

18. The Establishment

By

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In many ways, Corky Richmond's mom and dad, Becky and Cecil, were my "adoptive" parents. There were no blood family ties with them as there were with my first "adoptive" parents, Seabay and LE Jackson. Nevertheless, Becky soon began to refer to me as her #2 son, and I never failed to send her a Mother's Day card each year for the rest of her life. The happy times spent with the Richmonds and working for them during my high school and early college years were key influences in my life.



Christmas 1967 with Cecil, Becky, and Corky

In this chapter I will share with you some of the experiences that were typical of life in the small midwestern towns of Greens Fork and Economy, Indiana in the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s.

Everyone called Corky's mother "Becky," but her full name was Myrtle Roberta Kitts (2/19/1921-7/7/2005). She was born in the Appalachian area of Burkes Garden, Tazewell County, Virginia. I remember Becky teasing Cecil about how much better her Clinch Valley area in Virginia was than Cecil's West Virginia homeland. The two birth places are less than 100 miles apart.

Corky visited his Virginia and West Virginia relatives with his parents at times. He told me about some of his relatives with names like 'Tater Tom, Dirty Tom, and Polished Tom's Bob, as well as songs he heard there (among them, "I Love My Rooster"). His last trip to Virginia was when he drove Becky there for a final visit long after Cecil's death and after Corky lost his voice box to cancer.

Becky's mother was Letha Angeline Wilson (8/27/1898-4/28/1960). Her father, Vance Monroe Kitts (7/25/1899-11/5/1973), moved his family to the Greens Fork area of Wayne County, Indiana sometime between 1938 and 1940. Both Corky and Becky were dark complected, as was Vance Kitts and his

granddaughter Peggy Ann Kitts and Corky's cousin Bobby Hall. I always wondered if they shared genetic markers with the fabled Melungeons of the Appalachian region. (1) (2)

Corky's full name was Cecil Richmond, Jr. His father, Cecil Richmond (11/20/1910-1/22/1971) was born in Sandstone, Summers County, West Virginia. At the time of the 1930 census, Cecil was working at the Perfect Circle Company in Hagerstown, Indiana making piston rings. He still worked there when he filled out his WWII draft card. By the latter 1940s, Cecil was running a service station in Greens Fork, Indiana.

Cecil and Becky were married on January 3, 1942. Cecil, Jr. (Corky), their only child, was born November 15, 1942, but he was not Cecil's only child. The 18-year-old Cecil was first married (likely, it was a shotgun wedding) on December 7, 1928 to Marguerite Elizabeth Ward. Corky learned that he had a half-sister only in adulthood, and he subsequently met Mary Lou (Richmond) Field (6/21/1929-8/16/1986) where she lived in Terre Haute. The Richmonds never spoke to me of Mary Lou, but her obituary indicated she was the granddaughter of Shadrack "Shade" Ward of Meally, KY, a town not too far from the West Virginia state line.

A lot of people from the southwest sections of Virginia and West Virginia settled in Wayne County in east-central Indiana, and many of them were customers at Cecil's Phillips 66 service station in Greens Fork and later in Economy, Indiana. I heard some of them refer to Cecil with the nickname "Rabbit," but I don't know why he was called that. By extension, the family was dubbed the Rabbits by some of their old down-home friends, as I learned when a lady entered the Economy station one day and asked me, "Are the Rabbits at home?"

The Greens Fork service station was much more than a place to get gasoline and have your car serviced. A lot of snacks and beverages were available there, as well as some other items essential to the good life in America, such as condoms. One day, a young married man, Ronnie Coddington, came into the Greens Fork store to replenish his supply of contraceptives. He and his wife were gifted with yet another child earlier that year, and he jokingly accused Corky of sticking pins in the rubbers because they didn't seem to be doing the birth control job for him.

Ed McReavy, a minister in one of the local churches and a friend of the Richmonds, occasionally managed the Greens Fork store when the Richmonds were away on vacation or visiting relatives out of state. McReavy was given the nickname "Crazy" by some of the locals. He wasn't crazy, of course, but he had some unusual hobbies and ways. He was a licensed pilot, and he took Corky and me up in a plane one day. It was my first such experience, and I was enthralled by the view of Greens Fork and the surrounding area from such a height. You could clearly see the checkerboard layout of the fields and roads below, typical of the land surveyed into square mile, 640-acre sections in the former Northwest Territory.

Corky and I once played a duet of "Oh, Holy Night" during a Christmas service in Ed's Methodist Church in Greens Fork, although neither of us attended church. I don't have a picture of that performance, but I did find one taken about the same time at a different venue.



Max (George) Sowers, Gary and Corky Playing at a Valentine Party

There was a 2-way communications system between the Richmond house a block away and their Phillips 66 service station on Main Street in Greens Fork. This allowed Cecil to call Becky or Corky to come help him when he got very busy or was involved in a prolonged activity such as changing tires, doing a grease job/oil change, etc. The intercom also served as a theft deterrent after closing because it was generally known that Cecil left it on all night. When I slept over at Corky's house, I could hear the intercom monitoring the various comings and goings at the service station throughout the night.

