

Wyche, Ray: A Rainy Day Hangout ^[1]

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Ray Wyche: a rainy day hangout

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 10/10/2004. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

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In Hallsboro, in Columbus County, Ray Wyche gave me a tour of one of the state's oldest country stores, Pierce & Company. A retired postmaster and journalist, Wyche worked at the store as a boy, when his father ran it. He remembers when stores like Pierce & Company were cornerstones of the Southern agricultural economy. They furnished farmers with fertilizer, seed and groceries on credit for most of the year, then the farmers paid the stores back when they sold their crops in the fall.

Though under new ownership this last decade, the store has not changed in many ways. On a recent Saturday afternoon, Pierce & Company was crowded with customers buying everything from roofing nails to homemade country sausage. Up front, a group of men sitting in rocking chairs passed the time of day, the way people have been doing for more than a century.



Ray Wyche. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission for the photo to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

Pierce & Company started in 1898. There was a national farmer's organization called the Farmers Alliance, mainly a cooperative for buying fertilizer and selling produce. The Mount Hebron chapter organized here in 1893, at a place now called Hebron. When the Farmers Alliance played out, the people came to my grandfather and said, why don't you start a store? He said, I'd love to, but I don't have any money. Two men named Pierce and a man named Thompson said, we'll furnish some money. The first account book I have shows that they did an inventory in June of 1899 and the net value of the company was \$246.74. You can see where they entered every item that people bought because it was all credit. It would say, 1 lb. sugar, 1 lb. coffee, you could just about live, we said, out of Pierce & Company. We had an icebox with several kinds of soft drinks for a nickel. We had nickel Nabs and penny cakes. We had no refrigeration, so the meat was limited to what we call fatback -- sausage. We sold hoop cheese. We had coffee and tea in a box or can. We had a candy counter. We sold cigarettes, cigars --the most expensive, Tampa Nuggets, were a nickel -- and we sold a lot of chewing tobacco and snuff. We sold a lot of sugar. These farmers would come in with a list of groceries, and every one of them began with flour. Most women made biscuits every day. I heard an old woman say once, "You can't say you're a real mother until you can hold a baby in one arm and a biscuit in the other." Women did a lot of baking back then. We sold a lot of powdered sugar, baking soda, baking powder. We also sold an awful lot of sickeningly sweet, cheap Merita National Bread Company cakes, just sugar and lard. As far as healthy food goes, we sold an awful lot of patent medicines, most of it based on alcohol, and it would make you feel good. We sold paregoric, which you can't buy now without a prescription. Paregoric is an opium derivative and very, very addictive and a right prescription. Feedbags used to come with dress prints on them. Lord, those women would want to look at every bag of chicken feed you had. I'd have to throw around 100-pound bags so she could see exactly what that print looked like. But it was good credit. Saturday was the big day at Pierce & Company, and it was mostly men who did the shopping. We sold an awful lot of plow points and plows, plow bolts, and we sold things like shovels, rakes and hoes. Sold an awful lot of hoes because nobody had any. The two main insecticides we sold were Paris Green and arsenate of lead, both of which are outlawed for being too dangerous. Farmers would pour it in a bucket with water and take their hand and stir it up. How they all didn't die before they got home. We sold a lot of fertilizer, a lot of roofing tin, a lot of tarpaper and, of course, an awful lot of nails.

And clothes -- I can't begin to tell you the clothes. You could buy everything you needed. Sold an awful lot of overalls, because the sawmill workers all wore overalls, and blue chambray shirts. That was the only thing you wore if you were a woman. When the mill closed for lunch, all those mill hands would come running into the store. They'd get a can of Vienna sausage or a piece of cheese and a drink and sit around on the old warehouse floor out there and eat it. Some of them would tuck into it. In the early days, Pierce & Company would also buy and re-sell a few things -- eggs, crossties, shingles. See, summer, the farmer was busy making his crop. But in the winter, he would head to the woods with his ax and a cross-cut saw and make his own. Pierce & Company was a meeting place, too, and there was a lot of joking and politicking going on. Really, we didn't encourage people to come in there and loaf and talk, but they did it. If it was too rainy to work on the farm, the farmers would

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