

Rolling Stores of Alabama

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MOST PEOPLE TODAY HAVE PROBABLY never heard of rolling stores, especially if they are under sixty years of age and were reared in the city. Yet these stores on wheels played an important role in the lives of many people who lived in rural areas in the 1930s and 1940s and to a lesser degree in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of them were subsistent farmers, sharecroppers, and day laborers who were thankful for the service provided by the rolling stores, and many have expressed that they do not know what they would have done without them. Their importance has not been emphasized until recently, when articles have appeared in some newspaper columns throughout the state and in a series of Alabama county heritage books. Jesse Culp of Chilton County writes a syndicated newspaper column about the good old days because he is concerned that many things, like rolling stores, are disappearing from the American scene and no one is recording this history.¹ George Thomas Jones wrote in the *Monroe Journal*:

If you are a native of Monroe County and born since 1974, you probably never saw a rolling store. And if you lived in a remote area of the county since that date, you missed the romantic era of these widely popular conveniences that performed one of the most unique services to more people than any time before or since.²

People who remember the rolling stores recall their being referred to as peddling trucks, peddling stores, or peddling wagons.³ Whatever

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¹Stephen Grauberger, "Rolling Stores Once Were Common in Rural Alabama," <http://www.arts.state.al.us/actc/articles/store.htm> (accessed January 27, 2004); Jesse A. Culp, telephone interview by author, November 7, 2002. Recordings of all interviews cited in this paper have been made part of the Audiotape and Videotape Collection, J. L. Bedsole Library, University of Mobile.

²George Thomas Jones, "Rolling Stores Were Boon to Rural Residents," *Monroe Journal*, December 14, 2000.

³Jeannine B. Mason, "McKee's Store at Whitehead," in *The Heritage of Lauderdale County*,

the vehicles were called, they were specially made trucks or converted school buses, wagons, or automobiles that carried a variety of goods into rural areas at a time when many people had no transportation to the city or to a nearby store. They provided a great service to many rural residents by bringing the store to the people, providing credit to them, and allowing them to trade farm goods for the store products. The customers were grateful. One example of this gratitude is seen in the actions of a man in Arkansas who wrote a letter to the family of a rolling-store operator in Coffee County, R. C. Grantham, and enclosed a check. He explained that while living in Alabama, he had received merchandise on credit from "Mr. R. C." but had moved after losing everything. He sent a check to the family to make things right because Grantham had helped his family survive during difficult times.⁴

Like Grantham, numerous entrepreneurs realized an opportunity to benefit financially and also provide a service to people in rural areas by operating rolling stores. To do so they had to pay a state license tax in every county in which they operated.⁵ During most of the 1930s and 1940s that tax was \$100 to the state, \$50 to the county, and 50 cents to the probate judge. Operators also had to pay license fees of \$15 to the state and \$7.50 to the county to sell cigarettes and tobacco, \$2.50 to the state and \$1.25 to the county to sell soft drinks, and 50 cents to the probate judge for any license obtained. Some owners operated in only one county because of the additional license fee required to operate in each county.⁶

Alabama, ed. Lauderdale County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 1999), 80; Jimmy New, "The History of New's Store: S. D. New Gen Mdse," in *The Heritage of Randolph County, Alabama*, ed. Randolph County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 1998), 45; "Curry Community," in *The Heritage of Walker County, Alabama*, ed. Walker County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 1999), 12; Vivian McCreary Taylor, *Backtracking the Wood Tick Trail: A History of Canby and Stapleton, Alabama* (Bay Minette, Ala., 1998), 56.

⁴Janette Grantham Carr, "R. C. Grantham's Rolling Store," in *The Heritage of Coffee County, Alabama*, ed. Coffee County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2002), 78.

⁵Ronnie Boone, interview by Dale Hall, October 1, 2002; *Code of Alabama* (1940, recompiled 1958), title 51, sec. 611; Fletcher T. Driver Jr., telephone interview by author, August 27, 2002.

⁶Report of Revenue License, folder "Covington County February–August 1945," Alabama Department of Revenue, SG 12908, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery; Eldon C. Simpson, telephone interview by author, August 26, 2002.

