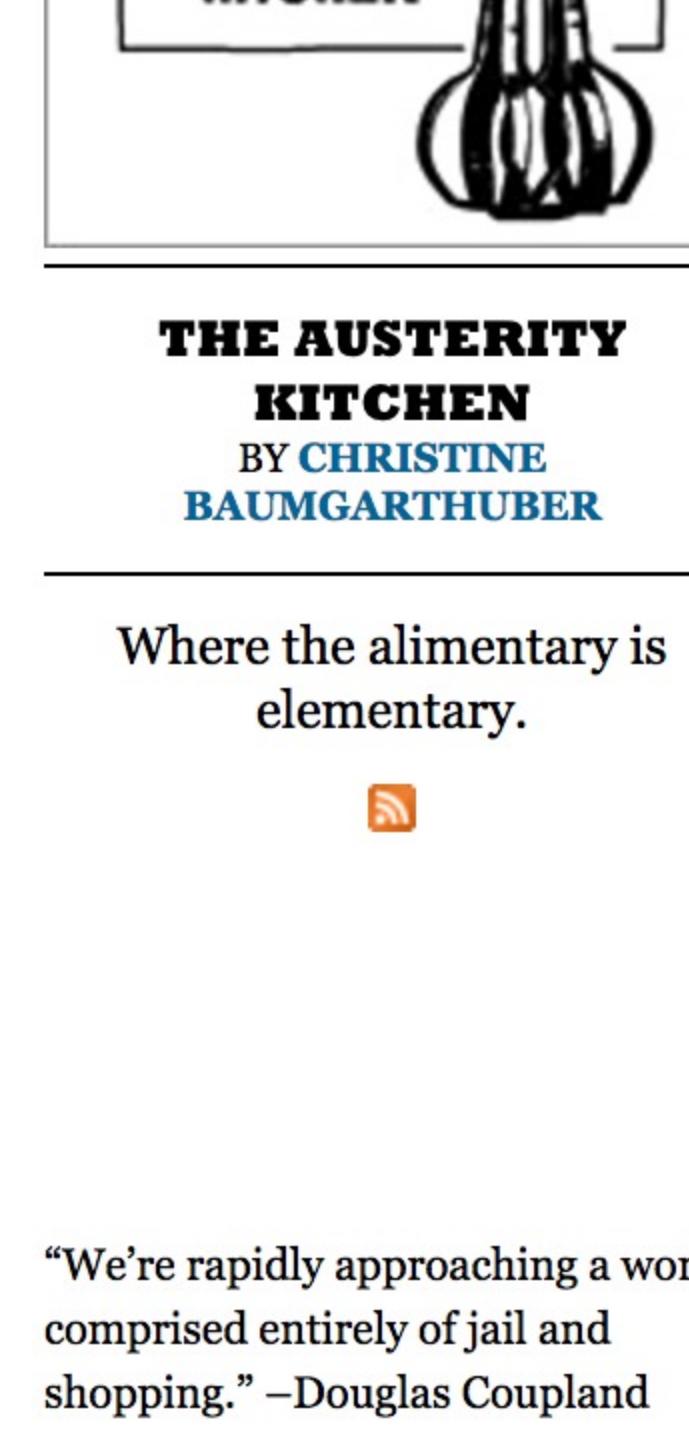




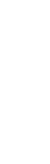
# THE NEW INQUIRY

SUBSCRIBE  
TO TNI

ESSAYS & REVIEWS FEATURES BLOGS &, MEANWHILE NEWS MAGAZINE ARCHIVE SHOP ABOUT



Where the alimentary is  
elementary.

