This General Store Still in Business

By FRANK UHLIG
Sunday News Staff Writer

Just about gone from today's scene is the old style general store—the kind that sold everything from penny licorice to pitchforks and from apples to alpenkreuter.

Still operating today as a distinct exception to present trends is the M. Libera Sons Co. at 662-66 W. 5th St. The spacious old store operates serenely at the same corner and under the same family management it has known for 55 years.

Some things have changed. There are frozen foods and cake mixes now — things that folks in other days might have scorned as far inferior to the start-from-scratch "home made" delicacies.

You can't buy a buttonhook at Libera's any more. The store no longer buys chickens by the crate, feeds them corn for a week to get rid of exotic barnyard flavors before selling them freshly butchered.

The cool, musty basement is empty, except for furnace and some refrigeration equipment.

In other days, it acquired a winter's supply of cheese from nearby creameries each autumn. Ranged on shelves, hundreds of pounds of cheese aged through the winter, each wheel being turned periodically to assure even curing.

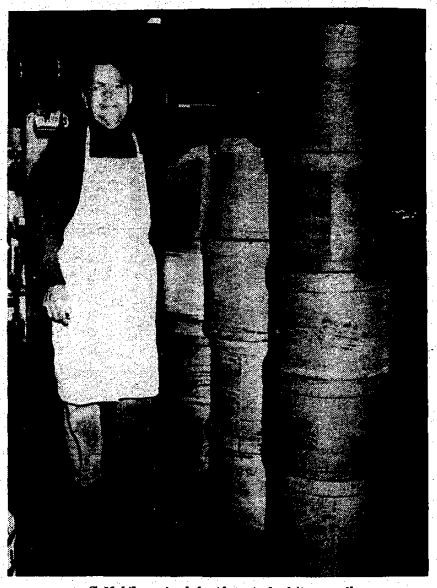
Empty, too, are the old potato bins. Proprietors once bought huge loads from local growers. It was an unlucky storekeeper who ran out of potatoes in midwinter and had to pay the penalties imposed by the law of supply and demand in a free market.

But you can buy a pair of shoes, across the store from the heavily stocked food department. Overalls and rubber footwear also occupy shelves and boxes.

If the burner on your kerosene lantern needs replacing, you can find one at Libera's. Moreover, there are glass chimneys for a half-dozen different types of lantern. In pre-REA days, no farmer could hope to do chores in the dark of winter mornings and evenings without such lanterns. Nor was Mrs. O'Leary's legendary cow the only bovine ever to threaten the start of a conflagration by an ill-tempered, well-timed kick at one of these fire hazards.

When horses drew buggies on downtown streets, when tractors, autos and trucks were rarities, the store did a respectable business selling hay and feed, along with its foodstuffs for human consumption. Bales of hay were stacked in a barn, since converted to a multiple garage. Feeds were dispensed from bins in a back room.

Credit, ever the bane of merchants, was extended on a basis that would be unthinkable today. Favored customers each received a small account book. Into this book went the list of charged purchases, entered in pencil by the storekeepers. The customer carried



C. M. Libera stands beside a stack of items ordinarily not found in stores these days. They are round wooden containers that each held about 60 pounds of cheese. A few are kept on hand for customers who want them. Demand is fairly brisk. The containers are often used for hassocks.



LANDMARK . . . Looming over the intersection of 5th and Ewing streets, the Libera store building stands unmoved in the midst of changing surroundings. The nearby business area once included such facilities as the old Palm Gardens and the Schuler candy factory.

the book home with him and kept it. When he paid his bill, a notation was added in the book. There was no other record.

Two of these individual account books are still in use.

Today the business is under management of Casimir M. Libera, one of seven children of the founder, the late Michael Libera Sr. Casimir returned from partial retirement after the death last month of another brother, Harry L. Libera.

Aside from Casimir, three other family members are living. They are Lad E. Libera, retired, and Judge Edward D. Libera, Winona, and Mrs. Harold Cummings, St. Paul. Harry, John and Michael Libera Jr., have died. The elder Libera died June 4, 1934.

Michael Libera Sr., was born on a Dodge, Wis., farm Sept. 29, 1865. He moved to Winona in 1880 and worked in the then-flourishing lumber mills until the early 1900's. While living on the city's east side, he served two terms as a 4th Ward alderman.

In 1905 he went into the grocery business at 616 W. 5th St. Five years later, he bought the two-story wood frame building which still houses the business.

It was a family enterprise from the start. Michael hired his brother Albert to remodel the store interior, took his three oldest sons and his daughter into the business and added the three younger boys as they grew into their jobs.

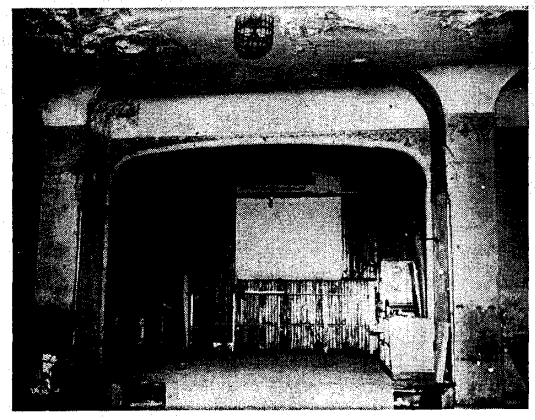
In 1915, the elder Libera listed himself, sons John, Harry and daughter Sophia as incorporators of the firm. The first directors' meeting was held April 1 of that year.