The rolling-store owners had vehicles that were similarly constructed and used. Quentin Nigg of Blount County got the chassis of a one-and-a-half-ton truck with a sixteen-foot bed, enclosed it, but left room for a front windshield. William King, who serviced people in Russell and Macon Counties, bought a school-bus engine and chassis on which he and his father-in-law built a wood and tin rectangular frame. It had a center aisle with shelves on each side and room for only two people to work, one taking orders at the door and the other filling the orders. Fletcher T. Driver Sr. of Conecuh County ordered a truck bed and built a body over it with a porch on the back that held a kerosene tank, put a chicken coop under the rear end, and installed shelves. Eldon C. Simpson of Blount County bought a 1939 Chevrolet truck body, enclosed it, installed shelves, and carried a kerosene tank on one side. Iva Bryant of Calhoun County helped her husband operate his rolling store, which he built by enclosing the chassis of a school bus with a sheet-metal frame and putting a door in back that opened to an aisle that allowed the operator to walk inside the vehicle from the front seat to the back. The shelves were slanted backward to keep the merchandise in place when the vehicle went over rough roads. This was very similar to many other rolling stores such as the big blue truck owned by Judge C. Everage in Andalusia, the box-shaped store owned by Edd Mannings and driven by Charles B. Vickery in Monroe County, and the store owned by B. J. Gorday and driven in Houston and Dale Counties by William Clearman.⁷

Similar descriptions of rolling stores are given by others who traded with or wrote about them. George Thomas Jones explained in an article in the *Monroe Journal* that owners of rolling stores custom built them on a one-and-a-half-ton truck chassis by constructing a wood floor, attaching two-by-four studs about seven feet tall, nailing sides to the studs, using two-by-fours as rafters for a flat roof made of tin,

⁷ Quentin Nigg, telephone interview by author, August 26, 2002; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; Driver interview; Simpson interview; Iva Bryant, interview by author, August 16, 2001; Rex Everage, e-mail to author, August 8, 2002, folder "Rolling Stores of Alabama," Vertical Files (hereafter cited as RSAVF), J. L. Bedsole Library, University of Mobile; Charles B. Vickery, interview by author, August 9, 2001; William Clearman, telephone interview by author, November 13, 2002.

and installing shelves that went from the floor to the ceiling. The owners usually made a side front door for the driver or passengers to enter and built a rear door leading onto a small covered platform where business transactions occurred. Numerous others remember the chicken coops under the bottom, on the back, or occasionally on the side; the counters on the side that were pulled down and used to measure cloth, display vegetables, or conduct business; and the center aisle with shelves on both sides that slanted back in order that the goods did not fall out as the vehicle traveled over rough, bumpy roads.⁸ For added protection over rough roads, some rolling stores had front panels on the shelves that kept goods from falling out but could be lifted in order for customers to see the merchandise. Some of the earlier vehicles, such as the Model T Ford truck, did not have starters and had to be cranked by hand, and arms were sometimes broken by the kickback of the crank. Kickback could occur even when the rolling store was a covered wagon drawn by a horse.⁹

Some people who were interviewed about their experiences with rolling stores gave short, interesting descriptions of them. They were "something like a school bus, only smaller"; "a flat-bed chassis with something like a utility building on it"; "a big, long bus-like vehicle with a door in back that served as an entrance for customers"; "covered wagons converted into" a store with steps to go inside; small stores on the back of trucks "which were on wagons earlier"; "Wal-Marts on wheels" because they "carried so many items"; a "ten-wheel farm truck built up and covered in the back"; "a big truck that was walled up in the back"; "a ten wheeler with a store on the back";

⁸Jones, "Rolling Stores Were Boon"; Warren T. Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," *Ford Truck Times*, March/April 1951, 25, folder "Cullman, Alabama," Vertical Files, W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama; Sibyl Jacobs, interview by Joy Rhodes, January 20, 2002; Eloise Vickers Jones, telephone interview by author, May 8, 2002; Judge Robert Bowden, telephone interview by author, November 5, 2002; Charles Dye, telephone interview by author, November 7, 2002; Ruby Robinson, interview by Ryan Smith, February 23, 2002; Jane Wade, interview by Benjamin Hill, September 26, 2002; Ernest Leslie Livingston, interview by author, May 13, 2002.

⁹Evelyn Hale, interview by author, July 26, 2001; Julius Elvin Howell, "Uncle Malcolm Roley's Rolling Store," in *The Heritage of Baldwin County, Alabama*, ed. Baldwin County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2001), 115; Joyce O. Braswell, interview by Tonya Overholtz, September 1, 2002.

and big cars packed with goods in the back and front seats from floor to ceiling, but with only one brand of anything.¹⁰ They were also described as being similar to FedEx trucks too packed to allow anyone inside, big vans, converted Ryder trucks, school buses with an entrance from the back, and modern short moving vans.¹¹ All of these descriptions paint a picture of vehicles that were very similar but had their individualized, modified differences. The same is true concerning the merchandise they carried. Most rolling stores had similar products, but some carried products that others did not.

