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Keeping the Circle Unbroken: Food Access in Glasco

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Keeping the Circle Unbroken: Food Access in Glasco
by Joan Nothern, June 7, 2012

Glasco, Kansas is now a town of 500. At the turn of the century and through the mid 1900's, the merchantile and grocery stores, meat markets and creamery, were instrumental in moving locally produced meat, eggs, milk, and produce to local counters for local consumption. Shopping followed the daily routine of patronizing these stores. It was a local economy that worked.

What exists in Glasco today mirrors this same dispersed delivery system, making it possible for an older population, even with no local grocery store, to survive and thrive.

Perhaps this is an accident, or a series of accidents. The local food sources today are a locker plant—that slaughters and processes meat, a historic soda fountain, and a former Merchantile-Grocery Store. All are located in the downtown block that is on the National Register of Downtown Historic Districts. They have retained their historic identity as contributing commercial properties.

More important, they offer needed services today. The Glasco Locker Plant has 2nd generation owners, Kelly and Laurie Cool, who have purchased the business and increased its sales and services. In addition to Kelly, Glasco Locker Plant has four full-time employees, and one part-time secretary.

The soda fountain was a popular feature of the Struble Drug Store, which was built in 1933. It operated as a drug store with two generations of Struble ownership until 1988. S & S Drugs from Beloit purchased it then, but found they could not afford to staff it with a full-time pharmacist. It could no longer be a 'drug store'—a keen loss to all who relied on it for their prescriptions—and S & S Drugs offered the building for sale. There was a real danger the historic back-bar and soda fountain would leave town, and with them, the traditions that go with ice cream and sodas.

Judy Wells remembered working there in the early '80's. Now a nurse, working full time, she managed to arrange purchase of the former drug store. She named it Hodge Podge, and built a business of soda fountain and gifts. She always worked full-time as a nurse to underwrite her commitment herself.

The two-story limestone building, Studt's Merchantile and Grocery Store was built in 1902 and operated continuously as a grocery and dry goods store until 1999. At that time, the

couple who had run the business for a decade abandoned the grocery business and sold it, lock, stock, and barrel, at auction. Bidding for the building were buyers from Kansas City. They were anxious to acquire it for the stone—to use in construction in Kansas City. Also bidding, the just created Glasco Community Foundation. It was established to preserve the physical and social assets of the community. This was the Glasco Community Foundation's first test. It purchased the building and grocery furnishings, then made improvements in heating and cooling, to increase energy efficiency and the possibility for profit. Two promising efforts were made to operate a grocery store in the refurbished building. Individuals leased the space and worked gallantly to develop a profitable business. The Glasco Community Foundation board of directors learned about minimum orders and volume of trade, and watched these two efforts fail.

History placed three players on the food-supply scene in Glasco: a locker plant, a soda fountain, and a community foundation Corner Store.

When the last individual gave up on running a local grocery store on Main Street, he took his inventory and tried to operate as a convenience store at the gas station on the highway. This tied the foundation's hands, for it would have been bad form to compete with a local citizen and try to develop a community store. Glasco Community Foundation's vision became one of a 'Nutrition Center,' to meet the needs of the community by serving the 'whole person.' A weekly Farmers' Market was established in 2003. It operates every Tuesday, year around. Events, classes, workshops, exhibits, concerts, and coffeehouses are held here, sustaining a vibrant, visible center on Main Street. Arts and crafts are sold, nurturing local artisans. The foundation operates the Corner Store through volunteer hours of help and annual membership donations.

Ten years without a grocery store.

The Soda Fountain-Hodge Podge now sells milk, bread, eggs, and basic grocery supplies. The shelves are stocked by trips to sources in Salina or Concordia. Family support came to Judy's aid as the need for groceries became apparent and she was in a position to supply them.

The Farmers' Market became a business incubator: breads, pies, bierocks, farm fresh eggs. There is garden produce, March through November.

The locker plant continues the tradition of bringing local products to local customers. Sides of beef and pork from local farmers and the Solomon Valley feedlot, 10 miles away, are sold to local customers. The locker plant also buys meat from Swift Packing, Nebraska, and Fanestin, Kansas in order to meet retail needs. It cures bacon and ham, and makes summer

sausage and jerky. The Glasco Locker Plant also processes deer, bringing in customers from a wide area. Local customers of the locker plant include the school, nursing home, and two restaurants, all who purchase in substantial volume.

What is the bottom line for these efforts to ease life without a grocery store?

The Corner Store/Farmers' Market sells an average of \$400. a month in produce and food stuffs.

The Hodge Podge sells an estimated \$1,500. from its dairy and grocery shelves each month.

The Glasco Locker Plant sales to individuals are estimated at \$2,000. a month.

There is another story. There is a cupboard marked "Caring and Sharing" at the Corner Store. When someone is shopping in another town and finds a bargain on some canned goods, she will buy extra and bring them into the Corner Store and put them in the Caring and Sharing cupboard. Things appear. And when someone else finds it hard to get enough to feed her family, she takes things from the Sharing and Caring cupboard. Things disappear. No one sees the things come. No one sees the things go.

Select 'Glasco' on www.getruralks.org to learn more about the Hodge Podge and the Corner Store.

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