

Twiddy's Grocery

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It's been slightly more than 20 years since anyone went to 156 Moira St. West in Belleville to buy groceries.

The family-owned corner store, in operation since 1913 and one of the last of its kind in the city, shut its doors for the last time in the mid-80s. Owners Phyllis and Alex Burley — most popularly known as 'Alec' — decided to close their decades-old business establishment.

The store, originally opened by Phyllis's parents Paul and Janet Twiddy in 1913, began offering area customers the most essential grocery items at the time when large grocery chains such as Dominion, Loblaws and A&P were virtually nonexistent.

The Twiddy's was just of the many similar stores in the area, which included Wright's and Mrs. Bargman's on Moira Street alone. In the '40s, however, the large stores began to cast a shadow over smaller establishments and would gradually force many of them, in Belleville and in communities across the country, out of operation. However, the Twiddy's continued to survive. When Phyllis Twiddy married Alex Burley, the couple took over the business operation from her parents in the mid-40s.

One of the Burley's three children, John recalled living in the house above the store with his siblings and helping his parents in the store even as a six-year-old.

"Whenever someone came in to buy candies I would give it out to them. I'd also help sweep the floor, shovel the sidewalk before school and at the end of the day sweep the floor again. But my parents made sure we still had a lot of time to play after all that," he said. In later years, he graduated to delivering grocery on his bike to select neighbourhood residents.

The store was located on the main floor of the house and the family lived upstairs and in the back area. Burley recalled that kids in the neighbourhood used to hang out in their big backyard and played horseshoe and ball games in summer and in the winter months, skated and played hockey on the ice rink that his father had built. He said his father, store was quite popular especially with the kids.

At times he'd say something to me for not cutting it straight," laughed Burley.

Frozen peas were also sold at the store in later years, he added.

"My uncle owned a freezing plant up in Toronto. He'd go up there and work during the pea season and we'd fill boxes with hundreds of pounds of fresh peas. Usually we'd take the orders and when my dad came back to Belleville people would be there to meet him and they'd take their peas home. We never really had to keep them in storage. The peas used to come in five pound boxes."

With much amusement he recalled that his mother used to wrap the ladies, sanitary products in brown paper adding that she probably thought it was not proper to show the products.

The Twiddy's store was located just down from the road where the Marchmont Home once stood on the corner of Yeoman and Moira streets. Burley recalled his father tell him of the kids that he used to see go up to the Home

"He'd tell them stories and on Halloween season kids would come in for candies and he would make them do a song and dance first. Just little things like that you know. I remember one kid went in there for butterscotch candies which were, I think, three or four for a penny and he asked my dad what he had to do for 25 cents worth of candy for nothing. My dad told him to put the whole thing in his mouth, so the kid did and he couldn't open his mouth," laughed Burley.

The store sold most essential grocery items, recalled Burley, including meat, potato and canned goods. Meat was delivered in big chunks to the store once a week in a truck and he recalled his father cutting it up into small pieces when customers come in to buy them. Cheese could be bought in any size as well. It, too, was cut on the spot for the customers.

"I helped him cut both. My dad always knew the cheese that I cut because his would be straight and mine would have an angle on it. He was very good at cutting it that if one wanted a pound of cheese, he

mother Janet Twiddy would talk about an isolation hospital immediately west of the store sometime around the turn of the last century.

The store opened at 7 a.m to accommodate the early customers and closed about 6 p.m. on week days but remained open till 9 p.m. on Fridays.

"Moira Street was quite busy at the time. Northern Telecom (now Nortel) was already there and there was a lot of traffic going up there for 8 o'clock shift or something. Then there were kids going to Prince Charles Public School and Quinte Secondary School. They'd pop in for something or the other so my parents opened the store early," said Burley.

Burley said his brother, Lynn, who had owned the family home all these years, has recently sold the house on 156 Moira St. which for many decades had welcomed the area residents as a much favoured grocery store.

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