Rolling stores normally carried almost everything a customer could find in a regular grocery store. They had practically anything needed in the kitchen for preparing meals: salt, sugar, flour, corn meal, compound lard, pure lard in buckets, baking powder and soda, pie-filling mix, milk powder, rice, coffee beans, loose tea, oatmeal, corn starch, grits, hoop cheese, bologna, bacon, salted meat, and canned goods. One popular canned item was potted meat, which customers mixed with eggs to make inexpensive sandwiches.¹²

The variety of edible products carried on rolling stores included soda pop, fresh fruits, and vegetables. Families could buy flour, sugar, and lard in quantities of 25 or 50 pounds. Some bought sugar in large quantities along with fruit jars for canning. A few bought as much as 100 pounds of sugar, probably for making a home brew, not necessarily on doctor's orders. People bought coffee beans and ground them at home, baking them first if they were green. Some

¹⁰ Julius Elvin Howell, "The Marshal-Pope Grocery Store and the 'Rolling Store,'" in *The Heritage of Perry County, Alabama*, ed. Perry County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 1999), 21; Joe Youngblood, telephone interview by author, June 18, 2002; Lavoid Carlson, telephone interview by author, August 27, 2002; Virgil Buck, interview by Ricky Smith, December 6, 2002; Culp interview; Frank Propst, interview by Jason Robbins, March 17, 2002; Bessie Lee Cooper, interview by Jon Durant, March 9, 2002; Leona Poston, interview by Jon Durant, March 14, 2002; Laura Ross Moore, interview by Joseph Christopher Terry, October 15, 2002; Norman Richardson, interview by author, May 8, 2002.

¹¹ Peggy Key, interview by Thad Key, October 1, 2002; Jennie Merchant, telephone interview by author, August 27, 2002; Judy Withers, interview by author, August 16, 2001; Robbie D. Andrews, interview by Meredith D. Bush, September 30, 2002; Wade interview.

¹² Eula Ward, interview by author, May 13, 2002; "Curry Community," 12; Rex Everage, e-mail to author, August 14, 2002, RSAVF; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; Carr, "R. C. Grantham's Rolling Store," 78; Sarah Brookshire, e-mail to author, August 15, 2002, RSAVF; Robinson interview; Jones interview.

store owners ground coffee early in the morning in order to have fresh coffee to sell on the route each day.¹³

Customers bought hoop cheese which the merchant sliced and weighed. It had a red rime and was usually kept in a wooden container. Drivers sold empty containers to customers who used them for various purposes. Some people still have these boxes. Nelle Battle of West Blocton uses hers for storing sewing materials.¹⁴

Customers could buy all sorts of household items including pots and pans and kits to mend them. Other household items carried by the stores on wheels included washing powder, liniments, salve, and lye used for making soap. Items for the bathroom included perfume, face powder, aspirin, combs, razor blades, bobby pins, and other sundry items. Hardware such as nails, screws, tools, axes, mops, brooms, rakes, rope, tubs, mousetraps, flashlights, batteries, and barbed wire could be purchased. Often the larger of these items were tied to the sides of the rolling stores.¹⁵

Country residents could get feed for cows, hogs, chickens, and horses. The women were the feed buyers because it came in sacks made of brightly printed fabrics, and they did not trust the men to select the sack patterns that would later become draperies, dresses, aprons, napkins, and tablecloths. When women purchased more than one sack they insisted on getting the same pattern of fabric. People exchanged empty sacks with neighbors until they had enough of one kind of print to make a dress or an apron. Similarly, flour sacks provided material for dresses and underwear, and customers could choose from a variety of prints used by brands such as Martha

¹³Jones interview; Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," 25; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; Brenda Real, "The Rolling Store," in *The Heritage of Marion County, Alabama*, ed. Marion County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2000), 80–81; Vickery interview; Bryant interview.

¹⁴Bryant interview; Helen Tucker, interview by Adrienne Casey, September 10, 2002; Withers interview; Driver interview; Charles E. Adams, e-mail to author, August 9, 2002, RSAVF.

¹⁵Ruby Robinson, interview by Ryan Smith, February 23, 2002; Jones interview; Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," 26; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; Francis Robb, e-mail to author, August 10, 2002, RSAVF; Propst interview; Carr, "R. C. Grantham's Rolling Store," 78; Driver interview; Real, "Rolling Store," 81.

