

McDonald, John: This Old Drugstore ^[1]

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John McDonald: This Old Drugstore

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/9/1999. Copyrighted.
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McDonald's Drugstore has been on Ninth Street in Durham for more than 80 years. When I interviewed John McDonald, I asked him how things had changed over all that time. I guess I expected him to lay into the chain stores that have taken over the pharmacy business or to feel uneasy about the new tattoo and body-piercing parlor next door. Instead, he looked around the old pharmacy, with its antique soda fountain and soothing blue bottles of Hunter's Sarsipirilla and Cow Balm, and he said, matter of factly: "See that south wall? When I was little, there used to be a booth there."

Not much has changed at McDonald's Drugstore. Six days a week, John and Frances McDonald still greet children with warm smiles and the best milkshakes and vanilla Cokes in town. The dress shop owner next door knows to go behind the counter and help herself, and the walls are adorned with hundreds of school photos, mementos from customers whose families have been coming to McDonald's for generations.

Their drugstore might not carry every gewgaw that you can buy at a shopping mall or chain store. But as I watched a crowd of gleeful children sipping orangeades while an older woman chatted with Mrs. McDonald about her granddaughter's piano recital, I got the feeling that maybe their customers were coming there for things that money can't buy.

In John McDonald's words:



John McDonald. Photo by Chris Seward, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I was brought up in the drugstore. My father opened in 1914 on Main Street. He moved to Ninth Street in 1916 in a two-story wooden building. He moved in this location in 1922. I went to school at E.K. Powe, two blocks down the street here. West Durham was a little community by itself, basically involved with Erwin Mills, which made sheets and pillow cases. The small stores up and down Ninth Street provided for the needs mostly of the people that worked in Erwin Mills. You had most of the recreation was provided by Erwin Auditorium, which was owned by the mill. They had an indoor swimming pool, a bowling alley, a soda shop, a library, a tennis court. This whole field up here where Wellspring Grocery is now was things were so quiet, people left their front doors open. They didn't lock up anything. When I was delivering, a lot of times I'd go bang at the front door, maybe seven or eight o'clock at night. Wasn't anybody coming to answer, I'd just open the door. During the Great Depression, things were not going well financially for anyone. Families were a little larger in those days, and not enough income. Quite often, people would come down to the drugstore and say, "Doc, I've got some sick child. They were hard times. It was very difficult, because he was having to pay his suppliers. For a long time, I kept some checks on the Bank of West Durham, which was two doors down from us and went under during the Depression. Checks were when I got out of high school in 1938, I got a job at Erwin Mills and was living home and saving my money. I made the sum total of \$11.88 a week. Strangely enough, even weavers and loom fixers-adults-were making \$14 to \$15 a week. The back in those days, doctors made house calls. They'd go see patients at Watts Hospital, which is about 4 blocks up from here. At night, after they finished their hospital rounds, they'd come out around the community. If someone had a sick child. Fifty years ago, when I first got my pharmacy license, I knew most of the people in the community and their families. You saw people in all stages of life. You saw the happy side of life - the babies, the new births - and you saw the sad part, where the children stayed pretty much in the neighborhood. Many would follow the family into the mill. When a lot of them got married, they just moved three or four blocks away. If you had given good service to the parents, then you inherited another. Now most of the people we wait on are strangers, because this area is more transient now. We have a few regular customers, but not nearly as many as we used to have. Like the old pharmacists, they're kind of disappearing. Years ago, people would come in the drugstore for little minor things. For years, we had a butcher shop down the street. If the guy had a little nick or cut, he'd come up to the store and say, "Hey doc, bandage this for me." We did a lot of that. There was also right much of the home remedy-type things, those that were passed along from the grandmother to the mother to the daughter. We still have a few of the old products. This morning a lady came in looking for a product called F. They'd also come for the soda fountain. People used to meet at the soda fountain in the mornings. They'd come down and have a Coca-Cola and pass the time of day. Once there must have been 25 or so of these little neighborhood stores in Durham. They're all gone now. But I still enjoy the street and the people. And Frances loves the children. She loves the older folks too. Have you noticed all the pictures? We are going to keep the store pretty much as it is, because we're enjoying it. The street has changed, the neighborhood has changed. Everything pretty much has changed, except for this old drugstore.

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ^[3]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[4] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional Resources:

[Audio Recording](#) ^[5]: Interview with John McDonald by David S. Cecelski, 17 February 1999, K-0260, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/13222> ^[6]

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