Part of the noise after dark was caused by people buying soft drinks from the pop machine that stood outside next to the door. Soft drinks were sold only in glass bottles in those days. The large, rectangular, trunk-like cooler was constructed so the bottles hung by the neck between narrow rows of metal bars, accessible when you raised the lid. Once you made your selection, you had to physically move the bottle into an area that was locked until you inserted money into the pay box (exact change only). That released a metal retaining piece, allowing you to pull the bottle straight out and open it in the attached opener.

One night, long after closing, some enterprising "customers" at the Greens Fork store had the bright idea to bring along their own bottle opener and some straws. Once the caps were popped from the bottles hanging inside the machine, as many Cokes, Pepsis, Nehi orange and strawberry sodas, Rock and Rye cream sodas, Dr. Peppers, etc. as you could hold could be sucked up through a straw. Though not as comfortable as drinking straight from a bottle that was paid for and extracted from the machine, it was definitely less expensive. Plus, it made for a good joke pulled on Cecil, if it wasn't done too often. I can't recall that anyone was ever caught siphoning soft drinks, but since the station was right on the main drag of Greens Fork, I suppose not that many were bold enough to try it. It may have been a factor in Cecil's addition of the intercom system at that location.

The Economy store also had a pop machine, but it was inside the grocery area. Corky and I used to get a kick out of watching people try to figure out where to put their money in that machine. There was no coin slot; you had to pay at the counter a few paces away. Regardless of the wording we chose for a sign to indicate that, exasperated customers would often ask, "Whar do you put your coin in this hyar

machine, boys?” Similarly, no magic wording was found to keep people from opening the full door of the cooler (necessary only when you loaded it), rather than the small door on the right where you could withdraw your selection.



The Coke Machine at Economy

The Greens Fork store was broken into on at least one occasion in the late 1950s. This occurred when the Richmonds were out of town, and Ed McReavy was in charge of the station. Two boys from Henry County stole some packages of meat, as reported in the Richmond *Palladium Item* newspaper. What the 9/7/58 and 9/16/58 newspaper stories didn't report was that they had also stolen a loaf of bread and a box containing a gross of condoms (i.e., 144 of them). When they were caught, McReavy had to travel quite a few miles to the place where they were being held in the next county to identify the stolen merchandise. He asked me to accompany him.

On the trip, the visibly upset McReavy was driving far above the speed limit on a two-lane country road when a dog dashed in front of us. BAM! The dog went flying with a death yelp, and McReavy brought the car to a screeching halt close to the house where the dog's owners lived. Although they saw the accident, they didn't seem to be particularly concerned about the dead dog, which was lying in the road. All they asked was that we move it out of the road. Ed, even more shaken up than he had been before, said he just couldn't do it, and I would have to retrieve the body. After dragging the large dog into their yard, I asked the people if I could wash my hands. They led me into a dingy kitchen with a pump and wash basin containing dirty water with a grimy cake of soap on the side. Relieved to be putting this experience behind us, we got back in the car and continued our journey at a much slower pace.

The jail in that town was a barred room on the ground floor of a house. The constable and his wife lived on the second floor, and both were in the lower-level office area when we arrived.

"Can you tell me what was stolen by the boys?" asked the constable, his wife standing behind him.

Hunched down over the counter, Ed said, "Some lunch meat, a loaf of bread . . ." and in an almost inaudible voice, he whispered "and a gross of condoms."

The constable was a bit hard of hearing (or pretended to be), so he again asked Ed to tell him what was taken. Ed repeated his description in the same manner, but the man still claimed not to understand him. At this point, a red-faced McReavy asked him for a pencil and piece of paper and wrote down the missing inventory.

A year or so after this incident, around the end of 1959, Cecil and Becky moved to Economy, Indiana where they purchased from an old fellow named Charlie both his house and the next-door business (a combination service station and convenience/grocery store). The new location offered a great deal more room, and the convenience store was stocked with everything from laundry detergent to canned goods. It also featured fresh eggs, milk, cheese, and bulk lunch meat that could be sliced, plus snack food, and of course, soft drinks. The Richmonds soon discovered that Charlie had inflated the prices on many of the canned goods and other items when he figured the cost of the buildings and inventory. But the deal was done, and now Cecil and Becky were the proud owners of the place that Corky and I dubbed "The Establishment". Even better, it sat on US 35, the road that connects West Virginia with Chicago, a much-traveled route before the completion of the interstate highway system. All-in-all, the new business turned out to be a very profitable venture. Cecil told me years later, "We made a shitload of money at this place, especially in the early years." After Cecil's sudden death in 1971, the store was run by Becky for a time, and it was eventually taken over by Richard Kitts, Becky's brother, who lived just south and behind it.

The Establishment in Economy also fell victim to thieves on a dark summer night around 1962. Corky was home for summer vacation from the University of Wisconsin where he had received a scholarship to study music. I drove up from Charlestown, but found I wasn't the only one who was visiting them at that time. Willard Cromwell, a minister who had moved west to Oregon several years before, came back to Economy with his family. That meant the beds were all spoken for in the house. Since it was summertime, Cecil suggested that Corky and I camp out in sleeping bags in the vineyard behind the house. The vineyard was located only a few paces from the back doors of both the house and The Establishment. Sometime during the night, robbers broke in and stole quite a few items. We really took a ribbing for sleeping through the incident.