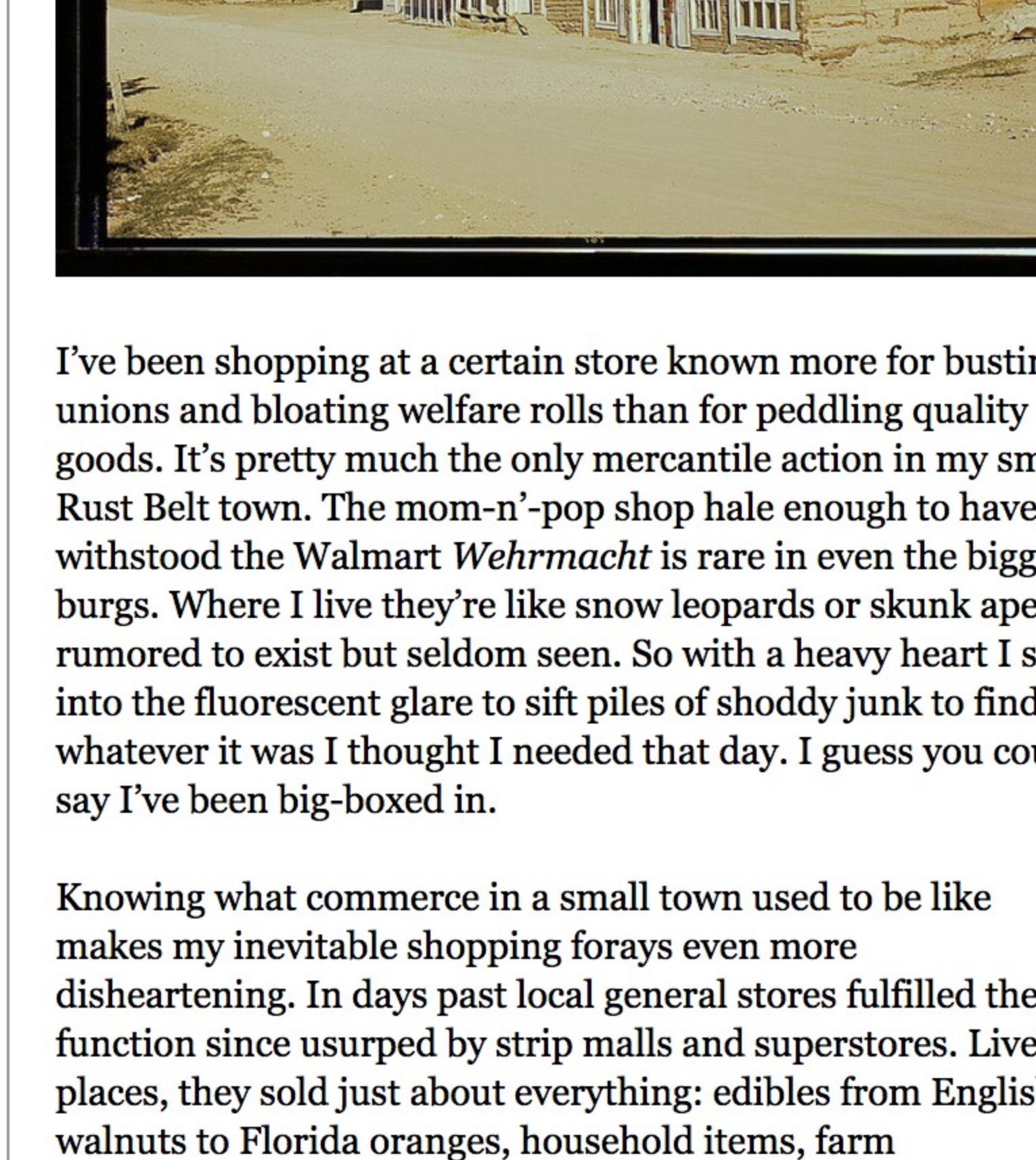


"We're rapidly approaching a world  
comprised entirely of jail and  
shopping." — Douglas Coupland

