

In the old days, the grocery stores came to you

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In this day of rural shopping centers, we find it hard to picture the shopping habits of old-time country people.

Before World War I, in fact, most farm families went to market only three or four times a year. Yet their families did not produce everything they needed and they had no refrigerators to preserve perishable foods. How did they manage to get necessary goods? The dealers came to their doors.

Within the memory span of hundreds of older mid-county residents, Aptos and Soquel grocers made a weekly call on every farm home within their townships, order book in hand.

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Usually, calls were made on Thursdays, deliveries on Friday. Even the cave and shack dwellers on the cliffs along the beach received this service. Goods were delivered in spring wagons, with only a tarpaulin stretched over the bed in wet or very dusty weather.

The Merrill Butcher Shop of Soquel gave twice-a-week service with a covered wagon that resembled a small Conestoga wagon. Hooks on wooden boards inside the canvas covering bore quartered beef, lamb, and pork and the necessary saws, cleavers and knives. Trays on the floor were filled with ground meat, sausage, liver brains and kidneys. Farm families knew the butcher was coming for some time before his arrival, for as he drove along he rang a big handbell constantly.

When he stopped, he turned down the thick end-gate that served as his chopping block and prepared to cut the meat to suit his customer. A big scale could be swung out the rear of the wagon on an iron brace to weigh the meat sold or to weigh the butchered animal that the farmer traded in to pay his bill. Only such specialties as turkey, duck, and rabbit had to be ordered ahead of time.

On Thursdays a raucous blast on a long tin horn summoned the lady of the farm to the fish wagon. Aptos and vicinity were served for years by an aged Portuguese man who always sat bent forward on the open seat of his spring wagon, the body of which was covered with white canvas tacked to low, arching supports. The fish man always wore a black rain hat and a wide cap of oilskin. His wares were fish caught locally—perch, smelt,

cod, and occasionally salmon, flounder and bass. Clams were available at times.

The gaily-painted wagons of the Raleigh Company and the Watkins Company came fully stocked with spices and flavorings, household cleansers and polishes, and a full line of patent medicines of good quality. Fuller Brush and Real Silk salesmen came with brushes and socks for immediate sale.

Photographers called with cameras and lights at the ready, but took two weeks to deliver the finished product. They were most active just before school let out in June and again around Christmas. Men who identified themselves as doctors showed up frequently with ointments, cold remedies, and other simple medicines of their own manufacture. The most successful of these was a Dr. Wolfe, who established a "laboratory" in Santa Cruz to produce cold remedies that smelled stongly of eucalyptus.

Gypsies came individually as knife and tool sharpeners, pot menders, and general handymen and sometimes settled in the neighborhood for weeks to make and sell furniture woven of willow or roughed out of redwood, a whole "tribe" working together.

Milk was delivered in the villages, but the farmers in remote areas either went without it, produced it themselves, or depended on the heavy, sweet condensed milk of the day. Village delivery was handled by small boys pulling toy wagons or pushing wheelbarrows. Until about 1900, the milk was brought in metal pails and ladled into pitchers brought out by the housewife. Later, heavy metal cans in quart and gallon sizes, with tight-fitting slide-in tops were filled at the dairy.

Glass bottles with cardboard tops came in about 1912, but new state regulations that required concrete floors, washable cow stables, and strict sterilization of equipment imposed too heavy an investment for small dairymen, who gradually went out of business.

Farmers and their families, who had no telephones and no automobiles, had to plan carefully in spite of these services that came to their doors. Pantries and "spring houses" had to be much bigger than modern storage areas when people bought flour by the barrel, sugar by the hundred pounds, and other supplies in proportion; for if any commodity ran out, there was no quick way to remedy the situation.



This is a shot (remarkably clear) of the Day home (in Day Valley) taken almost 100 years ago. Note delivery wagon in lower left corner. It's that of a door-to-door photographer.