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Co-Ops and Supermarkets: It was not until the late 1940s when I was in my 20s that I first experienced a self-serve store of any kind. Ten years later, other than a few “corner drug stores,” tiny hardware stores that had everything, and small general stores like those in Yorklyn and Hockessin, it was difficult to find a store where the customer could be waited on. We soon realized that TV swept the country during this same period, but our shopping experiences were altered even more.

It's my belief that food stores led the way toward retail automation. Many of the early supermarkets were “co-ops,” supposedly owned, at least partially, by those who used them in a membership arrangement. My cousin, Bassett Ferguson Jr. (1911-2006), was a pioneer in this field. Originally receiving a B.S. in Engineering from Swarthmore College in 1933, he worked as an engineer (or a chemist) for United Gas Industries in the Philadelphia area and was also a small commercial printer. Always a good cook but not a large eater, his interest turned to the food business and the marketing thereof. By the late 1940s, he had started a co-op in Greenbelt, Maryland, where he lived with his family. Soon, he was managing two or three such co-ops in the D.C. area, and was sought after as an expert in this new field. Becoming a private consultant, he would conduct feasibility studies for various sites in North America. Once he spent a month or more in Winnipeg, Manitoba, first recommending the path forward, and then helping with staffing and start-up details. Eventually moving back to Ridley Park (PA) to be close to his aging mother, he opened a new co-op in his hometown. After running it successfully for about 10 years, he sold it to his favorite employee, a young Japanese American who had learned the business from the ground up.

In Wilmington, the Food Fair, located on Pennsylvania Avenue near Union Street, opened just before World War II, with food rationing greatly affecting the industry. There were a few clerks, but it was mostly self-service. Eventually I think there were two or three Food Fairs in the Wilmington area, and they were quite successful until the big food chains got into the business. It's my impression that Food Fair started as a Co-Op.

In the 1940s, American Stores, headquartered in the Philadelphia area, and the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A & P), a huge nationwide company, were the major chains that had stores in most towns and cities of over 2,000 people in this area. Kennett Square had one of each, both quite successful and giving serious competition to the locally owned Pierce's Meat Market. The American Store became a self-serve Acme Market soon after World War II and moved to a new location on West State Street, while A & P opened a new self-serve store on South Union. By the late 1950s, both had newer and larger operations on the west side of Kennett. The growth of self-service markets dealt a slow but lasting blow to small independent food stores such as Jackson & Hagen in Kennett, Gregg's in Yorklyn, and Gormley's in Hockessin. Lake's Hockessin store, the successor to Gebhart's, specialized in fresh meats and was operated successfully into the 1990s.

Self service was not limited to food stores. As Sears Roebuck, the huge nationwide mail-order house, built hundreds of retail stores in cities of more than 50,000, these became increasingly self-service as they were enlarged. Sears' first Wilmington store was at 7th and Shipley Streets, but in the early 1950s, they opened a newer and much larger store at 43rd and Market. When the Price's Corner Shopping Center was opened in the late 1950s, Sears was one of its core attractions. The company eventually opened retail stores for its hardware lines in Newark and Kennett Square.

No longer do we ask a clerk in a locally owned drug store for an “over-the-counter” remedy. The stores operated by national chains are so large and handle so much more than drugs that the old system would be completely impractical. Kennett used to have two and sometimes three drug stores, all locally owned. Connors' was the most prominent and occupied one corner of State and Union Streets, Freter's (formerly Corson's) was on East State, and Reese's was on South Union near the Kennett High School. All had soda fountains where handmade ice cream sodas were favorites of young people. Druggists had many requests. My father used to get

George Freter to mix brass polish for his cars. It was a creamy-looking liquid with pumice. In return, Freter would receive a nice order for Webster cigars.

The Delaware Hardware Company at 2nd and Shipley Streets in Wilmington was never self-service, but they had everything, and about eight competent clerks. Owned by the Topkis family, nothing quite took its place when it closed in the late 1960s. I liked the many discounts. The hand truck still in use at Auburn Heights was bought from Delaware Hardware about 1948 for \$31.36 cash (it retailed for \$40). Kennett Square had three prominent hardware stores: Charles G. Gawthrop and Son (also lumber and coal), John H. Voorhees, and Kennett Hardware operated by Joseph Kanofsky. The Richards Lumber Company in Hockessin became Hockessin Supply and was then bought by Diamond Ice and Coal Co. Still trading as Hockessin Supply, it was owned by a local developer before closing its doors in the 1990s.

This story does not deal with changes that have occurred in the past 25 years. They are numerous and completely mind-boggling to someone who was born in the early 20th century. At my age, I still have to seek out clerks, and they are always very nice to one as old as me.