## The General Store of Yore

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER

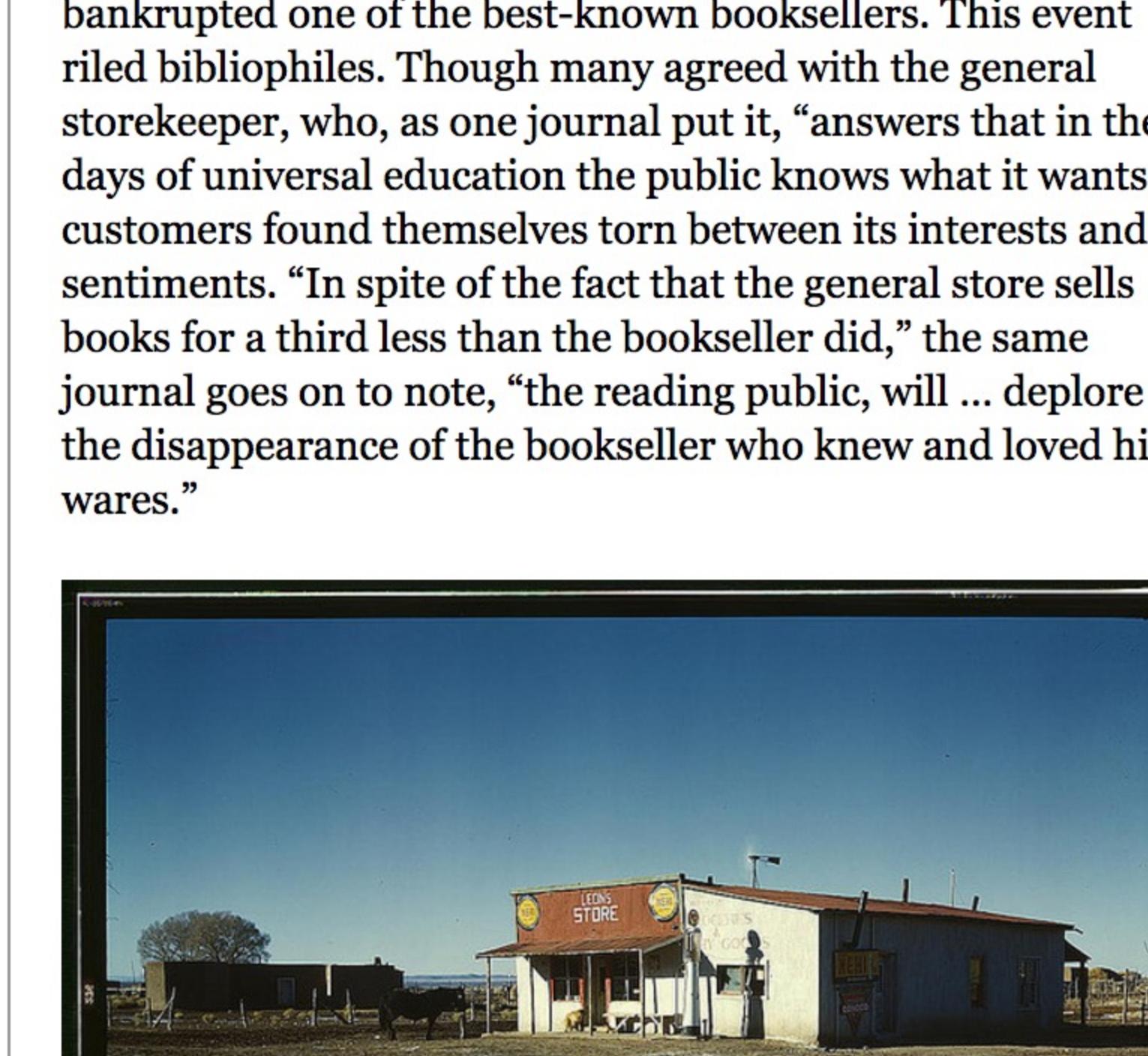
These fixtures of American towns dominated local markets  
but were later liquidated by corporate competitors



I've been shopping at a certain store known more for busting unions and bloating welfare rolls than for peddling quality goods. It's pretty much the only mercantile action in my small Rust Belt town. The mom-n-pop shop hale enough to have withstood the Walmart *Wehrmacht* is rare in even the biggest burbs. Where I live they're like snow leopards or skunk apes: rumored to exist but seldom seen. So with a heavy heart I step into the fluorescent glare to sift piles of shoddy junk to find whatever it was I thought I needed that day. I guess you could say I've been big-boxed in.

