Biggest Little Store in Northeast Missouri!

Outside it is snowing and men are sitting around a pot-bellied stove talking about the weather, telling stories, and playing cards or checkers. Across the room, their wives are standing around a cookie counter, with sliding glass doors, admiring a new baby and discussing who they thought it resembled. This was a common scene at Morlan’s Store in Greencastle, Missouri, during the 1930s.

Greencastle, located at the intersection of Highway 6 and Route FF, is near two larger towns, Kirksville, 19 miles to the east, and Milan, 14 miles to the west. With a population of 281, Greencastle has the friendliness of a small town, and Morlan’s Store exemplifies much of this friendliness.

Phyllis and Ezra Morlan came to Greencastle from Pollock, Missouri, where he had worked in a general store. Ron Morlan remembers his father telling him about the first shipment of fresh bread being delivered to Pollock about 60 years ago. “The bread was in loaves and placed in an oily paper, not yet individually wrapped. When the women of Pollock saw what was being shipped, they were sure that it would not sell. They didn’t think anyone would want bread that wasn’t homemade.”

After moving to Greencastle in 1928, Ezra Morlan decided to open a store of his own. Due to the lack of space, groceries were the main item sold. In 1932 the store was moved across the street to another building, measuring 50 feet by 50 feet, giving more room for merchandise.

The building was originally a lumber yard, complete with a runway down the center for a team of horses to load and unload the lumber. In order for the building to be transformed into a general store, floors, partitions, and a ceiling had to be installed. A seven-room apartment, where the Morlan family lived for several years, was also added to the back of the building.

After moving to the new building, Mr. Morlan expanded the store’s stock gradually over the years to include clothing, some hardware items, groceries, and even hand-dipped ice cream. Until the last 15 years, Morlan’s Store was the only place in the area where a person could get this luxury. “This was a drawing card and maybe should have been continued as a lost leader,” said Ron Morlan. But the price went up from the original nickel for two dips and was going to cost a quarter per dip so Morlan’s Store quit selling hand-dipped ice cream.

Ron Morlan recalls, “Most foods such as sugar, beans, coffee, candy, and cookies were sent in bulk or 100-pound bags.” The product then had to be weighed into one-pound packages.

Phyllis and Ezra Morlan worked together in the store until her death in 1980.

By Karla Baugher
Ezra Morlan purchased this lumber yard and converted the building into a general store in the early 1930s. A team of horses can be seen, in the center of this picture, bringing in a load of lumber.

by Mr. or Mrs. Morlan or one of their employees, whenever there was a free moment.

Morlan's Store has always been a gathering place for the townpeople of Greencastle. Ron Morlan remembers men sitting around the pot-bellied stove during the winter or on the front porch during the summer. The women would gather around the glass cookie counter and talk.

As times changed, so did the store. Modern heating and cooling systems were installed. The store began with a coal stove, switched to a furnace, and recently changed to solar heat and air-conditioning. The interior of the store changed too. The pot-bellied stove and the cookie counter were taken out, but people continued to gather at the store to shop and visit.

Morlan's Store provided courtesies unique to a general country store. When Mrs. Morlan was working, the store was open from 5:30 in the morning until midnight, seven days a week, including holidays. Ron Morlan told of the store’s "first half-day," in observance of the ending of World War II. The whole nation closed all business and factories for half the day. Someone came to the door and knocked, but Phyllis and Ezra Morlan wouldn't let him in. This person got angry and since then Phyllis and Ezra Morlan never again closed the store early. Another unique courtesy provided by Morlan's Store was delivery of customer's goods to Greencastle residents, nearby farms, and also to Green City.

Mrs. Morlan died from cancer in 1980; Mr. Morlan quit working in the store because of his own poor health. Their only son, Ron, now operates the store. Since he has taken over the store, much has remained the same; however, livestock feed is no longer sold and dry goods have been decreased. The townpeople still gather at Morlan's Store to visit and pass the time of day because the friendliness and hospitality have lasted throughout the years.

Morlan's Store provided everything from soda pop, cigarettes, and dog food to sugar, laundry detergent, and corn. Ezra, Ron, and Phyllis Morlan are pictured in the store during the 1940s.