

# AN UNEXPECTED BANANZA

Having grown up with two families whose fathers' either owned a general store or managed one, I saw that those children had better clothes and food, as well as toys that no other children in the community had. Beginning in my childhood years I decided that I wanted a store. Rather rashly I now know, when I was 25 years old I started a store in one room of our house with all the money I had at the time (\$32.50 (a whole farm wagon load of staples).

It was in October 1934 when Herman Preston (no kin) came to see me. Herman and I had known each other since childhood and liked each other a lot. "Hi, Herman," I said. "It's good to see you." (Although friends, we were competitors at the time. Herman and his wife owned and operated the other store in the community that had been there since back in the previous century. He was also postmaster of the fourth class post office.

Herman greeted me with a friendly "Hi, Mitchell" and with a smile and a handshake.

With little talk, he launched right into his reason for coming to see me. He said, "We would like to sell you our store. There is not enough business in this community for two stores anyway. Daisy and I would like to go to Ironton, Ohio, to work with Daisy's father in his business."

I knew that Herman was right about there not being enough business in that community for the two of us. Really there was not enough business for one family to make a decent living. Ruth was operating our little grocery business that was located in one room of the house in which we lived while I was teaching in the grade school at Williamsport, Kentucky, about three miles away.

I was so surprised by what Herman had said that I didn't know how to respond to his offer. I did ask him, "How much are you asking for the business?"

He answered, "For \$250.00 we will sell you all the merchandise we have, our winter's supply of coal, my gun, and the \$15.00 in well-fare voucher we have. Jeff, (his father-in-law) will rent you the store building, the house and the land with it for \$100.00 a year. I will turn the post office over to you, and you can become postmaster as soon as the postal inspector can come to swear you in."

I was really interested in Herman's offer, but if he had offered to take \$50.00 for his business I couldn't accept it. I didn't have \$50.00 let alone \$250 00. I said to him, "Herman, I need a day or two to think this over and discuss it with Ruth."

"All right, let me know as soon as you can. We want to sell as soon as we can find a buyer."

Now Ruth and I wanted that store. But how could we make such a deal without any money. That evening I mentioned to our landlord, Sam Spears, the offer that Herman had made us. I also told him that we didn't have the money with which to accept the offer..

I knew that Herman was waiting for an answer. I was ready to tell him, "No deal." when Sam Spears walked in and said, Mitchell, if you want that store, I'll go to the bank and withdraw the money and lend it to you so you can buy it.

I was overwhelmed by his offer and said, "Sam, I have nothing to secure the loan."

He said, "That's all right. I trust you and Ruth to do the right thing."

I never was sure why Sam was so generous. He lent me the money to make the deal. We would move out of his house on which he was getting \$3.00 a month rent. Then he would be stuck with an empty building for God only knew how long. I often wondered if it was because the post office at River, Kentucky, had been in the John Ward family as long as anybody could remember. (Jeff Stafford's wife was a Ward.) Some people in the area would like to see a change.

As soon as Sam Spears brought me the money, I went to Herman and said, "We accept your offer, Herman."

Within a week, Herman and Daisy moved out and we moved in. Since we had paid little attention to the assets we were buying and renting, this deal was like buying a pig in a poke. We immediately began examining the merchandise we had bought without taking an inventory. Since I was teaching, Ruth began working as Herman's postal clerk until he was relieved as postmaster.

We had as much salable merchandise in our little one-room store in our house as there were in his cross roads country store. We began examining the contents on the shelves. There were a few cans of baking powders, a few boxes of soda, cornflakes,

oatmeal, coffee, chewing tobacco, and pipe tobacco. Coffee, sugar, and beans were in large bags. Salt came in 300 lb. barrels. There were parts of kegs of nails, horseshoes, and mule shoes. The most interesting things were the many pairs of out-dated shoes on the shelves. There were several pairs of women's shoes from a different era to ours. They were all high top, button shoes with spool heels. All in sizes that fit few of the women's feet in that area. There were shelves of men's overshoes, so old that the rubber was cracked with age. We had one big sale, overshoes at 15 cents a pair and then reduced to 10 cents. What we couldn't sell we gave away or junked.

The building was really old. The ceiling was made of maroon colored metal that was almost black with flyspecks and smoke from the potbelly heater standing in the middle of the floor. It also sagged. The floor was sagged and in places it was worn so thin that one was in danger of breaking through. The coal burning heater stood in a four foot square heavy steel pan that turned up at the edges. This pan contained sand where the customers could spit their tobacco juice. (Some couldn't hit so small a sandbox and spit on the heater. That was a real stench when we had fire.)

The house was a six-room, story and a half one that was 50 to 75 years old. It badly needed some repairs and was quite drafty in the winter. The seven acres of land on which the house, the store and a warehouse (a relic left over from the days when freight came by steamboats and push boats.) was the most fertile overflow creek bottom and river bank land in the area.

Although we were renting the property, I immediately began renovating the store by painting everything and placing a new floor where it was badly worn. To the consternation of the "ambeer spitters" I removed the sandbox and scaled the dried crud off the heater and coated it with stove blacking.

With my income from teaching seven months a year, and the income from the post office and the store we prospered while 90% of the people were barely eking out a living. Two years after we had bought the business we bought the real estate for \$2,800 on a land contract and became owners instead of tenants.

When the postal inspector came to transfer the post office I was at school and Ruth was working in the post office and in the store. When he learned that Ruth was the one who would actually be running the post office, he swore her in as postmaster of the

River, Kentucky, post office. At the age of 23 years she was one of the youngest postmasters in the service.