Knowing what commerce in a small town used to be like makes my inevitable shopping forays even more disheartening. In days past local general stores fulfilled the function since usurped by strip malls and superstores. Lively places, they sold just about everything: edibles from English walnuts to Florida oranges, household items, farm equipment, clothes, seeds, and so on. Long counters crowded with such goods ran along either side of the interior, with rounded glass showcases set atop them every few feet.

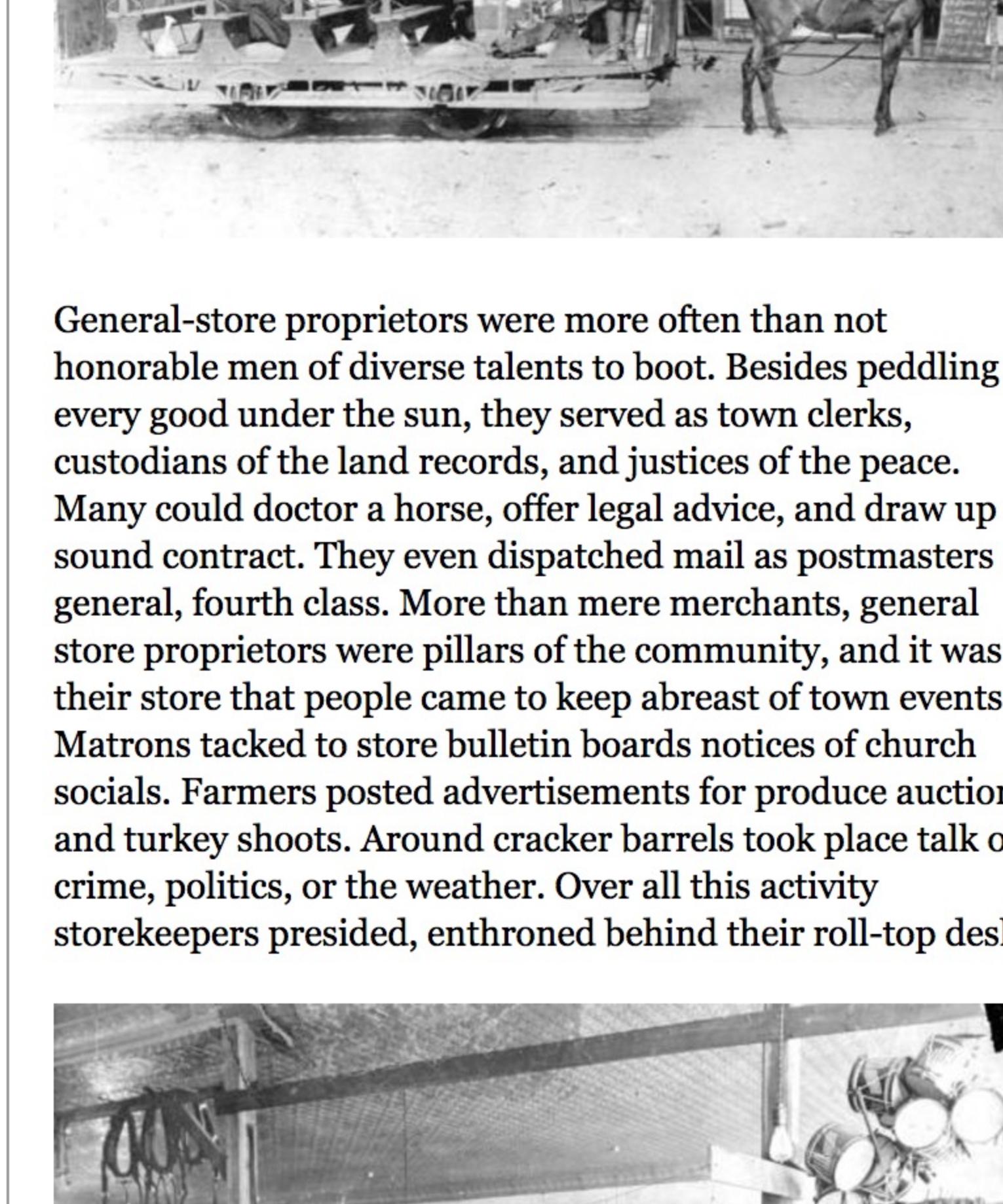
Drawers, bins, and shelves spanned the length of the side walls. They hid linens, spices, soap, hardware, tools, and cutlery. There was more besides. Huge wheels of cheese sat under screen cages. Barreled cukes gently bobbed in brine. Buggy whips dangled from the ceiling, as did corn poppers, lanterns, pails, and kitchen tools. On wooden pegs hung lamp chimneys, horse collars, and bouquets of dried apples. In the store's rear huddled rakes, hayforks, adzes, scythes, and other heavy hardware.



