

OLD COWTOWN MUSEUM BUSINESS DISTRICT GENERAL STORE

The General Store represents a business which provided a large diversity of goods and services in Wichita during the early 1870s.

1. The General Store is representative of businesses during the period which catered to supplying the general needs of its clientele rather than a specific, specialized retail trade.
2. The general store in Wichita served both the resident and transient population with manufactured goods and groceries. Food-stuffs, hardware, tobacco and whiskey, table ware, clothing, and any type of product in demand were all available at the general store.
3. The arrival of rail road service in Wichita during 1872, enabled general stores to distribute all the goods available elsewhere in the United States. The rail road also facilitated the growth of specific retail business and the decline of the central and important role the general store had in early Wichita.

The General Store, located in the Business District of Old Cowtown Museum, represents a business which provided basic goods and services in Wichita during the early 1870s. The General Store is representative of businesses which supplied a wide variety of products to its clientele rather than a specific, specialized, retail trade. The general store in Wichita served to supply the resident community with a wide variety of manufactured goods and groceries. It also provided travelers with provisions and replenished the cattlemen's supplies during their stay in Wichita. In 1868, Doc Lewellen opened a grocery and general merchandising store. He had formerly

operated a trading post on Chisholm Creek. Lewellen's ledgers indicate that he sold a great variety of goods: canned food, flour, potatoes, sugar, coffee, tobacco, candy and whiskey. He also sold lumber, hardware, building materials, and dry goods including sewing supplies as well as manufactured men's clothing. Shirts, pants, collars, handkerchiefs, jackets, drawers, suspenders, rubber boots (called "gum shoes"), shirt studs, overcoats, suits, vests, neckties, shoes and boots for men, and all kinds of cloth, thread, hose, whale-bones, pins, mosquito net, silk handkerchiefs, buttons, dress trininlings, ribbons, braid, elastic hair pins, corsets, and garters for women. The women made

their own dresses or had them made by one of the seamstresses in town. Lewellen seemed to have a rather lenient policy toward "trying out" merchandise since his customers would regularly take two or three pairs of shoes home to try out and after a week bring back all but one pair and receive a refund. Stiff shirt collars were purchased by the box. Many residents purchased a box of collars to use until they were dirty and then threw them away, thus keeping themselves in clean collars. Men's suits were also available cost between sixteen and twenty-seven dollars. Men's hats and boots were among Lewellen's biggest sellers. Dishes from England were a basic necessity for any social gathering among the "self-respecting" ladies. There was a vigorous competition between stores in Wichita to fill this desire for fine table furnishings. Women often purchased Queensware, China, stoneware, willow ware, wooden ware, and white granite ware to use in their homes.

In the general store could be found everything needed and available to life as it was lived in 1870s Wichita. Rea Woodman said of her father, W.C. Woodman, that he sold everything from shot to coffins. Vegetable seeds, chairs, several kinds of soap, pipes, pills and tonics, notepaper and pens, garden tools, candles and lamps were among the variety of goods available. In the

grocery line, advertisements from the period indicate that three types of coffee plus tea were "on hand", and California canned goods were often mentioned. Coffee was dispensed by the pound from large tins or wooden boxes, advertising their contents with bright orange backgrounds. The coffee beans were scooped into a coffee grinder, if the customer wanted to pay a little more for the added convenience. In the 1870s, Lewellen sold coffee three pounds for one dollar, or ground at thirty-five cents a pound. More extravagant coffees in tins were sold for forty cents a pound. Tea was dispensed from a tea box with glass sides. Spices were sold from smaller tin boxes such as the green canister on the shelf. Occasionally these spices were also ground for the customer.

A general store during the period was an "everything" kind of store. Before Wichita received rail road service in 1872, general stores were the primary outlet for any and all types of groceries and dry-goods. After the rail road came to Wichita, general stores could distribute all the goods available elsewhere in the United States. Eventually, the rail road also would facilitate the growth of specific retail businesses and the decline of the central and important role the general store had in early Wichita.

General Stores - Town and Country

General stores were significant in both rural and urban communities. In rural areas, a general store provided customers with all of their basic needs. In towns such as Wichita, they provided basic grocery and household items and services during the years before improved transportation allowed merchants to specialize their inventories.

The General Store exhibit represents a store in Wichita from about 1868 - 1873, when retailers carried moderate amounts of many different items. *The Wichita Tribune* described the problems one merchant had shipping his goods from the nearest railhead: *Mr. J.E. Price has just returned from the East, where he has been purchasing a large stock of goods for the Spring and Summer trade. His store is well filled and he is selling very cheap. The great trouble is to get his goods from the Railroad as fast as they are taken from his store.* *The Wichita Tribune, March 29, 1870*

From the General to the Specific

Urban general stores changed as towns grew and as economies became more diverse. In growing towns with multiple stores, it became necessary for competing store owners to emphasize an area of specialty in order to remain competitive.

Doc Lewellen, one of Wichita's earliest merchants, adapted his crude trading post from its early beginnings to a more permanent and substantial general merchandise store in 1868.

When Wichita received railroad service in 1872, it became easier for retailers to obtain the same goods carried by their counterparts in larger eastern cities. Stores which had carried a little of everything in the early 1870s were announcing specialties by the mid 1870s.

The *Wichita Tribune* advertised that J.R. Decky carried *A...a moderate supply of groceries. He also keeps a news depot.* By the end of the decade, most stores which had carried general supplies identified themselves as either grocery or dry goods stores.

Community Ties

In rural areas, stores served as community centers where patrons could visit, exchange information, conduct business, or lounge around the stove. Rural store owners often held leadership positions and occupied a visible place within the community. In urban areas a general store was not needed as a central meeting place. However, urban merchants still maintained strong community ties. Wichita merchants provided classroom spaces before a permanent school was built. Others

donated goods and services to the poor and to charitable organizations.

The Star Bakery will distribute one hundred loaves of bread Christmas day, to the poor of Wichita, free of charge. Mr. Nugent was always mindful of the poor. Though not a wealthy

man himself, his hand is never closed to those worse off than himself. We wish his generosity could be imitated by many others far more able than himself... The Wichita Weekly Beacon, December 16, 1873