White, Mother's Pride, and White Lily.¹⁶ Fertilizer sacks also provided material, sometimes for making sheets. Sack remnants could be used for quilts. People might also save string from sacks and wind them around corn cobs or other objects to prevent knotting and facilitate easy unwinding.¹⁷

The traveling merchants usually stocked bolts of cloth and sewing notions such as needle and thread and had stands on which to measure the cloth. They sold lots of denim used to patch the pants of children, who were not embarrassed because so many others wore patched pants. People could also buy ready-made clothes.¹⁸

The stores on wheels carried items that delighted the children. These included chewing gum, jelly beans, peanut butter logs, jaw breakers, Snickers, Baby Ruths, Milky Ways, Hershey's Kisses, Tootsie Roll Pops, coconut candy with three flavors, peanut butter balls, Sugar Daddies, and suckers. Other edibles were Stage Planks, Moon Pies, Po Boys, and Cracker Jacks. They also had toy pistols, wiggly rubber lizards, kites, and other toys.¹⁹

In the winter one popular item was kerosene, also called coal oil, which was burned in lamps because many people had no electricity. Rolling-store operators knew they should fill their tanks with this liquid each morning because many customers would meet them in anticipation of getting this fuel. The customer's container was often a gallon jug with a corn cob for a stopper.²⁰

The traveling merchants usually carried cigarettes, tobacco, cigars, and snuff. Tobacco was popular, and many people rolled cigarettes

¹⁶ Howell, "Marshal-Pope Grocery Store," 21; Real, "Rolling Store," 81; Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," 26; Key interview; Driver interview.

¹⁷ Elsie Herrod Golson, "Living in the Country," in *The Heritage of Autauga County, Alabama*, ed. Autauga County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2001), 54; Diane Dietlein-Cox, "It Was a 'Singer': If Only It Could Talk!" in *The Heritage of Chilton County, Alabama*, ed. Chilton County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2000), 137; Culp interview.

¹⁸ Jones interview; Driver interview; Vickery interview; Clearman interview; Austin L. Bonds, telephone interview by author, August 27, 2002; Youngblood interview; Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," 25; Livingston interview; Boone interview.

¹⁹ Everage e-mail, August 14, 2002; Bryant interview; Withers interview; Thomas Larry Smith, telephone interview, November 11, 2002; Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," 25, 27; Driver interview; Robb e-mail.

²⁰ Bonds interview; Linda Jolly Hallmark, "Philip Armstrong's Rolling Store," in *The Heritage*

in pieces of brown paper bags. Popular tobacco products included Bull Durham, Prince Albert, Garrett Snuff, Spark Plug, and Brown Mule.²¹

Some rolling-store drivers did not own their vehicle but were hired by an owner of a regular store in town. William Clearman, for example, lived near Dothan when he was hired to work in B. J. Gorday's grocery store and then drove Gorday's rolling store in Houston and Dale Counties from 1937 to 1941. Other drivers owned their own store in town, from which they obtained their merchandise for their rolling store. They either drove their own vehicle or hired someone to drive it.²² D. D. Real in Marion County built a regular store and at first drove a peddling truck while his wife ran the store. Eventually he hired other drivers. Some drivers owned their rolling store but not a regular store, so they secured their merchandise from wholesalers or retailers. Some rolling-store owners used part of their house for their store. Examples are Ervin and Nina Davis Williams, who started the first rolling store in Weogufka in Coosa County, and Evans Rodgers, who owned a store in Andalusia on East Three Notch Street, lived in the back of the same building, and kept his rolling store in a garage behind the house.²³

In Calhoun County, Iva Bryant and her husband went together on the route and alternated driving the rolling store. They obtained their supplies from wholesale stores in Anniston and had storage for the groceries in Wellington. They loaded the truck at night, left out at 7:00 in the morning, and covered five different routes, one

of *Blount County, Alabama*, ed. Blount County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 1999), 81; Clearman interview; Hale interview; Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," 25; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; Billy Thomas Nobles, telephone interview by author, August 19, 2002.

²¹ Hallmark, "Philip Armstrong's Rolling Store," 81; Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Stores," 25; Driver interview; Propst interview; Jones interview.