That led to another embarrassment for Corky and me the second morning following the theft. I had a case of beer in my trunk, and Corky suggested we quick-cool some of it by putting it in the ice cream cooler after we closed The Establishment. We had already decided to sleep inside the building that night in case the robbers returned to the scene of the crime. After closing the store, we quickly grabbed a bunch of bottles from the case, stuck them between the ice cream bars, pints, and quarts, and rushed over to the house to join the rest for supper. Our intention was to eat a quick meal, exchange a few pleasantries, and retire early to the station to drink beer and catch up on gossip and other matters of interest. That was not to be, for Willard was so wound up with stories about his former days in the area and life out west that we found it difficult to escape. When we finally got to our stash of beer, our first thought was that it might have frozen and exploded in the cooler, ruining not only our liquid refreshment, but making it hard to deny what had happened when the beer pollution in the ice cream cooler was discovered.

I was the first to lift a bottle, and to my horror, it was empty! But it had not exploded. In our haste to load the beer, one of us apparently threw in an empty bottle from the case. (You didn't discard beer

bottles in those days because you got a deposit back when you returned the empties.) The rest of the bottles were fine, and we each commenced to drink our first of many beers that night.

At this point, Corky decided to show me a trick he had learned at the University of Wisconsin. He took the beer cap, held it between his thumb and one finger, and snapped it into the air. To my surprise, it sailed like a helicopter halfway across the room. I had to try it, and from that time on, we sailed beer caps around the room each time we opened another bottle.

A few beers later, I was about to launch a “helicopter” when a car pulled up and began to flash a spotlight through the picture windows at the front. “Freeze!” yelled Corky. It was a sheriff’s deputy who had apparently been sent to patrol the area because of the theft the previous evening. We wondered after he drove away how he failed to spot us—me sitting next to the ice cream cooler with my arm raised to spin a beer cap and Corky standing behind the counter with a beer in his hand. Since it was very late at night, we decided it was time to turn in, so we went to the back office and climbed into our sleeping bags.

Our plan was to get up early and pick up all the incriminating evidence. It would have to be very early because The Establishment’s working hours were 7 AM to 8 PM Monday through Saturday and 8 AM to 7 PM on Sunday. At about ten minutes after 7:00 AM, the back door leading into the office area flew open, and in came Cecil, asking if we were ever going to open the store that day. He proceeded to start the opening routine, when we heard him say, “What’s all these beer caps doing in here, boys?” We were caught, but we suffered no punishment except the hangovers that we both felt as the long day in The Establishment ground its way toward closing time.

Corky’s time at the University of Wisconsin had apparently made him quite fond of spirits of all kinds. Wisconsin was famous in college circles for serving 3.2% beer in the student union building. When Corky opened his cornet case, I was surprised to see a ½ pint of his favorite cheap whisky, Corby’s. Thus began a long period in his life that ultimately led him to become an alcoholic.



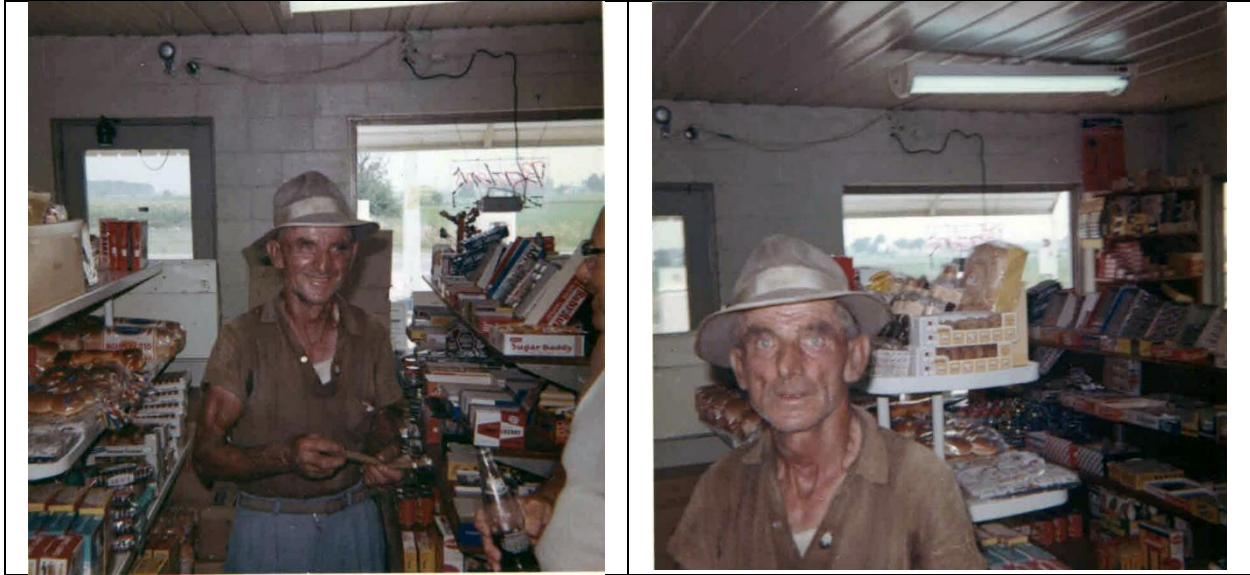
Corky’s Liquor Collection

The summer before he was to enter Officer Candidacy School for the Navy, Becky and Cecil decided to take a long driving vacation out west, leaving Corky and me in charge of The Establishment. Each Sunday evening, we would close up shop, rush next door, and pounce on Corky's stash of whisky. He would take two enormous iced-tea glasses, open a tray of ice cubes, and put half of the ice in each glass. He then filled the rest with whisky, and in no time, we were thoroughly soused.

