two or three dozen cans of tinned goods a year. This item has grown since then until now even many dry foods are canned, and anyone can become a cook by opening tin cans. There was no sale for bread or cakes. Since then, however, the baked goods line has developed until today the average housewife would not know how to make a loaf of bread; in fact she even requires the bakery to cut it for her.

The dependable standbys among the non-grocery staples were tobacco and kerosene. Work shoes were just coming in; as yet most villages had several shoemakers. Harness was a good line until the automobile displaced the horse. Except for selling a few plows, Magee did not go in for farm implements. One of his most profitable items was furniture, which made up about a fourth of his business. He usually bought it at Montgomery, Picture Rocks, or at Williamsport in Pennsylvania; but he might also buy from Michigan and North Carolina.

Dry goods and notions were important phases of the business. Dry goods were purchased in some instances from travelling salesmen; but Magee also went to Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia, usually twice a year, and picked his own stock. Dry goods (i.e., yard goods which came in bolts and which were used mainly as dressmaking materials) included silks, satins, outings, muslins, calicoes, and ginghams. Notions were thread, hosiery, shirts, buttons, garter web, hooks and eyes, ribbons, laces, underwear, crochet cottons, and similar items, many of which would at the present time be bought at a dime store.

Suits and hats were the most important articles in the men’s wearing-apparel department. A man’s suit sold for as low as $3.75 and as high as $10. It was customary for nearby farmers to bring in a load of hay when their boys needed suits; a load of hay for about $10, a sum which would usually buy suits for two boys.

Mrs. Magee was in charge of the millinery department. She went at periodic intervals to Philadelphia in order to get acquainted with the new styles and to make pattern hats. She fashioned all the hats by hand. Women’s headgear sold at from $1.25
to $20; the higher-priced creations had plumes which alone cost from $6 to $8. She had customers from numerous towns in the vicinity as well as from the immediate community.

Magee also ran a coal yard, selling both bituminous and anthracite coal. The soft coal was used chiefly in threshing-machine boilers. The hard coal was bought by householders in Kreamer and by a few farmers who used it in stoves for heating their livingrooms.

Several other unrelated activities are worth mentioning as showing the varied character of goods and services offered by the general store. For ten years Magee sold jewelry. For a similar length of time he was in the plumbing, heating, and roofing business, building up quite a trade in these lines. Farmers bought iron pumps for wells, and spouting and tin roofing for their barns. Magee hired a man to install furnaces and bathroom equipment. This phase of the business continued until the man who installed the apparatus died.

Still another aspect of Magee's career was serving as postmaster of Kreamer from 1897 to 1914; in the latter year he was displaced by a deserving Democrat. Kreamer was a fourth-class office in which the postmaster depended upon cancellations for income. The chief value in having the postoffice in one's store was getting people into the place. Before the advent of rural free delivery (1896), residents from a considerable area round about came for their mail, and, of course, to buy. After the establishment of country postal service, the postmastership was less lucrative because fewer people came into the store for their mail.

**Other Activities of the Country Storekeeper**

The successful storekeeper made profits which he of course desired to invest. Some storekeepers used their money to get into politics, and this may account for the sizable number of country merchants who were elected to the state legislature. Magee, however, stayed out of politics; instead, he plowed his profits back into institutions which would make the surrounding country more prosperous and which at the same time would increase his own personal estate. His first move was to better the section's banking facilities. Because Kreamer was too small to
support a bank, Magee had to do his banking at Middleburg, the county seat, five miles away. He and others saw the need of another bank at the county seat. In 1904 they organized the First National Bank of Swineford in a village which was then adjacent to Middleburg, but which is now part of Middleburg. This proved to be a very profitable venture, and Magee has been a director of the bank ever since.

A second concern in which Magee invested his money was a telephone company. The outfit then offering telephone service was so inefficient that he felt almost daily in his mercantile activity the need for improved communication. In 1910, therefore, he helped to organize the Middlecreek Valley Telephone Company, of which he served as vice-president until 1917, and as president since that year. This also was a profitable investment and at the same time provided a much needed utility for the section it serves.