²² Vickery interview; Simpson interview; Bonds interview; Clearman interview; Jones, "Rolling Stores Were Boon"; Claude Eaves, interview by author, May 13, 2002; Nobles interview; Wade interview; Mary Casey, interview by Adrienne Casey, September 10, 2002; Priscilla Anne Parrell-Evans, "Williams Rolling Store," in *The Heritage of Coosa County, Alabama*, ed. Coosa County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 1999), 92; Everage e-mail, August 8, 2002; Culp interview; Boone interview; Propst interview.

²³ Real, "Rolling Store," 80–81; Parrell-Evans, "Williams Rolling Store"; Jacobs interview.

each weekday, so they went to each house weekly. They drove up to the doors of elderly people. On Saturday they took their chickens and eggs to Anniston, where they sold them, obtained supplies, and learned the price per pound for chickens and price per dozen for eggs in order to determine how much to pay for them on their routes. They weighed chickens by crossing their wings to keep them from moving when they put them on the scales. They bought or traded for eggs, which they candled to determine if they were good. Operators had to be careful about reselling bad eggs; consequently, they had to candle every egg by holding it up to a light to see if spots were on it. Some operators rolled a piece of brown paper to form a tube, inserted the egg into one end of the hollow cylinder, and held the other end to their eye while looking toward a light source. Charles Vickery explained another way. "You put a light in a can and leave a hole just big enough for the egg and you set that egg up on the top of that light and you can tell if it's rotten. You can tell if there are any impurities, blood spots or hatching eggs or rotten eggs."²⁴

Carter Gibbs in Cullman County started his day at 6:30 a.m., drove to the Gibbs Warehouse near Highway 31 in Hanceville, and restocked. He stood inside the rolling store and announced over a two-way communication system the goods he needed, and workers in the warehouse arranged the items. By 8:00 a.m. the store was loaded, and Gibbs began his fifty-mile route over rough, unpaved roads and through four old covered bridges. He returned to the warehouse in Hanceville about 8:00 p.m.²⁵

In 1939 in Garden City, Philip Calvin Armstrong, driving Eldon Simpson's 1939 Chevrolet panel truck, started loading at 6:00 a.m., left about three hours later, and went to different areas in Blount County, driving twenty-five to thirty miles a day on mostly dirt roads. If the weather was bad he might not return home until 11:00 at night. Simpson, the owner, got his goods from a wholesale store and built a small warehouse for them. If he ran out of supplies he obtained more from a local retail store and shared profits.²⁶ Evans Rodgers in

²⁴ Bryant interview; Andrews interview; Vickery interview.

²⁵ Musgrove, "Alabama Rolling Store," 27.

²⁶ Hallmark, "Philip Armstrong's Rolling Store," 81; Simpson interview.

Covington County secured goods for his rolling store as well as for his regular store in town from Sessions Grocery Company in Andalusia. He usually kept the eggs and chickens that he obtained on the route, candled and crated them, and sold them to a man who came to his home to buy them.²⁷

In Calhoun County, Emmett Boozer, a preacher, owned a stationary store in the Williams community near Jacksonville and also operated a rolling store. He hired young helpers in the summer, such as twelve-year-old Austin L. Bonds, who assisted with getting goods and opening the doors and windows. They loaded from about 6:30 to 8:30 a.m., started from the Williams community, and covered four routes each week, going toward Piedmont, Jacksonville, Gadsden, and Hokes Bluff. They had credit books for their customers. On Friday they took chickens, eggs, and butter to Anniston and sold them to processors and wholesalers.²⁸

In Monroe County, Edd Mannings of Excel also hired young men to help him. One was Charles Vickery, a high-school student who was hired to drive the truck during the summer and sometimes during the school year. The owner went to Mobile County every Wednesday to purchase flour from a flour mill and other merchandise like cloth, candy, and rice from wholesalers.²⁹

R. C. Grantham of Coffee County took his daughter, Janette, on his routes during the summer when she was not in school. She was not fond of starting before daylight, keeping the windows down because of hot weather, contending with dusty roads, and making numerous stops. Like most rolling-store drivers, "Mr. R. C." had a big, loud horn on the driver's side of the truck that could be heard for miles and sounded to some people like a train whistle. People would hear the horn, drop what they were doing, scramble to get their money and trade items, and assemble at the place where the truck stopped. There a crowd of excited children and adults would gather. Grantham was the "man of the hour" and would open the back door to allow people to enter the store. During the time of buying and selling he would tell folks about what was occurring in the world and

²⁷Jacobs interview.

²⁸Bonds interview.