On one of these Sundays, an Economy customer, father of Ruth Ann Bales, stopped in late in the day to say they were making pizzas, and he asked if we'd like to have some. We thought he meant he would bring some pizza to us later, so after we closed, we poured out the whisky and quickly downed the potent liquor. Some time passed, and we heard a knock at the door. It was Mr. Bales, and he looked a bit perturbed. "What's keeping you boys?" he asked. "The pizza is getting cold." We had to go to his house in our inebriated state! Luckily, they didn't seem to notice how far gone we were when we arrived. However, during the conversation, Mr. Bales, an amateur artist, saw me looking at one of the paintings on the wall. He said, "I see you're interested in that painting. Do you see anything unusual about it?" I sure did! Maybe I was too drunk to make the distinction, but I couldn't decide whether the animal portrayed was a dog or a cow! "You'll notice that it's all painted in shades of green!" was Mr. Bales' proud explanation. "Very interesting." I replied limply. Our secret Sunday binges were safely concealed.

Another childish habit we shared as young men was to speak while emitting a belch. Corky held the record for the number of syllables that he could croak out while belching, as the following illustrates. One Sunday, after we had finished Corky's last bottle of whisky and were already both pretty looped, Corky remembered his father's stash of fine whisky under the kitchen sink. He lunged for the opened, but almost full bottle of Crown Royal Canadian whisky, but I stopped him. "You can't do that!" I yelled. "~~Why-the-fuck-not!~~" was his belched reply. Fortunately, we left enough whisky in the bottle so that Cecil, an infrequent drinker, apparently didn't notice anything.

The road on which Richard Kitts lived on the outskirts of Economy intersected US 45, the major route between West Virginia and Chicago. Just across the street from Rich's house was the rear of Manuel Retz's house, the house next to and south of The Establishment. Given their proximity to The Establishment, we saw a lot of the Retz family. Manuel was a wiry, brown-skinned man of short height. When he came into the store, we knew he wanted one of two things—either a buck's worth of gas or a Crook rum-soaked cigar. He never got more than the 4 gallons of gas that a dollar would buy at the time.



Emanuel Lester Retz (11/2/1900-8/8/1969, b. Colorado)

Manuel's wife, Vergia Leona (Bartley), never came into The Establishment, and I can't recall ever seeing her. Other members of the household were frequent customers. The 1930 census lists only 3 children, daughters Helen May (b. 1923), Katharine L. (b. 1926), and Ruth Maxine (b. 1928), all three born in Indiana. By the 1940 census, the family had grown to include another daughter, Leona Jane (b. 1936) and three boys: Charles Wayne Retz (b. 1931; nicknamed "Bud"), Donald Lester Retz (b. 1933, d. 1974; nicknamed "Duck"), and Chester Earl Retz (b. 1939). A fourth son, Keith Owen Retz (b. 1940 nicknamed "Doc") and one other daughter, Carrol Ann (b. 1943) came along after the 1940 census was taken.

One of Manuel's sons, Charles Wayne Retz, was a public-school mathematics teacher. He had a very gifted little boy, Michael Wayne, about 5 years old when we knew him. The child always amazed us with the breadth of his knowledge and rich vocabulary. Tragically, the entire family died from a horrendous car crash in 1965.

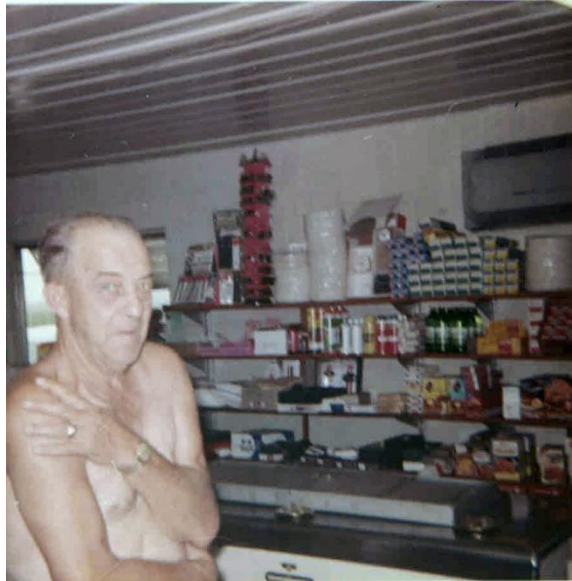
Duck once told us a lurid story about shooting an enemy soldier (Korean?) on a hillside, just as the man dropped his pants and squatted to take a dump. Duck was always immaculately dressed and coiffed; he even shaved his black eyebrows. Married in his mid-thirties, he died when he was only 41 years old. There were two daughters at home in the early 1960s. Carrol Ann (b. 1943) was an attractive young blonde woman, whom Corky dated once. There was also an older sister, "Sandy" (apparently a nickname for Katharine) who was mentally retarded.

