You Can Find It at Brooks Grocery

By Candace Medlock and Wendy Harris

Introduction

By Candace Medlock

Most of us can remember a place from childhood that always seemed warm, where neighbors stopped long enough to ask how you were doing and waited to hear your reply, and where milk and eggs and sugar could be purchased in a quarter of the time it would take to drive to town for them.

There is still such a place. It's in Bath, North Carolina, and it's called Brooks Grocery. Gas, groceries, fresh meats, hardware, tools, videos—you name it. You'll find it at Brooks.
Life on the Pamlico

In mid February, 1998, Mr. James Morgan shared an afternoon with us to give us a closer glimpse of Bath’s neighborhood grocery. Mr. Morgan, the co-owner of Brooks Grocery, has been a part of the store for twenty years. As he stated, “The store in some ways has become my life.” He even “works some on his days off.” Mr. Morgan showed us to the back of the store for our interview.

Life: Has Brooks Grocery always been in the Brooks family?

Mr. Morgan: Yes, they started the store in Bayview in the early ’50’s. Roy Brooks was the original owner, and he moved the store here to Bath in 1972.

Life: How did the store get its name?

Mr. Morgan: From the original owner, Mr. Roy Brooks.

Life: Did Roy Brooks build the store?

Mr. Morgan: Yes.

Life: When did you become involved with the store?

Mr. Morgan: Jimmy Brooks and I bought it together in 1978. Here is a picutre in The Washington Daily News taken two years before Jimmy and I bought the store. There are only two people in this picture that are still living. You can make a copy of it for this story if you’d like.

Life: Thanks. What hours are you open?
Mr. Morgan: Five-thirty a.m. to 8:30 p.m. every day except Sunday. On Sunday, it is 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Life: Are you closed on any holidays?

Mr. Morgan: Only two a year, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Life: Do you have mostly family that work here?

Mr. Morgan: Yes. We have two employees that work days and one or two that work nights, but the rest is handled by family.

Life: We were told that there was a stool here in the memory of Mr. Vernon Godley, Sr. Do you still have the stool here?
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Mr. Morgan: We did, but we do not have it any more. He was a regular customer.

Life: Do you have any problems with people loitering?

Mr. Morgan: Not really loitering. It is friends just sitting around. You have different groups during the day. Most of the people who stay around are the ones who have been here since the store first opened. I even provide them a bench to sit on, so they are welcome here.

James Morgan, second from right, shoots the breeze with some of the “older” patrons.

Life: Do you have some people that come in really early?

Mr. Morgan: Yes, they come in and out all times of the day.
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Life: Do you usually get the same crowd or different ones?

Mr. Morgan: I have had all kinds of people come in and sit around from all walks of life.

Life: What time during the day do you have the biggest crowds?

Mr. Morgan: Some come in at 1:30, and they’ll stay until 5:30 or 6. They’ll sit and talk four or five hours. Basically, they are the same group though.

Life: What kind of topics do they discuss?

Mr. Morgan: Any topics from religion to politics and a lot about old times.

Life: Have you ever had any heated discussions between the people who sit around in the store?

Mr. Morgan: Yes, maybe once a month. Most of them will argue out their points, but things never get out of hand.

Life: Can you drink alcoholic beverages on this lot?

Mr. Morgan: No, it is not allowed on this lot. They do go and drink under the pine trees, which is not part of my property.

Life: Do you have any problems with them drinking?

Mr. Morgan: No, we are a local business, and they know if they get too far out of hand, they are not allowed back in the store. And
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in Bath there are not too many places to go, so folks abide by that.

Life: What kind of items do you sell the most?

Mr. Morgan: Drinks, beer, snack items, and cigarettes.

Life: What brand of cigarettes do you sell the most of?

Mr. Morgan: Marlboro.

Life: Can you buy meat from just anyone?

Mr. Morgan: No, the meat has to be inspected by the State.

Life: When did that policy go into effect?

Mr. Morgan: About 40 years ago.

Life: Do you buy a lot of things from places like Food Lion?

Mr. Morgan: No, we get our food from Nash Finch out of Rocky Mount.

Life: Where do you get your gas?

Mr. Morgan: Country Mart out of Greenville.

Life: On a dollar basis, are groceries what you sell the most of?

Mr. Morgan: Gas is probably 45 to 48 percent of my business. Groceries, beer, hardware, and everything else is about 52-55 percent.

Life: What is the most unusual product you sell?

