

Downtown Eagle loses bit of charm as variety, coffee shop closes for good

by Jim Flaherty

Village of Eagle — Eagle Variety & Gift Shop will always be remembered as the kind of store where the rumors poured as hot as the coffee and the gossip was as juicy as the candy.

It never really mattered what the topic of the day was. On weekends the lines often started forming in front of downtown shop before it opened at 6 a.m. They came for a good hot cup, stayed for the camaraderie, and were never shortchanged on either.

After a brief lull during mid-day, the store would fill up again when the elementary schools let out, as children lined up several rows deep at the front counter awaiting their turn to select from the array of candy. Others were at the back counter ordering a shake or soda to enjoy on the way home.

Sadly, that's all history now. Last Sunday marked the end of an era for Eagle, when the shop at 109 E. Main St. closed its doors for the final time. An auction will be held this Saturday, May 13, starting at 10 a.m., and owners Jim and Kathy Chapman said everything in the store will be sold (see ad in this issue for details).

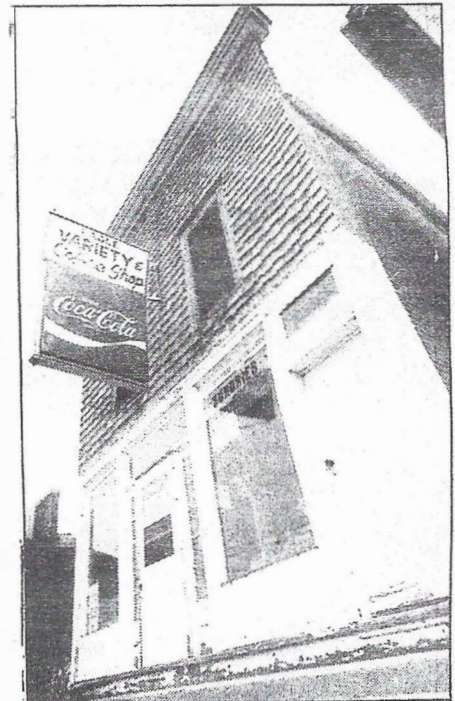
But it wasn't the antique fixtures that made this quaint store so valuable over the years. It was the friendly smiles and exchange of daily thoughts that kept the regulars coming back for more.

For the past 22 years, locals have been able to purchase just about anything from the Chapmans — candy, cigars, clocks, kites, cameras, greeting cards, magazines, newspapers, jewelry, figurines, aspirin, school supplies, and possibly the best coffee and homemade root beer money could buy.

The real news hounds of Eagle gathered in the early morning to discuss everything from the village board to big game hunting to O.J., and there was never a shortage of opinions to go around.

"I guess you could say the rumors started here," Jim Chapman said while moving some boxes behind the counter in the rear of the 100-plus-year-old store. "Of course you don't believe 110 percent of what you hear here. If the fellows here could run the Brewers and the Packers we'd have a World Series in Milwaukee and a

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End of an era — Downtown Eagle will not be the same now that Jim and Kathy Chapman (shown here) have retired and sold the Eagle Variety & Gift Shop, 109 E. Main St. The Chapmans said they will miss the good times and many friends who stopped in for good coffee and conversation over the years. An auction will be held at the shop this Saturday, at which all items in the store will be sold. (Photos by Kevin Harnack)

Locals will miss great coffee, stories at Chapman's shop

Super Bowl in Green Bay every year," he joked.

The Chapmans know they will miss all their friends after the store is converted into a real estate office. And the old timers of Eagle are already wondering where they're going to get their morning dose of caffeine and conversation.

"We will miss the people. We've heard a lot of stories and had a lot of laughs over the years," said Kathy, who wiped a spill on the coffee counter and topped off a patron's cup.

"Hi, Vivian," Kathy shouted across the store during the interview last week. "The coffee smells good. When are you retiring?" was the response.

The Chapmans know just about everyone who comes through the front door, including many of the kids.

"A lot of the kids you get to know by name. Once they go to junior high, though, you never see them in here again. Then the next time you see them on the street they'll be a foot taller," Kathy said.

"Things have changed a lot over the years, though. A couple came through here yesterday that had only come in once before, and I couldn't remember their names. We get a lot of senior citizens in here, but every now and then you see a new face."

The Chapmans purchased the store in 1973 and have been open seven days a week from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. just about every day since. In addition to running the store, the Chapmans also run a 100-acre farm just down the road, which makes for some very long days.

Coupled with their hard work is the lack of rest. Jim and Kathy said they haven't taken a vacation in about 5 years. They even keep the store open on holidays.

"When I come, he goes and when he goes, I come. When you are your own boss you don't feel like you're working as much as when you're working for someone else."

The Chapmans had three other employees when they first opened the store, including Ruth Mealy, now deceased, Helena Nielsen, and Frances Kramer, who retired four years ago at age 80 after working at the store for 18 years.

"We've also had high school girls work here from time to time. Our own daughter Cindy, who graduated from Mukwonago High School in 1973, worked her way through college at Whitewater by working here," Kathy recalled.

The coffee counter always drew the most attention at the shop, whether it was for the soda fountain, coffee, sweet rolls or orange juice that were served fresh daily. On Saturdays and Sundays it would not be odd to see over a dozen people standing in the rear of the store waiting for a stool at the counter.

"Most of the traffic is in the morning. The guys get up and come in here before work or stop in on weekends. In the summer we get a lot of people coming in for ice cream," Jim said.

The old-fashioned soda fountain, which will be sold off at the auction, makes some of the best homemade malts, root beer floats and cherry Cokes around.

"Everything in this store is 'buy as is,' Jim said. "There are no guarantees and no returns — except the malts. I have always said, if you

don't want the malt, I'll drink it myself. But no one ever took me up on it."

The candy business has changed over the years. No longer will you find penny candy behind the counter.

"Years ago, kids would come in here with a nickel and buy penny candy. Now if you have penny candy they come in with a dollar and want 95 of something. The lowest price we have on the jar candy is now three cents," Kathy said.

Jim remembers one time the store was so full of kids that he told them all that another store in town was giving away free candy.

"They found out I was just kidding, but it cleared them all out of the story for awhile," he said.

Memorial Day will have a special meaning for the Chapmans later this month. It will mark the 22nd anniversary of the day they opened their doors for business.

Neither Jim nor Kathy has any regrets about running the store or bad feelings about beginning their retirement. They feel a little badly about breaking up the coffee klatch, but they know they will always be able to cherish the good friends and good stories they all shared at the shop over the years.



Recalling old stories — Kathy Chapman took a cup of coffee over to a customer as she recalled some of the good times she and husband Jim have had over the years while running the Eagle Variety & Gift Shop in downtown Eagle. The Chapmans closed their doors Sunday after 22 years in business. (Photo by Kevin Harnack)