"How dear to my heart! To  
remember the barrel! / Alluring  
to sit there at ease! / My soul is  
inspired to a cracker carol / That  
flows with the breath of the  
odorous cheese. / I want to go back  
to the sleepy old village, / To tread  
once again the dim pathways of  
yore, / The grocer's dried beef case  
and cheese box to pilage / And  
lounge on the barrel that stood in  
the store." —Anonymous, "The Old  
Cracker Barrel" (1906)

This eclectic array of merchandise not only gave general stores a signature appeal. It gave them a signature smell, as well. Social historian Gerald Carson writes that "diorists and old timers agree that it was a well-dug-in odor, with lots of authority, a blend made up of the store's inventory, the customers and the cat." Adding to the aroma were "ripe cheese and sauerkraut, sweet pickles, the smell of bright paint on new toys, kerosene, lard and molasses, old onions and potatoes, poultry feed, gun oil, rubber boots, calico, dried fish, coffee, and 'kept' eggs." (By "kept" eggs" Carson means "eggs that should have been shipped off to the city some time ago but weren't.")

General stores were often as much a feast for the mind as for the senses. Many boasted book departments, and quite large ones at that. Indeed, they were the Amazon of their day. It was reported that one especially ambitious storekeeper bankrupted one of the best-known booksellers. This event riled bibliophiles. Though many agreed with the general storekeeper, who, as one journal put it, "answers that in these days of universal education the public knows what it wants," customers found themselves torn between its interests and its sentiments. "In spite of the fact that the general store sells books for a third less than the bookseller did," the same journal goes on to note, "the reading public, will ... deplore the disappearance of the bookseller who knew and loved his wares."