Mr. Morgan: Freon and butane gas.

Life: Do you have any kind of systematic control over the inventory?

Mr. Morgan: Well, there’s no computer. It is all kept in my head. This store probably doesn’t have as much in it as when Roy started out, though.

Life: Has business increased since you have had the hardware?

Mr. Morgan: Yes. In fact, the business increases every year because we have more people moving into this area. Young people seem to move out and older people are moving back.

Big stores have volume control. But me, in big storms, I get cleaned out. Brooks is closer to the people around here. During bad weather, we have about an eight percent increase in business.

Life: When Bath High School closed just down the road, did it cause business loss?

Mr. Morgan: Yes, it caused about a 25 percent loss of business.

Life: Is there a charge policy here?

Mr. Morgan: Yes, we have one.

Life: Have you ever had any problems with people not paying the accounts off?
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Mr. Morgan: Yes, but you will always have a certain percentage of that.

Life: What happens when they do not pay?

Mr. Morgan: You can prosecute them. But here, most of the time, if you keep confronting them with it, they'll pay you. We have to live with each other around here. We have lost more with shoplifting than charges.

Life: Do you have a lot of trouble with shoplifters?

Mr. Morgan: Yes. The ones you don’t see are the ones that you lose the most with. But I’ve had little kids, three and four at the time, that have been caught stuffing items into their backpacks. One kid wears it and the other puts the candy in it. The two main losses from theft are candy and cigarettes. Occasionally, some people will drive off without paying for their gas.

Life: Are the kids caught stealing treated the same as adults?

Mr. Morgan: Yes. Most of the time when they are caught, it is their first time. Usually, we contact the school and their parents.

Life: How many robberies have you had?

Mr. Morgan: We have had four. We had three before we installed an alarm system, but only one after.

Life: When did you put that in?

Mr. Morgan: Somewhere between '81 and '82.

Life: Is the alarm the only kind of security you have?

Mr. Morgan: No, I have good cameras.

Life: The robberies that you have had, were they break-ins or day robberies?

Mr. Morgan: No daylight robberies. All of them were after hours. They pushed the door in one time. One person robbed us twice. I caught them the second time. There were two guys, a baby, and two girls. They had the back of the truck filled with diapers and food which they had taken from us and another store.

Life: Were these people local?

Mr. Morgan: No, they were from Greenville.

Life: Are there any techniques used to steal certain things?

Mr. Morgan: Yes. Some people would use a knife or ice pick and stab the beer cans and the pressure will shoot the beer into the other person’s mouth. Teenagers will also set the beer out the back door and a friend will drive around back and pick it up.

Life: Does the store look the same as it did when it was first opened?

Mr. Morgan: Well, two things have changed. We have a new ceiling, and we have relined the gas tanks. Those are the only things that have been changed in twenty years.
From "Natural Light" to pipe fittings - you can find it at Brooks.

Life: Do you ever think about retirement?

Mr. Morgan: Yes, I do look forward to retirement, but I enjoy my job very much. I am here when I have to work and even here when it is my day off.
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Life: When you retire, will you miss seeing the neighborhood kids grow up?

Mr. Morgan: Yes.

Life: When you retire, who will take over?

Mr. Morgan: Well, Jimmy and I would like to get one person from each family to take over.

Life: One thing about Brooks is that it is part of Bath. I guess that you are proud of that.

Mr. Morgan: Yes, I enjoy being here and knowing almost everyone that comes in and out.

Conclusion

By Wendy Harris

Undoubtedly, James Morgan is one of the reasons for the success of Brooks Grocery in Bath, NC. He and his partner, Jimmy Brooks, have maintained this store which has become a fixture and supply force for the daily needs of the people of the Bath area for twenty years.

One of the most wonderful things we discovered about Brooks Grocery is the pace of life here. Nobody seems to be in a hurry to leave. The owners have even supplied benches for those that want to stay a spell to catch up on the local gossip, debate politics and religion, or relive some old times.
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During the interview, Mr. Morgan stated that when he retires, he will most miss seeing the children of the community who frequent his store day in and day out grow up. He suggested that his customers are like family and that he knows most by their first names.

So if you’re out of salt or wood screws, Freon or fresh meats, gas or green beans, you’ll find it at Brooks. And be sure to say hi to James and Jimmy. There’ll be a spot on the bench for you!

Candace Medlock (left), Wendy Harris, and Roy Armstrong enjoy a laugh with James Morgan.