Not all the family remained active in the store but all continued

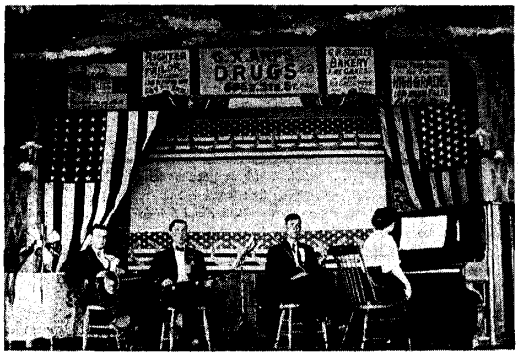
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FOUNDER . . . Michael Libera Sr., started what became one of the city's best known retail stores and which still bears the family name.



DESERTED . . . Only a few reminders of its former gayety are visible today in the old hall. Floor boards are chipped and splintered from the time of its use as a skating rink. Cage over the light recalls a time when Cotter High School basketball games were played there.



FESTIVE . . . When the upstairs hall of the Libera building was used for dances, this group was one of the orchestras which appeared. The horn player at left is unidentified. Next to him, left to right, are Albert Flood and Carl Lehnert. The pianist were Mrs. Helma Swanson LaBarre.

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as shareholders. John went into banking and was associated for many years with the 1st National Bank. Edward turned to law and is now Winona County probate judge. Daughter Sophia married and moved to St. Paul.

Though primarily a merchant, the elder Libera had a keen business sense which led him into some profitable side ventures.

The large second-story area was put to use as a movie theatre. Operating as the Lyric, the theatre capitalized on the developing national craze for movies. It played to sellout crowds of adults at 10 cents and children at five cents per admission.

On nights when no movies were shown, the large hall was used for dances.

Still struggling to get its feet on the ground, the movie industry was a lusty and sometimes unruly youngster. Still far in the future was today's rigid organization and efficiency.

Relatives chuckle over an incident in which Libera and another Winona Theatre operator, Theodore Bambenek, thought they had hit on a way to save expensive film rentals by cooperative action.

Bambenek operated the Grand Theatre, near Mankato Avenue and East 5th Street, at the rear of what is now Jack's Bar.

By staggering their show hours, Bambenek and Libera found they could use the same film on the same nights, thus cutting the rental fee in half. A sturdy-legged youngster, often a younger Libera son, stood ready to jump on a bike and rush each reel from one theatre to another.

When "Birth of A Nation," the movie industry's first extravaganza, became available about 1915 for second runs in neighborhood theatres, the system was in full force.

Carl Laemmle, later to attain prominence as a producer, was associated with the distributing company. Learning that the film was being shown simultaneously in two Winona theatres, he visited Libera on a trip from Minneapolis.

In a compromise settlement that may have established an industry pattern, Laemmle agreed to permit the arrangement for a rental one and a half times the amount of a single charge.

When the late Louis Roesner, then employed by the Winona Opera House, told Libera he wanted to build his own theatre in the neighborhood, Libera promised to get out of the movie business.

Roesner opened the West End Theatre, across the street from the Libera store in 1921. True to his word, the storekeeper closed up his Lyric Theatre. Today the upper floor stands starkly empty, its boards pitted and chipped by later use as a roller skating rink. It also served as a gymnasium for Cotter High School basketball games prior to erection of the Catholic Recreation Center.

The inventory, once far larger than it is now, is being slowly reduced. Although future plans are uncertain, it appears likely that Winona's last general store will be sold to other owners. If this happens, the business may fall in with trends after all. You will have to look elsewhere for kerosene lamp burners and for the sort of special charm and atmosphere that abounds in the old store building.



THEATRE PARTY . . . In this picture, dating back to 1921 or before, the theatre sign indicates that movies were still being shown at the Lyric, upstairs from the Libera store. The men are Max Rivers, locally famous baseball player, Frank (Kelly) Stroinski and Harry Libera. The boy is Michael Libera Jr. All are now deceased.



SHAREHOLDERS . . . A family snapshot in 1957 pictures a reunion of six of the children of Michael Libera Sr., all of whom were stockholders in the business. Absent from this picture was Michael Jr. Seated, left to right: John Libera, Mrs. Harold (Sophia) Cummings and Casimir Libera. Standing: Judge E. D. Libera, Harry and Lad Libera.

COVER PHOTO

CURIOSITY . . . Casimir Libera explains the purpose of the burner and chimney for a kerosene lantern. You don't just switch it on, he tells Rickey and Debbie Johnson, 1031 W. King St. They are children of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Johnson.

Photos by
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