

Foy's Variety Store feature

By Jeff Louderback

BEHIND THE WOOD-AND-GLASS CANDY COUNTER AT FOY'S VARIETY STORE in Fairborn, owner Michael Foy pours a scoopful of chocolates into a small, brown paper bag and weighs it on an antique white scale. Walking across the worn and squeaky hardwood floor, he passes a heated glass case with nickel sacks of popcorn and stops when he is greeted by a familiar face. "How's that future owner of yours?" asks 75-year-old Dorothy Ann Niebes, referring Foy's infant son Michael, Jr. Foy smiles and hands the bag of chocolates to Niebes--who has been shopping at Foy's since she and her husband moved to Fairborn in 1952--to add to the paring knife, mailing labels and writing paper she already bought. "I remember when you were a toddler and we would see you in here with your father," she tells him.

This kind of friendly banter at Foy's has been going on since 1929, when Michael Foy's grandfather, Albert, opened the store two weeks before the stock market crashed. Next to the candy counter--which contains treats from jelly beans and sourballs to candy corn and peanut butter kisses--is a glass case displaying black-and-white photographs and yellowed newspaper clippings. There's a photograph of a middle-aged man with thinning hair and glasses who wears a white dress shirt, a polka-dot tie and a contagious smile. "It seems like every time someone saw my father, he had a smile on his face," Michael Foy says about the man in the picture. "He was a fixture here, and he loved to talk to his customers.""

Foy has maintained the store's customer-friendly tradition started by his grandfather and continued by his father. Though decades of inflation have impacted the prices, Foy's still carries several items that range from a nickel to a quarter. "Without them we would not be a true five-and-dime store," Foy says. "This has always been a favorite place for children, so it's important we have toys that kids can buy with the change in their pockets."

At the front of the store, across from the candy counter, shelves are filled with old-time favorites like Chick-O-Sticks, Boston Baked Beans, wax lips, candy cigars and giant gumballs. Nearby, dozens of plastic bins are stuffed with miniature plastic soldiers, finger-sized cars, spider rings, bulk marbles, whistles and an assortment of rubber balls in all sizes. Checkers, jigsaw puzzles, tiddlywinks, yo-yos and kaleidoscopes are other toys of yesteryear found in the store.

But, while it seems like 1950 inside Foy's, outside, down the street, the 1990s are in full swing. Today, Michael Foy faces challenges his grandfather did not have. Fewer than five miles from Foy's doorstep in peaceful downtown Fairborn, a new megamall and several strip shopping centers anchored by bigbox retailers draw traffic from miles around. It was the arrival of shopping centers in the 1960s and 1970s that took a large base of customers away from variety stores, says Bruce Van Kleeck of the National Retail Federation. As recently as the 1970s, more than 25,000 five-and-dimes dotted the

landscape of America's downtowns. Now, Van Kleeck estimates, fewer than 1,000 exist--and only about a handful in Ohio. "Five-and-dimes are competing with the big guys like Wal-Mart and Meijer and the smaller discount chains like Odd Lots and Family Dollar," he says. "To survive, the old-fashioned independent stores have to create a niche and differentiate themselves from the others."

Variety stores' impending extinction is just the latest step in the evolution of shopping in America. Five-and-dimes peaked in the 1920s, and they remained prosperous through the 1950s, Foy says, when most communities had independent operations such as Foy's or national chains like Woolworths and Kresge's.

But five-and-dimes were once the new, big kid on the block too. Just as big-box retailers have caused independent variety stores to close, the emergence of five-and-dimes led to the gradual disappearance of their precursors, general stores, which were typically among the first businesses opened when towns were established in Ohio during the nineteenth century. They carried groceries, clothing, equipment and supplies and were the main retail establishment when a town was created. Corner markets (which sold groceries) and five-and-dimes (which primarily sold household items, clothing and candy) later became prevalent, and general stores faded from society.

For now, Foy's is maintaining its market niche with nostalgia. In a community that has a veterans memorial in the center of town, where soothing music echoes from outdoor speakers and double-sided parking spaces are located in the middle of the street, the variety store looks much like it did in 1929. It has the original flooring, counters and fixtures. The neon sign that hangs outside was installed in the 1940s. "Nostalgia is on our side," Foy says. "Older customers like coming here because it reminds them of their childhood days. Younger customers come here because it's something different, something they've heard about from their parents and grandparents but haven't seen."