At slow times, Corky and I looked for novel ways to fill the time when the work of stocking the shelves, filling the pop machine, cleaning up the place, doing inventory, etc. was done. During one particularly boring time at The Establishment, we came up with the idea of linking famous people by re-christening them with a common name. They would all share the name "Chuck". It didn't take long to identify candidates for the Chuck Brotherhood, among them, Jesus Chuck, Chiang-Kai Chuck, and Nikita Krushchuck. We decided that we should join the august company of Chucks, so Corky called me Chuck, and I did likewise for him. Sandy Retz was very confused by this because she never knew who was going to answer her when she asked Chuck something. Most of the customers in Economy knew me as

Chuck. Becky and Cecil even referred to me as Chuck (or Chucker), and they called me that for many years thereafter.

Corky was an avid reader of literature, and after he quit the University of Wisconsin and enrolled at Indiana University, he became an English literature major. Consequently, he had a large collection of fiction from which to choose, and I read *Catcher in the Rye*, *As I Lay Dying*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and other classic works of English and American literature during those long summer days. Anything to pass the time. It probably would have been better if I had used the time to review and consolidate the chemistry and Russian I was exposed to during the previous academic years, but as with many things in my life, I was content to learn just enough to get by, not to become an expert with deep knowledge in any field. I've thought many times, I know a little something about a lot of subjects, but not a great deal about any one subject. Maybe that's what made me a success at being a librarian.

A 13-hour workday is a very long time. There were times when we would see just one customer an hour, but there were also occasional intense periods of business when local farmers and others would stop for refreshments and to spend a while in our air-conditioned environment. Some of these people we got to know very well, and some were real characters. Not the least of them was Gus Sanders.

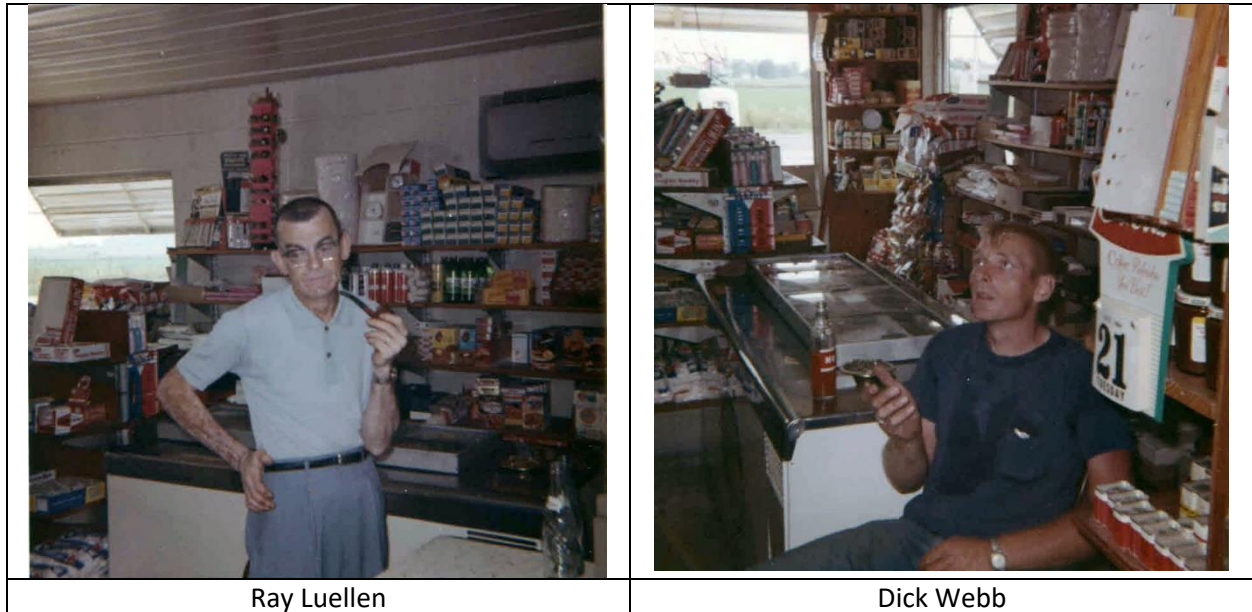


Gus Sanders, Philosopher and Farm Hand

Gus and Corky engaged in some strong philosophical debates, most of which Corky seemed to win. But what Gus couldn't accomplish with solid arguments, he more than made up for with his dramatic presentation. While he was baling hay or doing other farm work, he was shirtless and toothless (except for the two bottom eye teeth which he used for great effect). When Gus thought he scored a particularly good point, he would snort, open his mouth, and stick out his tongue between the teeth, almost touching the tip of his nose. His manner of speaking was also very dramatic, and I wondered if he hadn't at some time been an actor.

The scholarly-looking, pipe-smoking Ray Luellen was another favorite person. Ray prefaced many of his remarks with "Now, ah Gud . . ." He worked at a Richmond assembly plant. I asked him what he did there, and his reply was, "I tighten down bolt 38." Another was Dick Webb, who always challenged

Corky to gamble with a coin flip for the cost of his favorite soft drink, Nehi. On the back of his photo Corky wrote: "Double or nothing." Dick rarely won the toss, so he frequently ended up paying twice the cost of the soft drink.



Pictures of other favorite customers are included at the end of this chapter, along with words Corky wrote on the back of the photos to help us remember them.