²⁹Vickery interview.

nation. Grantham often got home after dark and then began loading for the next day.³⁰

Some operators bargained with customers, especially if they paid cash. Norman Richardson in Mobile County remembers his interest in watching his mother haggle over prices and sometimes succeeding in getting an item at a reduced cost. Jesse A. Culp said that haggling over prices was a way of life, and paying six or seven cents for a spool of thread that sold for ten cents was quite an accomplishment.³¹

Whether or not operators of rolling stores bargained with the customers, the large majority were prepared to trade with them because these rural families had little cash but all sorts of farm goods. Chickens, eggs, and butter were the most common trade items. Thomas L. Smith of Henry County said that his grandmother always had a pen full of red-feathered chickens and would swap eggs for something on the rolling store. Sometimes she churned fresh butter and traded it. Other commodities traded were shelled corn, jams, pecans, sweet potatoes, vegetables, syrup, and even smoked link sausage.³² Some unusual articles of commerce accepted by different rolling-store operators were pigs, calves, dogs, aprons, quilts, hand-split shingles, alligator skins, and calf skins.³³

Most rolling-store operators allowed customers to place special orders for goods that they did not normally carry on their routes. Usually the customer would get the ordered item on the next trip, which generally was the next week. On one occasion a lady south of Frisco City ordered a casket, and the rolling-store merchant, Charles Vickery, filled the order.³⁴

While some operators of rolling stores did business only on a cash

³⁰ Carr, "R. C. Grantham's Rolling Store," 20.

³¹ Moore interview; Bonds interview; Sally Davis, interview by Heather Wilkerson, September 27, 2002; Merchant interview; Richardson interview; Culp interview.

³² Parrell-Evans, "Williams Rolling Store," 92; Real, "Rolling Store," 81; Everage e-mail, August 14, 2002; Brookshire e-mail; Carlson interview; Thomas Smith interview; Hallmark, "Philip Armstrong's Rolling Store," 81; Graubeger, "Rolling Stores"; Andrews interview; Howell, "Marshal-Pope Grocery Store," 21; Nobles interview.

³³ Real, "Rolling Store," 81; Corbett Lee and Jocelyn Rayford, "The Rolling Store," in *The Heritage of Dale County, Alabama*, ed. Dale County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2001), 71; Abb Jackson Smith, interview by author, August 19, 2002.

³⁴ Jones, "Rolling Stores Were Boon"; Carr, "R. C. Grantham's Rolling Store," 78; Vickery interview.

or trade basis, many others allowed customers to purchase goods on credit and extend that credit until they had produced a crop. This practice was widespread because of the largely agrarian nature of rural Alabama. In Lauderdale County some customers of Lonza and Oscar McKee made payments of as little as one cent on their accounts. Some drivers did not permit credit unless they knew and trusted the customers. Normally the operator kept an account of the person's name and amount owed and expected payment every two to four weeks.³⁵

Some rolling-store merchants allowed customers to go inside the store, but others did not. Some patrons preferred to watch the scales when the driver weighed items. One interviewee said his father watched the weighing of the chickens and would act as if the driver might be cheating him, but it was cheerful teasing because customers generally trusted the dealers.³⁶

Rolling-store operators normally traveled set routes on each day of the week. Drivers sounded their horns to signal their arrival in the community, but customers usually knew when to expect them due to the regularity of the routes. William King developed six different routes in Russell County with "about 60 houses to visit for each single route." Charles Vickery in Monroe County covered about thirty miles on one route and sixty on another. The latter took him through Frisco City and almost to Spanish Fort.³⁷

In Marion and Lamar Counties the rolling store of D. D. Real took the following routes:

On Monday, the route was the present Highway 19 north to Hamilton and circled around to the Bexar Community. Tuesday was the day for restocking

³⁵ Key interview; Gertrude Byrd, interview by Heather Wilkerson, September 27, 2002; Sally Davis, interview by Heather Wilkerson, September 27, 2002; Mason, "McKee's Store at Whitehead," 80; Richardson interview; Otis Hughes, interview by Brandy M. Dawson, March 17, 2002; Henry Crenshaw, interview by author, June 4, 2002; Propst interview; Wade interview.

³⁶ Thomas Smith interview; Carlson interview; Bonds interview; Ernest Livingston interview; Ruby Davis, interview by Heather Wilkerson, September 27, 2002; Ladrester Collins, interview by Karen Stallworth, September 26, 2002; Wade interview; Hale interview.