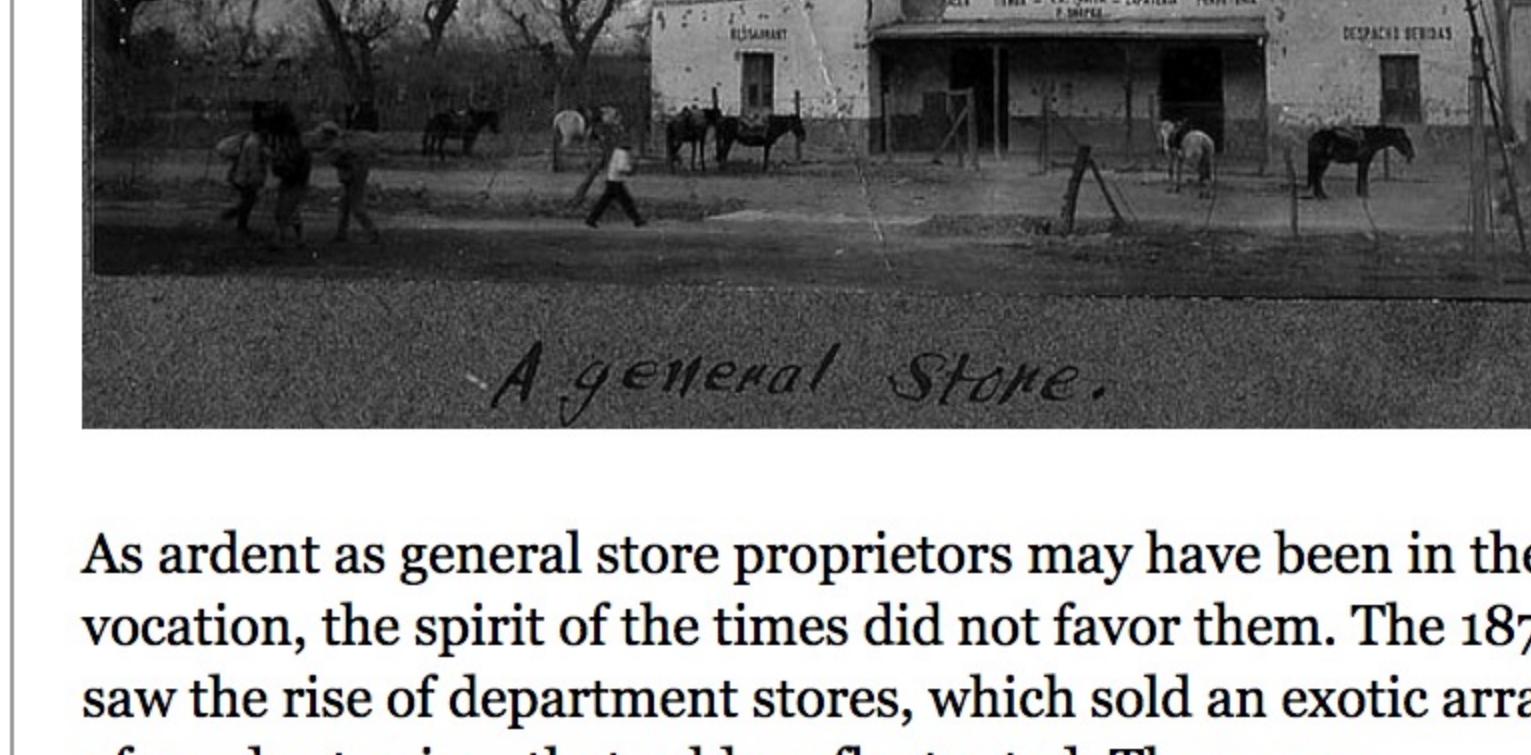


"For the merchant, even honesty is  
a financial speculation." —Charles  
Baudelaire

Deplored the bookseller's disappearance may have been, but the general store was universally celebrated. Whole families came to gawk at goods. Mothers inspected the latest fabrics or patented foods newly arrived from New York or Boston.

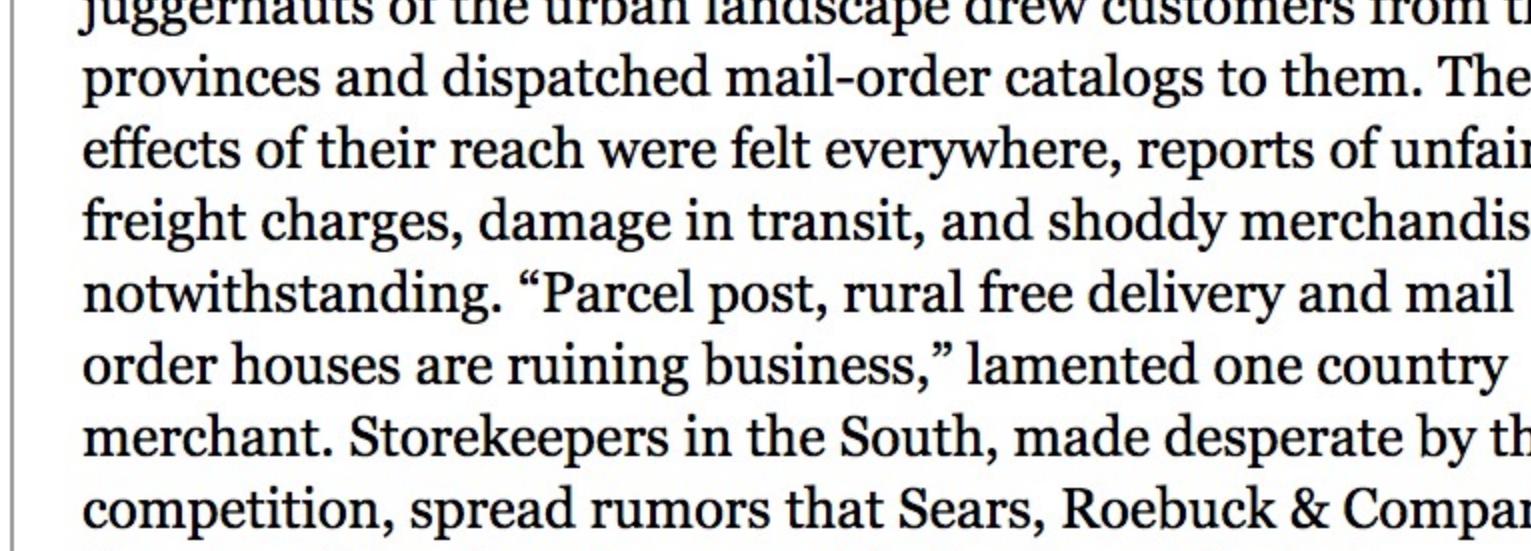
Fathers gossiped, munched crackers, and warmed their toes by the pot-bellied stove. Children ogled peanut roasters, barrels of brined Chesapeake oysters shipped fresh from Baltimore, and the many candies on display. Because customers came knowing what they wanted, shopkeepers felt little need to tout their wares. They were free, then, to attend to keeping a tidy establishment, which they at any rate preferred to hawking. "Advertising don't take the place of dustin'," one successful merchant proclaimed.