Francie was another interesting resident of Economy who I think hailed from Cecil and Becky's home area. She was a shapely, attractive, and somewhat flirtatious married woman in her late twenties or early thirties. Once when Becky and Cecil were out of town, Corky decided to ask her for a date, and Francie accepted. Although he didn't score with her that night, he came close. They ended the evening parked in the driveway and doing some serious making out, apparently with the windows rolled down. Corky told me that at one point, an excited Francie yelled "Oh! He's hot, and he's on me!" The passionate exchange was apparently overheard by the neighbor to the north, a red-headed man (Mr. Riggle?), whose bedroom window was quite close to the Richmond's driveway. When he came into The Establishment the next day, he said "hello" to me, then turned to Corky and said, "How are you doing, lover-boy?"

Richard Merkamp was a typical hard working, hard-bargaining farmer. Dick usually bought a couple of cans of Skoal snuff, and he never tired of asking us, "You boys want to bale some hay today?" Dick didn't treat his car with much loving care. It got covered with tar from driving the newly surfaced country roads near his house. I asked Dick if he wanted me to clean and wax the car for \$25, and he accepted. Despite working a full day on this eyesore, I was able to completely clean only the top surfaces of the car. The side areas never fully yielded to my repeated applications of kerosene, a trick I learned from Cecil. Accordingly, Dick wasn't totally happy with the job, but he did pay up.



Richard Merkamp

Farmers had ways of stretching the useful life of the equipment they used. We did a lot of business fixing tires. Invariably, when they brought in the often excrement-encrusted tires for repair, they'd say, "Can you fix this hyar tire, boys? It's only flat on one side!" One wily farmer made do with what he had to extend the life a tire, but it eventually went flat. He brought in a 13-inch tire into which he had inserted a 15-inch tube. When we removed the tube, the folds that developed from being bunched up inside the tire literally disintegrated when unfolded.



The Ill-Fated Tube

Occasionally, a large family on their way from West Virginia to Chicago would stop at The Establishment. Corky developed a special talent for identifying them, making the prediction before they even entered the store: "West Virginia, on their way to Chicago." Often the first thing we heard from them was "How far is it to Chicago, boys?" We then checked the license plates, and almost invariably, they were West Virginia or Virginia plates.

Cecil was very protective of the rest rooms and the yard on the south side of the house. The rest rooms were always locked, and the signs indicated they were for customers only. If Cecil didn't like the looks of someone, he would tell them the restrooms were out of order. We didn't have his cold-hearted approach to turning down access to the restroom. One day, someone from a large group of people asked for the keys to the rest rooms late in the day. On this occasion, I wish we had rejected the request. When we began to do the closing chores, Corky said, "Why don't you check the restrooms, Chuck, and I'll shut down the pumps and lock up." A catastrophe awaited me when I opened the restroom doors. The folks apparently hadn't tried to flush the commodes until all in the party had relieved themselves. Both commodes were stopped up and overflowed.



Gary Preparing to Clean Up a Broken Bottle of Grape Juice and to Clean the Rest Rooms

The sly, scheming Corky had already seen what a mess they left, and he was watching from the corner of the building to see my reaction. I yelled at him to get me something to scoop out the shit. I couldn't believe that he brought me a bucket and an old shoe. The shoe turned out to be adequate for the job, and the rest rooms were back in tip-top shape when we opened the next morning.

Some customers thought nothing of allowing their dogs to relieve themselves on Cecil and Becky's yard, much to Cecil's frustration. He kept a sharp eye out for those who led their precious pets to the side yard, ignoring the professionally produced sign Cecil installed there. Kind words did not flow their way when Cecil stopped them.

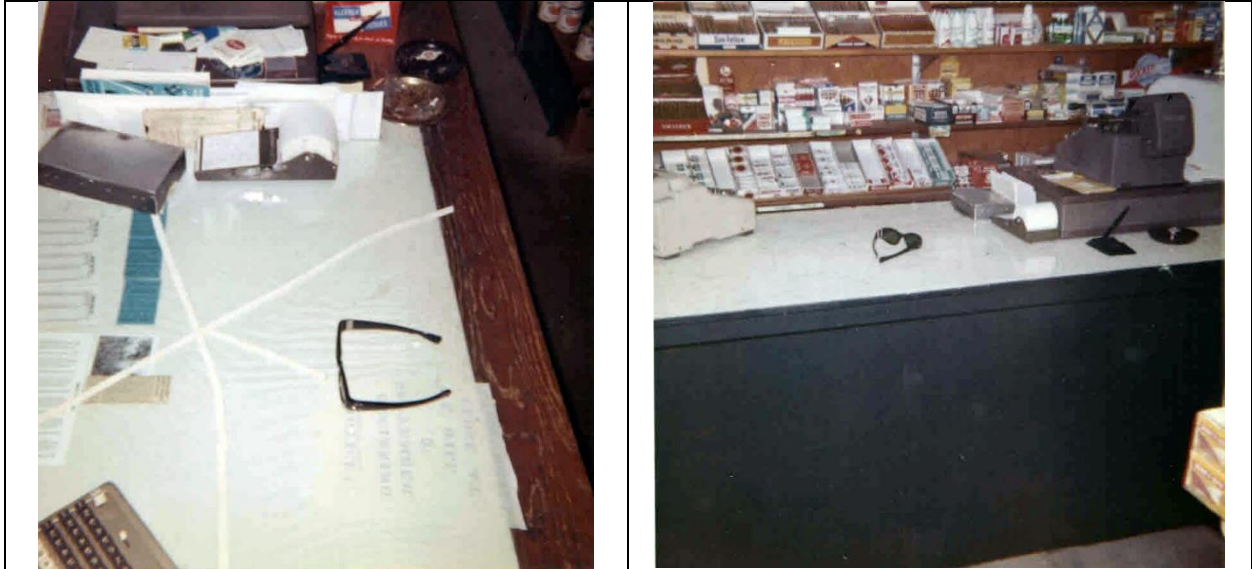


The "No Dogs Allowed" Sign

A thick glass plate guarded the wooden counter from various spills and dirt that might have spoiled its appearance. Cecil and Becky were fond of placing under the glass headlines from the local and Indianapolis newspapers, such as "Economy Roaring Along," "Rough Times Ahead for Economy," etc. The glass plate met an unseemly fate one day.

