

Gene's Variety Part Of Vanishing Breed

By BOB RIEL
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For the past 36 years, Eugene Gelinas has made his living in an 11-by-22-foot room. That's the size of Gene's Variety Store, 394 Willow St., which he owns and operates.

And Gelinas, a short, white-haired man of 65, has enjoyed almost every hour of those 36 years.

"You have to enjoy what you do. That's the secret," he says. "If you enjoy your work, it's a pleasure."

Unfortunately, Gelinas' work is fast becoming a thing of the past, as corner stores are a vanishing breed.

When he bought the business in 1946, neighborhood stores were the lifeblood of the community. There were five or six other stores on Willow Street alone.

A neighbor, Alphonse Lanois of 522 Willow St., remembers when there were 11 stores on the street, including a drug store, bakery and several meat markets.

Lanois, who has lived in the area 67 of his 69 years, used to be a clerk in Gene's store. He worked there during the 1930s, when Henry Lessard owned the business.

Lanois earned 50 cents a day and remembers that Lessard would give him one afternoon off a week, along with an extra 50 cents for a movie and some candy.

The world has changed since then, but Gene's Variety remains essentially the same. Gelinas said the store looks exactly as it did when Lessard opened it in 1923, except for the addition of extra shelves.

Youngsters from around the neighborhood still stop by after school or on weekends for a bag of "penny" candy. Under a glass case on the right of the store is a veritable treasure of candy, the likes of which are hard to find nowadays.

Customers can choose from caramel creams, fireballs, fish, Tootsie Rolls, squirrels, flying saucers, lollipops and more. Gene stands behind the counter, patiently filling a small bag with whatever a youngster asks for.

Unlike the supermarkets and large convenience chains that have replaced the corner stores, customers gather very few of their own items at Gene's. Most of the canned goods and boxes in the store are behind the counter. Some of the boxes are high on shelves and can't be reached by hand. In those cases, Gelinas grabs a pole and nudges a box until it tumbles into his hands.

The best part of his job, Gelinas says, is the everyday contact with people. "You're in the lifeline. You're part of the people. They take you into their confidence."

The personal atmosphere of Gene's store is obviously pleasing to neighborhood residents, many of whom stop by just to chat. A customer can purchase a bottle of soda, have Gelinas open it and then hang around and talk while they drink it.

The soda is still kept in a "relic" Frigidaire that was installed during the store's early days. The cooling unit has been replaced, Gelinas says, but the wooden box with two doors and latches has never changed.

There is no cash register or adding machine in Gene's store, either. He still adds up all purchases by hand, using a pencil and the side of a brown paper bag. He says he's been using the same method for so long now that "it's easy for me. It's no big deal to add."

Gelinas also provides services that his customers can't find in many larger stores. Small things, like selling stamps, making change and cashing checks, are important to local residents, he says.

He is surprised that his is the only store left on the street. Before the advent of supermarkets, Willow Street was a bustling place. Residents would go to the market for meat several times a week, he said, and shop at variety stores for canned goods.

Now, the street is a quiet residential neighborhood. Thinking back, there is a faraway look in his eyes as he says, "The years go by so fast. Things have changed."

He still remembers the exact day his store opened. It was Feb. 13, 1946. "A Wednesday," he says, never to forget the first time he worked for himself.

Asked if he has any retirement plans, Gelinas says he is in "semi-retirement" now. He no longer works nights, Sundays or holidays.

He said he enjoys the store because it keeps him active and in touch with the people. "I've always enjoyed it. I just take it from day to day," he says.

"So far, I want to keep active. If I let go ... well, I'd like to go 40 years," he says, alluding to the fact that his 40th anniversary in the business is just four years away.

If and when Gelinas ever does "let go," it will be the city's loss, for Gene's Variety Store is much more than a neighborhood institution. It is also a symbol of a bygone day in America. A day when corner stores seemed much larger, good service was appreciated and shopkeepers were integral parts of the community.



Eugene Gelinas



Gene's Variety Store

This corner store is a landmark in the city and in time, a symbol of a past era.