

A little bit of everything

By Roslyn Ryan / Editor
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Winston Duke, left, and A.G. Smith Jr. are seen here at work at A.G. Smith Jr. and Company in Goochland in this undated family photo. Beginning in 1926, the general merchandise store offered customers everything from fresh produce to housewares.

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Mention to Goochland resident George Smith just how easy life has become for the modern consumer — how these days you can order up everything you need from your favorite megastore and have it all picked out and loaded into your car when you get there — and he'll probably smile and say that it certainly has.

But don't be surprised if he also gently points out that none of this newfangled, one-stop-shop convenience is particularly new. In fact, he might tell you with a glint in his eye, it's at least a century old.

Smith can say this with certainty because for over six decades he and his family owned A.G. Smith and Company, a popular and well-stocked general merchandise store located by the river on Route 522. Beginning in 1926 when George's father, A.G. Smith Jr. and his business partner opened the business, area residents were able to purchase just about everything they needed under one roof. That included items ranging from fresh produce to meat to small household appliances. There was fabric, cow feed and just about any kind of hardware item a person would need to repair any kind of thing, plus penny candy for the children and a better-than-average selection of men's shoes.

To be clear, the customer experience in the earlier days of the store would likely be unrecognizable to younger shoppers today. Back then most of the items a person needed would have to be requested from a clerk, who would cheerfully and efficiently gather up breakfast cereal, bulk beans, bananas or whatever else was on the customer's list and package it all up. Many customers would request that their purchases be put on their account and would come in once a month and pay their bill in full, Smith remembers, another thing that simply isn't done anymore (so diligent were customers about paying their bills, he says, that when the store finally closed its doors in the late 1990s Smith had to write off less than \$500).

Delivery was available, and lest anyone think that curbside pick-up in a new invention, the proprietors of A.G. Smith — which also eventually included Smith's brother Mason — would politely beg to differ.

To Smith's niece, Donna Dalla Villa, the store offered the family more than just a way to make a living.

"I didn't realize it then," she said, "but it taught me and my sisters so many lessons about why it is good when people are in a community together — rich or poor, black

or white — people helping people. I saw these lessons carried out by my dad Mason, grandfather A.G. uncle George, Charles Binford and store employees, who were like family. What an education it was and such a huge blessing as well." George Smith will be the first to tell you that he is proud of the business his family built, and the service they were able to offer the community. But one thing you won't hear him say is that he spends much time longing for the days when general stores like his were still commonplace, or that he wishes someone would start one up again.

"It's just something that outlived its time," he says, and probably wouldn't work today. Not only were stores like A.G. Smith unable to offer the mindboggling selection and eye-catching sales displays that today's consumers have grown accustomed to, Smith says, but there is also the pace of modern life to consider. Everyone is in such a hurry these days, he points out, that the idea of a place where you can grab your items and even ring yourself up has an obvious appeal.

Still, he will be the first one to say that he will always cherish the relationship he had with his customers, plenty of whom he still calls friends today.

"Do I miss the store? No," he says with a chuckle. "But I really do miss seeing the people."