

100 years of Agnew's General Store having what you need

SUE TIFFIN

Staff Reporter

Karen Knox remembers that the adventure-filled bike rides from her family's cottage on Big Straggle Lake to Agnew's General Store on Allen Lake in Harcourt Park began in the mid-1960s, around the time that her brother, Kent, was nine, and she was seven.

"Back then our parents didn't know where we were most of the time, and we were always safe," she told the *Echo*. "Not just my parents, everyone's parents - there were no telephones."

That smaller store was open simultaneously for a time with the Agnew family's flagship shop in Wilberforce, where Knox's parents bought big, juicy T-bone steaks when visiting their cottage from their home in Scarborough. But the treat that Knox remembers is the penny candy - the blackballs and pixie sticks, black licorice cigars and Lik-m-aid candy powder, all washed down with Orange Crush and Tahiti Treat - worth the bicycle ride she actively participated in to get to it.

"We'd buy candy and ride home," she wrote on the Agnew's General Facebook page. "Kent peddling and steering and me sitting on the back carrier. I'd jump off to push when necessary."

While Knox's nostalgic memories reflect her own childhood, the presence of Agnew's General Store in Highlands East has long held a place in the hearts of both residents and cottagers - this year, the historic landmark celebrates 100 years since Fred G. Agnew took on the store in 1921.

Fred had come to Canada from England solo, as a 16-year-old.

"It wasn't unheard of at the time, it was what you did, I guess," Cathy Agnew, Fred's granddaughter, said to the *Echo* in retelling his story.

He ended up in the Lindsay area, doing a number of jobs that included logging in the lumber camps and on the river drive, leading him to working for the railroad. His position as station agent in Gooderham gave him the opportunity to meet the woman - Mary Ellen (Mae) Dixon - who would become his wife in 1913, and then acquire a job as a travelling train agent on the Bancroft to Howland Junction route.

"He got to know the towns along the way, on the stops, and that's how he ended up knowing Mr. Reynolds, here in Wilberforce," said Cathy.

The history as to how Fred ended up working with S.W. Reynolds at his store after the railroad job, is part of the Agnew family lore, passed along by Fred's children to their children.

"We kind of feel that he left the railroad because he had an accident one night on the side car, which he wasn't supposed to use after dark, and took it out on the railroad tracks," said Cathy. "He was transporting a child who needed medical attention. Anyway, there was an accident and he lost his sight in one eye. He started working for Mr. Reynolds, and that's how he ended up, eventually, the owner of Agnew's General Store."

The history page on the Agnew's website said the store, originally a boarding house, exchanged hands with "no more than a verbal agreement and a handshake."

"Reynolds decided to eventually retire, and the story goes that he said to Fred, 'there's not enough money here for the two of us, why don't you take over the business?' and then Reynolds left town on the train, and Fred took over running the business for Reynolds, and eventually ended up buying the business from him," said Cathy. "We also heard that Fred didn't tell his wife until Reynolds was already gone, that they were now running the store."

By all accounts, Cathy said, Fred was an affable type. "He was very easy-going, he took to people," she said. "Mae probably had more of a business head on her than Fred."

Numerous people have told the Agnews over the years about the generosity of Fred as a shopkeeper, ensuring that nobody went without proper clothing or adequate food supply.

"Back in those days, everybody ran lines of credit, everybody had credit," said Cathy. "But Mae would get to the point where she would cut people off of credit - she was the authority figure in the store, I think. And we've been told that Fred would then sometimes slip out and catch up with the person and slip them a bit of money, eh?, to get them through."

The store, a general store then as it is today, sold everything from dried goods and cooking pots, everything that you might need in a house. In March of 1938, it burned in a fire, and the rebuilding of the store just down the street with a warehouse and house attached to it - the



Mae (Mary Ellen) and Fred Agnew. /Submitted

post office would come later - cost about \$300, "so we've been told," said Cathy. During construction between March and November that year, the store temporarily operated in the Orange Hall.

"But for years, they didn't have any furniture in the house," said Cathy. "There was nothing. Uncle Ross, who died a few years ago, he remembers when they built the house, them not having any furniture in it. They had four hard chairs, dining room chairs, and a table. It was years down the road before they could afford to furnish it."

The store was built with a 16-foot counter at the back, running across the store, which customers would approach with a list for the shopkeeper to fill. The counter was fitted with large drawers where flour, sugar, baking soda, raisins, dates and the like were stored.

"Ross got tired of walking out of the house, behind this counter, all the way to the end of it to get to the other part of the store, so one day he got the idea to cut it in half and make a walkway halfway down," said Cathy. "We still have part of that counter in the store here, that we use to this day. That's kind of a treat. We're happy to have this piece that we still have right now."

Cathy said that in those days, she was told everything came in on the train, which came through three days a week.

"The roads weren't open in the wintertime and were very poor quality in the summer," she said. "Everything had to come up in sleighs in the wintertime and carts in the summertime."

Popular tubs of ice cream would come from Silverwoods Dairy in Lindsay on those trains.

"It would come packed in dry ice, up on the train, and then they would put it in the freezers," said Cathy. "There was no hydro here then, so you would have to chip at the blocks of ice that came out of the lake in the wintertime, and store it in the ice shed packed in sawdust. That was part of Ross and Murray's job, to go out and chip the ice off these big blocks, and bring it in and pack it in around the tubs of ice cream to keep it frozen. They said it was an awful job doing that, but at the end of the day, the treat was that you could have some ice cream."

