

Dividing Ridge

(Information contributed by John Oester - taken from the book, "The Berlin Area-Published by the Berlin Area Historical Society 1977".)

The following are a few dates, a few facts, and a general outlook as to how life was lived in Allegheny Township around the turn of the century in and around a country store.

Albert W. Miller was born in Allegheny Township on the seventh day of December, 1869, a son of Joseph H. and Loretta (Garman) Miller, Loretta having been born in Germany. Near the end of the nineteenth century, probably either in the year of 1897 or 1898, "Ab," as he was known to his many friends, opened a general store in the hamlet of Dividing Ridge.

Dividing Ridge was located along Route 31, the main traffic route between Somerset and Bedford, at the bottom of White Horse Mountain. There are several stories as to why this hamlet was named Dividing Ridge with the most likely being that the waters south of Dividing Ridge flow into the Potomac River, and the waters north of Dividing Ridge flow into the Susquehanna River. Also, the waters west of the White Horse Mountain flow into the Monongahela and on to the Ohio River.



The original store was located in a building owned by William Hillegas. Shortly after he opened the store, Ab purchased about one half acre of ground from the Hillegas family for the purpose of erecting a building which would serve as his home and a general store. Ab, at this time, was not married. The new building was probably completed during the year of 1900. After he was firmly established in his new home and store, Ab married Missouri E. (Sue) Weighman on June 26, 1901. Their marriage yielded two daughters, Jesie and Mary, and one son, Barron, who died early in life. Ab later added another on half acre to his plot of ground, again a purchase from the Hillegas family. This acreage was to play a prominent role in his life as a merchant.

For many years Dividing Ridge could be found on many of the road maps published by the major oil companies. The reason for this identification being that in the year of 1899 Ab was appointed postmaster of Dividing Ridge, and areas having post offices were listed on routes of travel. Ab held this post until the Rural Free Delivery Service started delivering mail to each family. Ab made provisions for this public service as a room was included in his new building that was used exclusively as the post office.

The store was the center of activity for the immediate area and retained that distinction until it was closed in the early 1960's. This store handled almost any item that a family of that era would need to purchase, from vinegar to sugar, from medicines of that era to gasoline, from spades to plows, and from Long-Johns to lace, and if the store did not have the item in stock, it would most certainly be ordered for the buyer.

Money was not a plentiful item in that era and the barter system was often used. Mrs. Miller would often relate how the room at the rear of the store would often be filled with various items of farm produce and with the products of nature such as buckets of huckleberries, blackberries, walnuts, hickory nuts, and almost anything edible. Mr. Miller would load these items on his horse-drawn wagon and would go over the mountain to Berlin, by the way of MacDonaldton, peddling the items around the mines of MacDonaldton; Ab, with his wagonload of produce, was always a welcome sight, and he would arrive in Berlin with an empty wagon. There the wagon was reloaded with items that had arrived at the freight station along with any other products that he purchased to be resold in his store. Of course, with the coming of the automobile, the wagon was retired. When "Bird," the faithful horse that made so many trips over the mountain, died, she was buried with dignity and ceremony at the "Huckleberry Gate."

Mr. Miller made use of his land and he supplemented his income by raising vegetables to be sold in the store and to be hauled over the mountain. His ideas of planting a garden passed to the next generation. Every potato had to have the eye turned just right, the seed or seeds had to be planted at just the exact depth and correct distance apart regardless of the aches one found in his back. The many varieties of trees bearing cherries, apples, pears, plums, and prunes attested to the fact that these were also items to be found in the store.

Of course there was the "ice room" located in the barn. Mr. Miller would cut blocks of ice on the MacDonaldton Dam during the winter and would haul them home to be stored in sawdust. When the warm weather arrived, they would be uncovered and used in the household, the store, and of course some were sold.

Mr. Miller died when he was sixty years of age, and the store passed to his daughter Mary and her husband, Freeman W. (Tome) Poorbaugh. The store was operated much in the same manner that Mr. Miller had operated it except that the barter system gave way to the increase in currency, for now times had improved.

The store remained the community center. A building known as the Election House was rented to the citizens and twice a year voters gathered at Dividing Ridge to elect their favorite candidate. Politics was an important matter in that area, and the final tabulations were met with great jubilation or much sorrow. On election day it was not uncommon to have a nip from a bottle of homemade spirits which seemed to appear from nowhere, and after warming the recipient, vanished until needed again.

Young people gathered in numbers around the store for a game of ball in the Hillegas Meadow, and of course, many spectators leaned on the fence to watch the progress of the games. In the winter groups enjoyed the sport of sled-riding down the numerous hills around the store. Of course, many of the old games of Hide and Seek, Run-Sheep-Run, Wolf in the Ring, and so on passed away the twilight hours. Sometime in the forties, the upstairs of the barn was converted into a basketball court of sorts and many a hotly contested game was played here, even during the winter when the boys of the neighborhood played with hands so cold and numb that it was difficult to hold onto the ball.

During the heavy snowstorms, when the roads were blocked with tons of snow, the men of the community would walk to the store for the staples that were needed at home to tide the family until the roads were cleared and vehicles could move once again to the store. More often than not, the men would arrive before lunchtime and would first warm themselves and then refresh themselves with hunks of cheese and crackers washed down with bottles of pop. During the afternoon many games of "500" would erupt and would continue until evening when the men would load their groceries into burlap sacks, throw them over their shoulders, and begin the journey home. It is not known if the men engaged in card games during the early years, but we do know that they gathered around the pot-bellied stoves found in the store and many stories were told and much tobacco was chewed. At one period when Mrs. Miller had a choice of adding a convenience to the home, she chose central heating, hoping to eliminate the tobacco juice that would miss the stove and the coal buckets and would consequently add to the cleaning chores. The store played its part well during the war. Many tires that were incapable of holding a breath of air were gathered into the barn along with many, many tin cans that were flattened with a heavy shoe and of course the bushels of elderberries that were to be made into jellies for the men in service. Yes, War Bonds were also sold during that important time. A stranger looking for information of for a certain family was always directed to the store at the bottom of the mountain and there he received the final information that he needed.

Tom Poorbaugh died in the early forties and Mary in 1963. The store was sold in 1964 and today it stands empty with only memories of the olden days filling the shelves and waiting for someone to browse and perhaps carry the best of them away. Perhaps somewhere in the future with the increase in population and the decrease in our natural energies, there will once again be a need for the country store and then another Ab Miller will once again fulfill that need.

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