

Atwood's Store

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

People of a certain age clearly remember the Atwood Store that was operated by members of the Atwood family on Main Street until Gladys and Tyler Atwood retired in 1965. Little changed since it was established there by Levi in 1899; it was the last family operated traditional grocery store in Chatham.

The original store was opened in 1849 by Tyler's grandfather, Levi Atwood, in a small building beside his barn that was next to his house on Pond Street, now the beginning section of Stage Harbor Road adjacent to the Oyster Pond. In spite of its size, it was packed with barrels of molasses and bags of grain. In addition to groceries, the store carried dry goods, including velvets, silks, fine embroideries, and millinery. His stock was so complete that the usual reply to the question of where to buy something was, "You can get it at Levi's." Travel to Boston was not easy in those days, as it involved taking the stage coach to Harwich to pick up the train for Boston. For that reason people in Chatham were delighted to have a store with such a variety of goods. In the beginning Levi was assisted by his wife, a young clerk named Cornelia Mayo, and his son Sidney. After a few years Levi Atwood phased out the dry goods and concentrated on groceries. An early photograph of Levi and Sidney in The Pond Street store suggests that it was little more than a large shed.

When Mr. Atwood died in 1898, Sidney and his brother Tyler assumed control of the business and carried it on together for a while, but Sidney soon bought out his brother. Realizing that the location on Pond Street was inadequate for the size of their business, he moved the store to Main Street and enlarged it. It first opened at that location on Thursday, May 11, 1899. An early photograph of that store shows six shelves against a wall that are totally filled with canned goods. His stock was extensive, as indicated by an advertisement that appeared in the local newspaper toward the end of the 19th century. The store offered sugar "especially granulated and of the very best quality." In addition, it was possible to buy molasses, kerosene, vinegar, starch, tapioca, raisins, currants, citron, corn, canned peaches, and pickles by the gallon. Besides food, the Atwoods offered croquet games, children's hoops and sticks, enameled table covers, and curtain fixtures. A photograph of the store taken in about 1918 shows that they were keeping up with the times, as two motorized delivery wagons await their orders while parked on the side of the building. In 1920 they doubled the size of the store, making it the same size as the building still across from the Wayside Inn. As described by L. Sidney Atwood in his history of the store, this enlarged store measured 20 by 50 feet. A second floor measuring 20 by 30 feet carried a stock of linoleums, rugs, tires, accessories, hardware, paints, oils, crockery, rope, and oil stoves. Another room on the second floor carried kitchenware, boots, and oil cloths. The sidewalk in front of the store at this time had a gasoline pump ready for any automobiles that might pass by in need of fuel.

By 1925 the store employed five grocery men, a meat cutter, and a bookkeeper. During the summer season there were two extra clerks, an assistant meat cutter and an office assistant. Three cars were kept busy making deliveries, and at the peak of the summer it often was necessary to add an extra car and two delivery bicycles.

The experience of shopping at the Atwood Store remained unchanged throughout its years of operation. Its wooden counters and creaking wooden floors were a constant. Instead of endless aisles of shelves designed for self-service, the customer at Atwoods stood before one of the wooden counters with varnished wooden tops and paneled facades painted white with black trim. The goods for sale filled the floor to ceiling shelves that lined

three sides of the building, and a clerk stood behind the counter to pick your items off the shelves as you read off your shopping list. Once everything was on the counter, the clerk would list the prices of your items on a large paper bag and add the columns to arrive at your total.

While Tyler Atwood was relatively soft spoken and reserved, his wife, Gladys, was strong-minded and a great talker with a sharp sense of humor. For those she knew well, she would share her amusing stories, some of them even slightly off-color. Upon their retirement, Mr. Atwood had worked in the store for most of his 75 years, or as his wife put it, “ever since he was old enough to look over the counter.” Gladys had worked in the store from the moment she became an Atwood in 1913.