Even in the 1960s, Indiana had a sales tax on food purchases over 24 cents. One day Richard Kitts' younger son Cameron came through the back door and bought a loaf of bread and a few other items, placing his money on the counter. He looked somewhat confused when Corky returned some of the money, but he left with it and the purchases. He shortly came back and got one more item, laying on the counter the remaining coins from the previous visit. It was one penny short of the cost with the tax. Corky told him he could pay the additional penny the next time he was in the store. Within minutes, the back door flew open and a furious Richard Kitts, cursing and fuming, slammed a penny down on the thick glass cover, cracking it in several directions from side to side. Rich was a very strong man, and this scared both Corky and me. Fortunately for us, Vance Kitts entered the store at this time, and Richard composed himself enough to say to his father, "By God, I sent Cameron over here with the exact change, and these cheap pricks want to charge him more for what he got!" He promptly wheeled around and went home.

Corky was apparently so shaken and fearful that Rich might come back after closing to take physical revenge on us that he got a shotgun and sat with it on the front porch for quite some time after dark. Rich didn't return, and this, like other disputes in many families, was apparently smoothed over eventually.



The Counter Top: Before and After

It was during this summer, when Becky and Cecil took the long vacation of several weeks out west, that I made a big mistake. We had one customer who had a serious speech defect. Shortly after Becky and Cecil left, he parked at one of the pumps and entered the store where I was working alone at the time. He started to talk, but only stuttering, unintelligible noises came from his mouth, sounding like “F-F-Flom, F-F-Flom, F-F-Flom!” to me. Finally, he pointed to a pen and paper and wrote, “Gas on credit.” I filled up his tank, and he appeared again late Friday and paid off the bill. This occurred again the next week, when he charged a bit more, including some snacks. Finally, he bought more expensive items on credit, including a watch. It was shortly after Cecil and Becky got back that he stopped coming into The Establishment. I finally had to confess that I had given him credit, and he had a large outstanding balance. Cecil was quite upset, went into the back office, and came out with a thick stack of bills. These were bad debts that had accumulated over the years. Cecil had learned the hard way who in the community could be trusted with credit, and he had no hope of recovering much, if any of these debts. A while after this, I read in the local paper that the stuttering man had been arrested in Richmond for trying to steal money from a soft drink machine. I remember thinking at the time, “I wonder if he really meant to do that.” Maybe the machine didn’t give him the pop after he put in his coin, and he was upset about that. Given his speech problem, he probably couldn’t successfully explain the situation to the police. I never saw him again.

With a field where many cows grazed across the road and the doors to The Establishment opened and closed many times a day, it was inevitable that flies would frequently get into the building. We spent a fair amount of time killing them. The flies were irritating and sometimes got into places that were particularly upsetting, as the following picture indicates.



The Fly and the Doughnuts

Although not as clear as I would like, if you look carefully, you can see the unfortunate fly that managed to get into the covered box of doughnuts on the counter. When I caught the fly, I decided to execute him in an unusual manner. I grabbed a roll of caps and ran into the garage, where I picked up a sledgehammer. After inserting the immobilized fly into the center of the caps roll, I slammed the poor beastie with the sledgehammer. BLAM!!! My goodness, what an incredible blast that created! When I think now of that gruesome scene, I wonder that I didn't graduate into some sort of maniacal serial killer of other living beings.

The doughnuts and bread were delivered by a particularly cocky route man, who once regaled us with a bit of news that we hadn't heard. It was early August 1962 when he entered The Establishment and announced that Marilyn Monroe had committed suicide. He speculated about what happened after the discovery of her suicide. His final comment was very startling. "I bet she was screwed by at least half a dozen guys before her body got cold!"

Another unforgettable customer, not a regular, stumbled when he came into the store. The man was drunk and apparently hungry, because he approached the meat cooler and ordered a ham sandwich with potato chips. Corky patiently explained to him that The Establishment was not a restaurant, but if he wanted to buy a loaf of bread, a bag of potato chips, some sliced ham, and even a slice of cheese, he could make his own sandwich. That didn't register with him, and he repeated the same request several times. Finally, Corky got impatient, and the tone of his voice strongly reflected that. When Corky thought he had forcefully communicated the problem and the solution for the final time, the inebriated customer reeled back, looked him in the eye, and said, "You boys is gentlemen and scholars, but I want a ham sandwich with potato chips!" Needless to say, he never got it.

