

Mrs. Landers Grocery

Dave Godin

Mrs. Landers Grocery store is long gone. Full-service groceries like hers don't exist anymore. They were on the way out even back in 1965 when I was eight and visited her store regularly. Her store stood on the corner of Second and Outagamie in the southwest section of Appleton, Wisconsin, then a city of sixty-five thousand. My friend Greg lived in a house on the same intersection, catty corner from the store. I lived down the block on Second St.

At Mrs. Landers store you'd present your list at the counter, and then she'd disappear into the shelves and reappear magically, with everything. She would even sell us cigarettes, providing we had a note from our parents proving the purchase was for them. Then she'd bag up the purchase in a small paper bag, which were fun to blow up and pop later, and after paying you'd be on your way. I don't know if she extended credit; my mom always paid cash.

Her first name was Lucille and people called her Lu. I heard that she had lost her husband in the second world war and had three sons, whom I never met. She was a trim woman about five foot three inches tall with shoulder length, bob cut black hair, and a warm smile that welcomed children especially. Mrs. Landers always wore a dress in the store, protected by a full-length apron. She knew all of her customers since they were also her neighbors as she lived in an apartment above the store. When a mom had a kitchen emergency, finding she didn't have a can of beans or enough flour for a batch of cookies, one of us kids would be sent to make a quick run, with a shopping list and a few dollars clutched in one hand.

Moms loved the lifeline Mrs. Landers store provided and the convenience of kid powered delivery.

But the kids on the block weren't interested in convenience. We were interested in the penny candy displayed in plain sight behind the counter. And what a wide selection! At any given time, the assortment included candy necklaces, candy cigarettes, Banana splits, cinnamon bears, licorice babies, Red and black licorice twists, satellite wafers, Astro pops, wax bottles filled with flavored syrup, bazooka bubble gum, Jolly ranchers, jawbreakers, smarties, Atomic Fire balls, taffy, mints, candy buttons, caramels, Necco wafers, Pixy Sticks, candy lipstick, wax lips, marshmallow snow cones, and root beer barrels. Every candy a kid could ever want!

But what made Mrs. Landers candy assortment special was the surprise package, which all of us kids loved. I recall one time when I burst through the door of the store with youthful exuberance, dime in my grubby hand, scrounged from the sofa cushion.

"Mrs. Landers, I'd like a surprise package" I said breathlessly, handing her my perhaps purloined dime.

"Turn around and close your eyes" she replied with an amused smile. A moment later, my eyes scrunched shut, I heard the crinkle of a paper bag opening, one of the little bags she kept on the counter. And then rustling sounds as she rummaged in the cardboard candy boxes and a plop as a piece of candy dropped into the bag. I tried to figure out what she was placing in the bag from the direction of the sound, the anticipation dangerously close to killing me, as I heard one treat after another drop in.

After eons had passed, I heard the words I'd been waiting for, "you can open your eyes now". And there it was, in her hand, the little bag now a filled and the top folded over neatly.

My excitement boiling over, a quick "thanks!" and I flew out the door to open the bag and reveal the surprise, not able to wait a second more. Peering into the bag I spied two caramels that I'd savor slowly, a candy necklace which would go around my neck to chew on later, three pixy sticks to be poured directly on my tongue, a root beer barrel, a bazooka bubble gum with the bazooka Joe comic, and two satellite wafers which tasted like communion. Ten pieces for ten cents, and all my favorites! How did she know?

The store is long gone and Mrs. Landers is as well. But I hope she knew that she made a difference in the lives of the kids who lived on Second Street, and that at least one of us remembered her.