**Significance of the Country Store**

The importance of the country store as an institution in the development of the state and nation can be indicated by the following considerations. In the first place, it was a social center for the community and its environs. People came in not only to buy, to get their mail, and to sell their produce, but also to learn the news and to swap stories. Men in particular used the store premises as a place to loaf, to keep warm in winter, and to chew the chaff as well as tobacco. They discussed how the crops were growing, how the pigs were doing, how one should vote in the coming election, and how low the prices were for things they sold and how high they were for what they bought. Magee says that his loafers never swiped crackers from the cracker barrel. Nevertheless that was part of the folklore of the country store in other places, especially in New England.

Use of the store as a loafing place presented problems to the merchant. Of course he was glad for the good will and for the sale of candy and tobacco to the idlers. But they also hurt trade. Magee tells how the loafers spat tobacco juice at the stove and missed the goal so often that the floor and counter were frequently a mess of tobacco spit. Ladies coming into the store had to raise their skirts to prevent them from being contaminated. In addition,
the men sitting around the benches made sarcastic remarks while
the women were trying on hats. For these reasons Magee lost
quite a bit of trade from the ladies. Deciding that something must
be done about it, he removed the benches, scrubbed the floor and
counter, and made the place spick-and-span. Upon arriving next
time, the idlers had to stand. They were told that the benches
were being painted; somehow or another, however, the painting
was never finished. In that way Magee got rid of the loafers who
soon drifted to other hangouts. He says that what trade he lost
in tobacco and candy was made up in hats and other larger pur-
chases by the distaff side.

In the second place, the general store was a business center for
the community and the surrounding farm section. Magee was a
compound of grocer, furniture dealer, coal dealer, jeweler,
plumbing salesman, dry goods retailer, postmaster, and ice man.
Farmers seldom needed to go farther than the country store to
get their wants filled and to sell all or most of what they raised.
The saying which comes down to us—that the general store sold
everything from a gatling gun to a needle—suggests the multi-
titudinous stock it carried. A country merchant was literally a
Jack-of-all-trades. The numerous services that he performed have
been divided by specialization until now there is a separate dealer
in jewelry, in clothing, in furniture, and so forth. No longer is
it usual for one emporium to be the business center of an entire
area. It is now possible, because of the motor car and good roads,
for a farmer to sell butter and eggs at the farmers’ market ten
or fifteen miles away, to buy his groceries at a chain store, and
then to go to the movies. Half a century ago such dispersal of
activities was out of the realm of possibility.

In the third place, the country store was an important step in
the commercial development of the United States. Many of the
special stores of today grew out of the general store. It served
past generations and served them well. However, in spite of its
long history which reaches back into colonial times, it has been
left high and dry by specialization, by the chains, and by the
internal combustion engine. That modern conditions have caused
it to become antiquated is not to say that in its day the country
store was inefficient, or wasteful, or useless. To the contrary,
it did a good job as distributor and buyer for its own marketing
district; without it the farmers would have been more isolated than they were. In fact it is hard to see how rural people of fifty or more years ago could have done without the general store, which sold them their staples and bought their produce. Like the horse and buggy, it represents an age in American history. That age was an age of mud roads, subsistence farming, small businesses, local isolation, and ruralness. Many general stores can still be found in country districts, but they are not the emporia they once were.

To make a general store pay, the owner had to be willing to work hard, put in long hours, and not to ask for riches—at least not over night. Mrs. Magee remembers the drudgery that keeping a store entailed. Two coal stoves had to be attended to in winter. The modern generation knows nothing about the dirt and dust that a coal stove can cause. A dozen kerosene lamps were needed to light the store, and these had to be filled every morning; besides that, the globes must be washed, and the wicks trimmed. Not until about 1910 did the Magees install an acetylene lighting system; then around 1915 they tried a Delco light set; and only about 1921 did they get electricity from Millersburg.

The qualities that spelled success in running a general store were legion. Without question three fundamental ones were willingness to work hard, absolute honesty, and a shrewd business sense. Magee had all of these, and yet interestingly enough he attributes his success in no small degree to the fact that in his own purchases he operated on a cash basis, never borrowing money and never buying on credit. When he went to the city to secure supplies, he got reduced prices by offering cash. In notions, six per cent was allowed for payment in ten days, and he says he never lost a discount. The fact that his store is still in existence, in spite of competition from the chains, proves that Magee had the necessary qualities which many other storekeepers lacked.