Foy's prides itself on carrying items that are hard to find anywhere else--they stock everything from greeting cards to sewing supplies, glassware to gag items, and party supplies to oil lamps. Stationery is a big seller among elderly customers, Foy says. "Not many people write letters anymore. But for people who do, we want to make sure they have everything they need," he says. Foy's can also fully outfit customers looking for a rubber cane bottom, a tape ribbon fly trap, a strawberry huller, a single cork or a replacement string for a yo-yo. The store even has tropical fish and iguanas in the pet section, where a monkey named Copo--the store mascot--entertains guests from his tall cage. "If something is not a big seller at big-box stores, they will take it off the shelves. I try to cater to individual customer desires," Foy says. "If someone wants a clothing sprinkler to put on top of a soda bottle, I'll get it. If they want photo corners for the old-style photo albums or wooden clothing pins, I'll find them."

"Often, though, it's a struggle to find the merchandise I want," he adds. "When I find something that is hard to find in the modern stores, I'll buy a large supply because I can't be sure I'll be able to find it again because the supplier may go out of business."

He knows that in some cases he duplicates the stock of his competitors. Yet he believes the wide selection of products in a compact space brings customers through the doors and keeps the cash registers ringing. "A lot of customers have told me they have never seen so much crammed into one store. The volume we have in the space we have is part of our appeal," Foy says with a smile. "I would rather offer one brand each of several different items than have four brands each of a smaller assortment of items. I like keeping the shelves full because, after all, we are a variety store."

Customers' fascination with Halloween, and Foy's vast selection of masks and costumes, has also helped the five-and-dime pass the test of time. For years, the variety store sold Halloween masks year-round. In the 1990s, the demand for masks, costumes and other Halloween products forced Foy to carry more merchandise than the business had room for. This spurred him to open separate costume stores for adults and children within a block of the variety store on Main Street. Hundreds of masks glare from the wall and hang from the ceiling along one row of the variety store, yet most of the costume inventory has been moved to the other locations. Still, patrons who flock to the Halloween-related shops stroll down the street and visit the variety store. "I didn't want to ruin the nostalgic atmosphere of an early 1900s variety store that my grandfather and father worked so hard to maintain," says Foy about why the Halloween shops were established. "We have a loyal customer base that shops in the variety store, and we have a loyal customer base that likes Halloween items, so that made the decision to open the additional stores easier."

Including the variety store, Foy owns seven establishments on Main Street: the Halloween store, a haunted house and special effects store, a children's costume store, an adult costume store and a location that sells glow-in-the-dark items. The latest addition to Foy's collection of businesses is a 1950s-style diner that serves sandwiches, sodas and milkshakes and displays photographs of Fairborn when the city was composed of two villages, Fairfield and Osborn. The villages merged in 1950 to become Fairborn, the only city in the United States with its name.

The variety store is self-sufficient, Foy says, yet he admits the income from all the other stores makes it easier to keep the five-and-dime open. Half of Foy's \$ 1 million in sales revenue for 1998 was earned through the variety store, he estimates. "Because of the Halloween stores, the variety store is not under as much pressure to maintain a high volume of sales," Foy admits. But he points out, even with the masks and scary stuff in a separate location, sales of holiday decorations especially help the variety store's bottom line. "Without holidays, I don't think the variety store could support itself. My dad used to say that every day is a holiday at Foy's. That is what it seems like when you walk in here," he says with a grin. "We're known for having a large assortment of decorations for each holiday, whether it's Christmas, St. Patrick's Day or the Fourth of July. The store is decorated for the nearest approaching holiday, and after that day is over, we prepare for the next one."

The cycle of holiday decorating is comforting to Foy--the 38-year-old is a self-admitted throwback who prefers the simple life without change. "I live in the house where my

father was raised," he says of the brick home on the corner that has towering evergreens and an "F" on the center of the screen door. His number in the phone book is listed beside his grandfather's name, even though he died more than 30 years ago. "In fact," Foy says, "my grandfather's and father's names are still included above mine on our business card."

Though he prefers the simpler days when his grandfather lived, Foy understands he must change with consumer tastes. Nostalgia alone, he admits, will not keep the five-and-dime afloat. This is why he stuffs shelves and cases with Halloween items and carries products like over-the-hill party supplies, which occupy an entire aisle. "We have products here we didn't carry 10 years ago," Foy says. "But I don't think it has detracted from the atmosphere that has been here since my grandfather opened 70 years ago."

Longtime Foy's customer Dorothy Ann Niebes agrees. She takes a deep breath to smell the aroma of fresh popcorn as she leaves the store with her small bag full of chocolates, a paring knife, mailing labels and stationery. "There was a time when every small town had a business like this. Now a place like Foy's is one of the few reminders of how it used to be," Niebes says. "Years pass and the people in our town come and go, but Foy's remains the same."

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