

JIM & CHARLIE'S MARKET: THE END OF AN ERA

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Published February 27, 2019

The phrase "I sure do miss..." is heard quite a bit around here, especially the past twenty years. Places like Pappa's Pizza, the Electric Bakery, Slinker's, Robertson's Dairy and The Blue Top are sorely missed. But there is one more place that is really missed. That is Jim & Charlie's Market. February 22nd marked the 20th anniversary of Jim & Charlie's closing. I could tell a little bit about it but I thought I would reprint an article that Rayma Davis wrote. It ran on the front page of the February 20, 1999 issue of the Lamar Democrat.

The End of an Era

"Have you got some greener bananas? I'll take them. And I need a bale of potatoes." Despite the fact that Jim and Charlie's Market will officially close Monday, Dorothy Combs Housh (owner and proprietor) was ordering groceries for her customers in order to be stocked and ready for any need until she locks the door for the last time.

When the lights go out shortly after 10 p.m. on February 21, an era ends in Lamar. Jim and Charlie's began really more as a fresh watermelon and vegetable stand, not a neighborhood grocery. Approximately 34 years ago Jim Combs, with the help of his son Charlie, brought watermelon and vegetables to their home at 1005 Jefferson and promptly they became the area suppliers for really fresh produce. Jim had driven a truck for years, but health forced him to give up the road and begin a new venture. He later told his wife Dorothy he wished he had made the change sooner.

So how did the vegetable and fruit stand become a grocery? People just began to ask, "Don't you have this or that?" The Combs would get this or that, and before long they had a well-stocked grocery. They added the grocery building to their home, and over the years added to it.

Jim ran the store with the afterschool help of Charlie. At the time Dorothy worked at Barton County Memorial Hospital. When Jim's health worsened, Dorothy gave up her job at the hospital and came home to help with the market. When Jim died in 1979, and because Charlie was by then out on his own, the store became Dorothy's responsibility, and she has run it ever since, even though some said she couldn't do it.

The store has been open every day, and that includes holidays, from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. for 32 years. Anyone who lives in Lamar will miss the convenience of the market. One customer who heard of the closing came into the market to ask if the rumor were true. Dorothy assured her it was no rumor.

The customers response was "What will I do on Thanksgiving?" I always come out here at least three times that day to get something I have forgotten.

This writer always went to Jim & Charlie's on the Fourth of July. We always ran out of Coke or forgot the ice cream or needed paper plates for the picnic.

Jim & Charlie's also had really good prices. By keeping two suppliers at all times for the grocery items, they were able to keep prices in control. Many kept their cola supply stocked with RC products the market always carried. They always carried Harold Ensley's Fish Fry from War Eagle Mills, and people

came from all over to buy several bags of that at a time. For anyone who wonders who Ensley is, remember "The Sportsman's Friend?"

It wasn't just food people went for either. The old fellows from Phoebe's always went for tobacco and pipes. In fact, a rack of pipes remains from those days. Many people got their Halloween pumpkins from the bin in front of the market. Nobody ever had a better selection. Others remember always buying seed potatoes and onion sets to plant. Others remember getting flowers for spring planting. Children, even little ones now, always got candy there. After all, it is placed at their eye level.

From the beginning people went to the market for the friendly personal service and attention. In 1972 Jim was saluted by then Barton County State Bank as merchant of the week in the Democrat. That salute still hangs by the door at the market and certainly will soon hang in the Housh's home. Jim is kind of famous for his watermelon and keeps a cooler full of them during the summer months. He guarantees customer satisfaction. Then Dorothy was merchant of the week in 1985.

That service is part of what makes it hard to see the market close. As Dorothy says, she is ready to retire, and her kids have been after her to stop working and do some things she wants to do. One of the things is dancing.

She jokingly told a regular customer that as soon as the sale of the equipment and remaining groceries is over on the 27th, she would just have to open a dance hall in the building. When you drive by, be sure to check. If the lights are on and the music is playing, the dance will have begun.