Fred Agnew died in 1945, at the age of 59, when his youngest son, Gary, was only 10 years old. After that, Murray Agnew received a discharge out of Trenton to help his mother run the store. Mae Agnew died a few years later, in 1951, at the age of 55.

Murray continued running the family business, with Gary finishing his schooling and joining to help at the age of 16.

"I know that he [Murray] was offered several different jobs over the years, but felt that this was his place," said Cathy, his daughter. He was the postmaster, as well, a job now managed by his eldest daughter, Mary Barker.

On Sept. 1, 1952, Murray married Eileen Taylor. "The wedding had to be on Labour Day because that was one of the few days the store was closed," notes a history of the store's succession.

Murray carried on the legacy of his dad, bringing the community together and looking out for residents both inside and outside the store, occasionally going to bat for people who needed advocacy on political issues. Gary, who worked as the butcher at Agnew's, ended up joining council himself.

"Dad was such an outgoing and gregarious person. he loved to talk, and knew everybody," said Cathy.

Janette Packard, who lives on Wilbermere Lake, wrote on the store's anniversary post on social media that she remembers the post office in three different places, and a conveyor belt coming up from the basement.

"If you couldn't find it on the shelf, someone would go



The original store, owned by F.G. Agnew since 1921. It burned down in 1938 and was replaced with the building still standing today. /Submitted

upstairs or downstairs and 99 per cent of the time come back with what you needed in hand, or something that would do," she wrote. "There was a big book at the cash with all the accounts or tabs that people mostly paid on payday, but no one went without. Definitely a true general store and heart of the community. If they didn't have what you needed, no one did."

Ross Agnew, Fred and Mae's eldest son, ran a Gooderham store [now the Lucky Dollar] in the early 70s, before selling it and moving back to Wilberforce.

The park shop on Allen Lake in Harcourt Park that Knox rode her bike to for penny candy was open for about four or five years, Mary remembers, and was run by Mary and Cathy's mom, Eileen Agnew, and their aunt Bev, Gary's wife.

"It was promoted to the women as their chance to 'cottage,' while running a store six days a week and caring for six kids in very cramped living quarters attached to the more expansive store footage," said Mary. "The store closed on Thursdays. Wednesday night we came back to town. By Thursday night we were headed back to the park with a station wagon crammed full of grocery boxes and us kids packed in around them. If we hurried to unpack and got all the merchandise priced and on the shelves we got to stay up and watch 'Spine Tingler,' on a snowy TV and go to bed scared out of our minds. It was probably the birth of two more kids that made the women put their foot down and say they had had enough 'vacationing' in Harcourt Park."

Growing up, Cathy said, it was unique to be connected to the store.

"You always had a job, there were always things to do after school," she said. And then, laughing: "I have to admit, as a teenager, I did not work here because you had to work weekends. No, thank you. During summer break, I would find a different job."

In 2018, the store changed hands, from the Agnew family to Frank Meurer, who shares the initials F. G. with Fred Agnew. He had started coming to the area a few years prior to that for an interest in rockhounding. On one of his first visits to the store at that time, he said he walked around, "amazed at everything they had here ... this is a real general store."

"When it was for sale - and three years left before the

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CROSSWORD ANSWERS

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Customers happy beloved general store is still standing

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100 years - and I loved the store myself as a customer, I went OK, is this possible to do?" said Meurer. "I lucked out."

Despite the sale, sisters Mary, Cathy and Wynne are still very much involved at the store.

"When I purchased it, I made sure that the agreement came with it that the Agnews' family had to stay," he laughed. "This is Agnew's store and I need your touch, your feel ... Everybody's been very supportive, the community has accepted me and likes me - just because I haven't changed things."

"When I say hi to the Agnew girls, they still remember me," said Knox, who ended up buying the family cottage in 1994.

"It's interesting to watch the community grow and change," said Cathy.

Despite the years going by in the community - Cathy notes the setbacks of the current pandemic, and also the loss of the lumber industry - she said she is hoping it will continue to grow; she has noticed more and more young people have been moving to the area.



The "new" Agnew's - later the post office would be added to the building. /Submitted photo

As times have changed, so has the store - from what is sold, to the method in which goods are sold, and even how people shop, doing so with more independence now although visiting with other shoppers and a genial closeness to store employees still very much occurs. Meurer said it's common for people to share stories, and to hear "I remember when ..."

"They'll be chatting and I love hearing the laughter," said Meurer. "I can just hear the laughter at the front end, from the customers interacting with the people who work here. That's another thing I love about this place, everybody who works here is really a part of the store,

they're not just an employee of the store. One of the people here told me she loves working here, and to me, that means everything."

A website to allow for online sales is being developed, and clever merchandise posts on the store's Facebook page virtually draw in customers old and new. A future look-back on the store's history will see that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Agnew's thrived at being the general store the community needed when so much else had shut down, working to provide the essential service of mail distribution but also providing a town cornerstone to keep face-to-face greetings

- even behind masks - going in the rural area.

"We need to service this community and that's definitely something we strive to do in the best way possible," said Meurer.

"It's very heartwarming," said Cathy, of the customers who care about the store and share their memories of it with the staff. "People are genuinely happy that it's still operating and there are people who make a point of coming in and spending their dollar here, because they want it to stay here. That's really, really heartwarming."

"Agnew's General Store has been at the heart of downtown Wilberforce for 100 years and hopefully it won't miss a beat over the next 100," said Mary.

Centenary celebrations will be held throughout the year, spreading events out so the community can help mark the milestone occasion year round.

For more information about Agnew's General Store, visit agnews.ca or stay up-to-date with anniversary celebrations via <https://www.facebook.com/agnews.wilberforce>.

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