³⁷ Irene Sanders, "Albert Nathan Kilpatrick," in *The Heritage of Pike County, Alabama*, ed. Pike County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2001), 435; Tucker interview; Dye interview; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; Vickery interview.

and placing orders. The Wednesday route went through the Cooper Church, Barnesville, Bull Mountain and Shottsville Communities and back home through the Ada Hanna Community. On Thursday the route started with Russ Cooper on the Cotton Gin Road (present Highway 17) to Hamilton. On Friday the route went through Detroit and turned right across the bottom to the Edgeworth's, Stone's, Farr's, Scogins', Guthrie Cut, and the Lundy Settlement, Watson's, and Nix's. Finally on Saturday "The Rolling Store" would go through Detroit to the Scotts', Lockridges', Lost Creek, Sulligent, Irvin's and to Pine Springs Community. When they reached Pine Springs they would eat lunch with Claude and Ella Norton. The peddler had married their daughter, Billie Fay, 6/8/1946. After lunch they would get back on "The Rolling Store" and stop by Murray Finch's, the Cliftons', Stanford's and Mrs. Salyers'.³⁸

In Mobile County, Claude Eaves started from Wilmer and covered routes that included the Wilmer–George Town Road that crossed Big Creek, the road to Chunchula, the Vickers Road to Kushla, the Tanner Williams Road to Howell's Ferry, and west on Highway 98 almost to the Mississippi state line. All were dirt roads. Eaves drove on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, starting around 7:00 a.m. and ending by 4:00 p.m.³⁹ James and Annie Oppert established a rolling store in the Asbury community, where James became known as Dale County's "Rolling Store Man." His vehicle, a wagon pulled by two black horses, traveled through Midland City, Pinkard, Newton, Daleville, Ariton, Mabson, Arguta, Echo, and Skipperville.⁴⁰

In Clarke County, Nathan Stephens covered a large area around the Whatley and Ashbury communities and Thomasville. Fletcher T. Driver Sr. and Fletcher Jr. operated in Monroe, Conecuh, Wilcox, and Clarke Counties. In Monroe County, Fletcher Jr. serviced people in Fountain, Bermuda, Ripton, Evergreen, Chestnut, Buena Vista, Burnt Corn, and Peterman. In Blount County, Eldon Simpson's routes included Blount Springs, Hayden, and Sky Bald. The Bryants covered half of Calhoun County, including Vinegar Bend out from Heflin. Jamie Easley drove Judge C. Everage's store into the rural

³⁸ Real, "Rolling Store," 80.

³⁹ Jones interview; Eaves interview.

⁴⁰ Jo-Ellen Mims Willis, "James and Annie Oppert," in *The Heritage of Dale County, Alabama*, ed. Dale County Heritage Book Committee (Clanton, Ala., 2001), 330.



This converted heavy-duty Chevrolet truck with a homemade shell was typical of the boxy rolling stores that roamed the country roads of Alabama. (Courtesy of Stephen Grauberger, Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, Montgomery)

areas of southeast Covington County. William Clearman serviced the Houston County communities of Blackwood, Silver Grove, Hunter's Crossroads, and Love Town.⁴¹

The traveling merchants had interesting experiences on their routes. In Blount County, Quentin Nigg had to drive into the back yard of one house in order to do business because the front was in Jefferson County, and he would have to pay another license fee to operate in an additional county. William King, who operated in Russell and Macon Counties, remembers buying a case of little girls' dresses and selling all of them on the first road of his route. At church that Easter Sunday, "every little girl had the same color dress on." In Calhoun County, Iva Bryant and her husband stopped for a mother

⁴¹ Withers interview; Driver interview; Simpson interview; Bryant interview; Everage e-mail, August 8, 2002; Clearman interview.

with three children whose ages ranged from three to six years. They tugged at their mother's dress as she tried to decide which items to buy. The Bryants assumed that the children wanted candy, but the mother bought tobacco and gave each a plug; this became their weekly treat. Fletcher Driver Jr. recalls selling a vision-impaired man some Ex-Lax for his constipation and warning him not to take too much. On the next trip he learned that the man liked the taste of the Ex-Lax so much that he ate the whole box. He also remembers raising the lid on a chicken coop, letting a prized hen escape, and chasing it for thirty minutes before giving up the chase when the hen escaped into a swamp. Charles B. Vickery of Monroe County had more success with his nine roosters that got out of their coop in downtown Mobile; people on the street, even men in business suits, helped catch them. A fancy restaurant across from the Battle House Hotel bought them to make chicken salad. Vickery also carried six pairs of shoes in his store. One day a lady tried on a pair, inquired about the size, and announced that she wanted to order that size from Sears. Abb Smith remembers children crying for their mother to buy flour for biscuits and bread because they were tired of eating cornbread.⁴²