The clientele of The Establishment was virtually all white. The only black man I recall coming in on a regular basis was Fred, the man who picked up the trash once a week. I'm not sure if he lived in Economy, and I don't recall seeing any other blacks there except one time when Corky and I were working together. A car pulled into the driveway, and two young black boys got out. The car was having some problems, and they needed help. They were clearly cautious about asking us to look at the car, but one of them assured us that they would pay for the work. Furthermore, he tried to put us at ease by

sharing the reason he and his companion were travelling our way. He said that the other fellow was being recruited to play basketball at Cincinnati, and they needed to be there by the appointed time for an interview and tryout. He announced this proudly and identified the basketball player by name. Corky sensed that they were uneasy and told them that we'd work quickly to get the car in shape so they could reach their destination on time. We fixed the problem, and they were shortly on their way. That they felt the need to justify why they were stopping in The Establishment made a lasting impression on me.

One other memory from my days at The Establishment dates from 1960. While picking up trash in the driveway one day, I found a printed sheet of paper that warned of the dangers of voting for the Catholic presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy. It was clearly written to scare people, claiming that if he were elected, the entire armed services of the United States would be under control of the Pope! Not one of my fonder memories of working there, but it brought home to me how pervasive are the prejudices in our land of the free and home of the brave. Of course, this was in the days when there was no Internet web to spread such garbage and falsehoods during a presidential election year.



The Establishment, Summer 1964: Collage of Memories

The final picture within the text of the chapter shows items that Corky and I gathered to remind us of that last summer when we worked together. It includes the coffee pot, a shotgun shell, books, the key to the restrooms, a fly swatter, playing cards, paper towels, an exercise bar equipped with surgical tubing for resistance strength training, and the bugle Corky used to intimidate the cows across the highway, yelling after he blew it: "No milk tonight!"



The people I met in Greens Fork and Economy were, by and large, good, honest, hardworking people, and the towns were pleasant little communities. We even have a family link to Economy through William Cheesman, whose daughter, Janet Ann, was my high school classmate, and who married my uncle, Edward Earl (Dick) Bolton. My thoughts return to Greens Fork and Economy from time to time, and I hope the stories presented in this chapter give you a sense of the strong influence the small towns and their inhabitants had on me. After working on farms and at a mill in and around Greens Fork and at

The Establishment in Economy, I was even more determined to finish my college education and never again have to bag wool, bale hay, de-tassle corn, or work long days in a service station.

NOTES

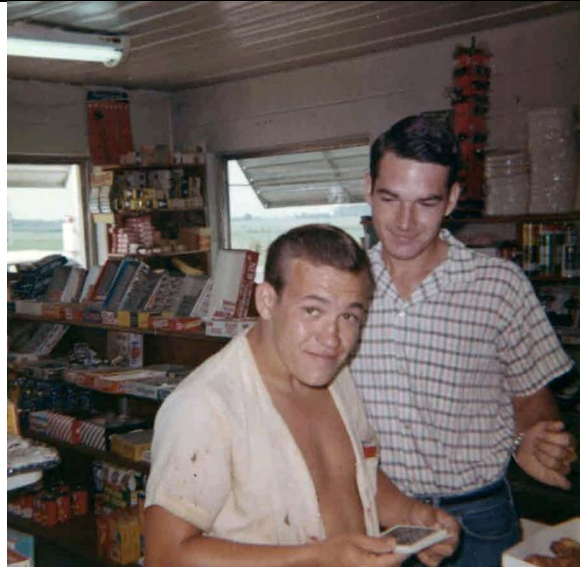
1. Becky's sister Lillian Laverne Kitts married Clyde Selvey Hall, and they lived in Williamsburg, Indiana at the time. Bobby Hall was their son. In the 1940 census under Vance Kitts are listed son Richard Kitts (13) and daughters Becky (19) and Peggy Ann Kitts (2). However, an 8/10/1958 Richmond *Palladium Item* that announced the engagement of Peggy Ann Kitts to Clarence Haynes says that Peggy is the granddaughter of Vance Kitts. Peggy confirmed the latter. She lived with her grandparents, and many assumed she was their daughter. Richard Kitts married Martha Jean Weyl in Economy on 4/25/1948. Peggy Kitts married Clarence Haynes first, then Lloyd Michael.
2. From Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melungeon> (accessed 10/7/2021): Melungeon is a term for people of the Southeastern United States who descended from European and Sub-Saharan African settlers. Historically, the Melungeons were associated with settlements in the Cumberland Gap area of central Appalachia, which includes portions of East Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and eastern Kentucky. Most modern-day descendants of Appalachian families traditionally regarded as Melungeons are generally European American in appearance, often (though not always) with dark hair and eyes, and a swarthy or olive complexion.

Appendix: Other Local Customers at The Establishment in Economy (with comments by Corky Richmond)

	
Willie (Gene) Huffine: "Two PA's and a pack of OCB's." (Prince Albert tobacco & cigarette paper)	Randy "Jack" Goodson: "Dollar's worth of gas, tax included."



Stanley Cook: "Couple quarts of oil, boy!" "How do ya like that horn, son?"



Rod Williamson (banker's son)



Bob Myers: "I'm left-handed, dammit!"



Vicky Myers: "Pierced ear lobes."



Willard Neuman



Willie Lauter" "Ya wanna hear a joke?" "If my wife calls just one more time. . ."



Unknown Name: "Cigarettes, cigars, bag of peanuts."



Unknown Name: "2 Camels, 2 Paxtons."

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