Still, some of their brethren disagreed, believing that a little bit of swag goes a long way. In summer, one especially enterprising proprietor would give out small fans bearing his store's name and address. Yet truth in advertising proved as dicey a proposition then as it ever has. "Fresh," as it applied to pork sausages, may have meant scraped of mold and garnished with butter. At one Prospect, New York store rumor had it that two grades of molasses issued from a single barrel. Another store's miraculous barrel managed to house three grades of port wine ranging in price from 25 cents to a dollar a pint. Storeowners could only plead necessity as a defense. "We must live and thrive, you see," said one merchant of his unscrupulous ways.

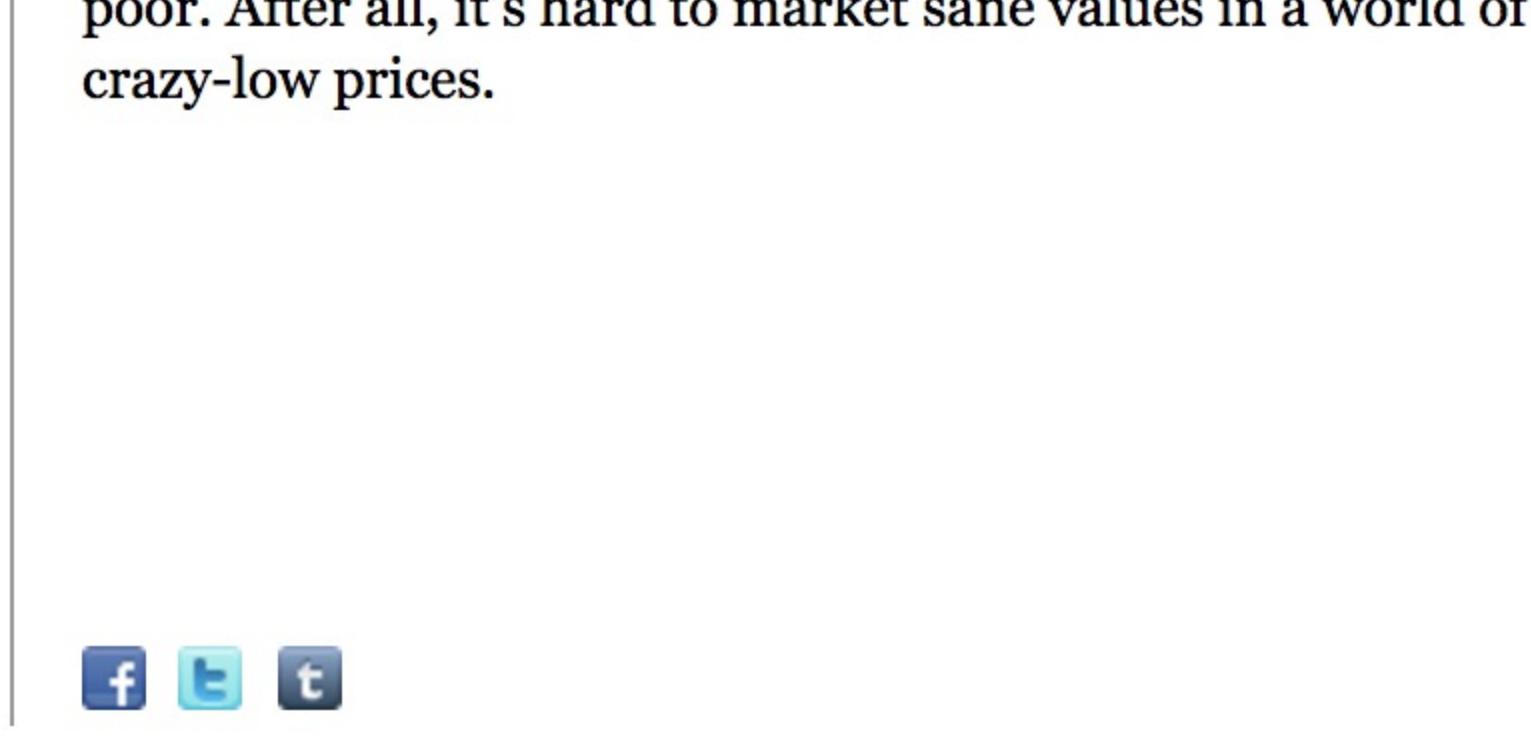


"Corporation: An ingenious device  
for obtaining profit without  
individual responsibility." —  
Ambrose Bierce

General-store proprietors were more often than not honorable men of diverse talents to boot. Besides peddling every good under the sun, they served as town clerks, custodians of the land records, and justices of the peace. Many could doctor a horse, offer legal advice, and draw up a sound contract. They even dispatched mail as postmasters general, fourth class. More than mere merchants, general store proprietors were pillars of the community, and it was to their store that people came to keep abreast of town events. Matrons tacked to store bulletin boards notices of church socials. Farmers posted advertisements for produce auctions and turkey shoots. Around cracker barrels took place talk of church, politics, or the weather. Over all this activity storekeepers presided, enthroned behind their roll-top desks.



Storekeepers had every incentive to see this activity continue. Like it or not, their fortunes were yoked to those of the community. Business ebbed and flowed with the seasons. To ease lean times they extended credit, often for six months or more, and trafficked in kind as well as coin, accepting eggs and milk in payment. Sometimes, however, it was a short stock to kind, rather than sometimes a glut, that brought great devilry unto their books. "Oh, it is a horribly cold business," complained one shopkeeper about his bittersweet neighbor. "We have a great number of stores, thriving, farmers; but now about half of them are ruined; and many of them were ruined at my store. And there is not a store in the country that sells ardent spirit, but what tends to produce similar results."



"Christine Baumgartner and  
Plastic Malls  
Dinner with Caligula  
A Starring Image  
Steaming Excretion

November 12, 2013

Various photographs of country  
stores, 1890-1940

"One evening Sam, now grown to  
man's stature and full of the  
awards and self-consciousness  
of his new growth, was sitting on a  
cracker barrel at the back of  
Wildman's grocery. It was a  
summer evening and a breeze blew  
through the open doors swaying the  
hanging oil lamps that burned and  
sputtered overhead. As usual he  
was listening in silence to the talk  
that went on among the men." —  
Sherwood Anderson, *Wind's  
McPherson's Son* (1916)

"The superior man understands  
what is right; the inferior man  
understands what will sell." —  
Confucius

"From the standpoint of figures the  
country storekeeper is an  
important man. Out of all the retail  
business in the United States nearly  
one establishment in every four is  
classed as a 'general store,' doing  
its trade with farmers or people in  
small towns. There are fully two  
hundred and forty thousand of  
these general stores among the  
million-odd establishments of all  
kinds that form the retail  
distributing in city and country." —  
From "The Country Store and Its  
Trade: A Growing Field for  
Aggressive Merchants" (1911)

ESSAYS

SUPPORT TNI SUBMIT TERMS OF USE CONTACT US

DESIGNED BY IMP KERR BUILT BY KRATE