Customers also had memorable experiences with the rolling stores. As a child in rural central Alabama, Alexander Sartwell knew the rolling store was near when he heard a familiar cry by the first person to spot the peddler—"ROOOLLLIN STOAHHHHHH, ROOOLLLIN STOAHHHHHH.' It was the excitement I imagine one heard when a great whale had been sighted by a lookout aboard a whaler at sea." He described his memory to the late Michael D. Goodson, a student at the University of Alabama, who then wrote the lyrics of a song and convinced his professor, Harry Phillips, to compose the music. It was performed and sung in Morgan Auditorium sometime in the early 1970s and was published by Highgate Press in 1981 as "The Rollin' Store." It describes the coming of the store, the merchandise it carried, including mousetraps and head wraps, and the anticipation

⁴² Nigg interview; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; Bryant interview; Jones, "Rolling Stores Were Boon"; Vickery interview; Abb Smith interview.

of the people as they wait by the road.⁴³ Don Bond and childhood friends in Dale County were so impressed by the stores on wheels that they would get under a shade tree and play rolling store. One person would be the driver, and the other children ordered goods that the driver pretended to get.⁴⁴

Rolling-store operators faced numerous problems on their routes. Perhaps most common was the bad condition of unpaved roads. Truck stores frequently slid off muddy roads and got stuck, but often the driver could expect to get neighborly help from a nearby farmer. Drivers sometimes had to turn around because of washed-out roads or bridges covered by water in a low-lying area. Blount County had a number of narrow covered bridges just wide enough for the store on wheels to cross. Iva Bryant remembers not being able to go through a covered bridge in the area of Ohatchee in Calhoun County and being forced to turn around.⁴⁵ Despite their efforts to secure loose items, drivers occasionally experienced kegs of nails falling onto the road, items falling off the shelves, eggs being cracked, and syrup jars being overturned.⁴⁶

Other difficulties on the route included operating a rolling store without a helper, encountering vicious dogs, buying syrup that soured easily, overcrowding their chickens until they died in the heat, lacking bathroom facilities on the route, and spending the night in the rolling store after being stranded on the side of the road. These mobile merchants always faced the possibility of their vehicles getting stuck or overturning. They faced rain, sleet, and snow but kept driving because their customers depended on them.⁴⁷

They also faced the possibility of accidents, which were not frequent but did occur. In Baldwin County, Malcolm Roley stopped to get gas one night after completing his route. The station attendant pumped

⁴³ Alexander Sartwell, e-mail to author, February 6, 2002, RSAVF; H. Garrett Phillips, *The Rollin' Store: for SATB Chorus with Soprano and Baritone Soli and Harp or Piano* (New York, 1981).

⁴⁴ Don Bond, interview by Kelley Senda, October 1, 2002.

⁴⁵ Clearman interview; Driver interview; Real, "Rolling Store," 81; Nigg interview; Bryant interview.

⁴⁶ Wade interview; Real, "Rolling Store," 81; Vickery interview.

⁴⁷ Driver interview; Byrd interview; Clearman interview; Vickery interview; Bowden interview; Jones, "Rolling Stores Were Boon."

the gas by hand. Because the station had no electricity, he used a kerosene lantern to see how much fuel was in the tank. When he placed the lantern over the open tank, the fumes exploded and the truck caught fire. Roley was burned badly, contracted pneumonia, and died several weeks later.⁴⁸ In Walker County, Homer Rutherford was traveling on one of his routes on a cold day in December 1944. After losing consciousness from the carbon monoxide produced by a kerosene heater, he ran off the road and was killed. On April 12, 1949, robbers shot Fletcher Driver Sr. with a German Luger and got away with \$112.33.⁴⁹

Despite the risks associated with their operation, rolling stores were profitable for their owners and, in many cases, were essential to their appreciative customers. Transportation was a problem for many people, some of whom owned only horses or mules rather than automobiles.⁵⁰ Bessie Cooper of Baldwin County said she would rather wait on the rolling store than drive the horse and buggy, her only transportation, to Robertsedale. Eloise Jones in Mobile County said that her family owned no automobile, and the nearest store was seven miles from their house. Robbie Andrews's family in Clarke County lived five miles from Grove Hill, a long trip on foot or by mule wagon, so rolling stores were a great help. Evelyn Hale of Monroe County said that some people used two good wheels from their worn-out Model T Fords to make "Hoover Carts" that were pulled by a horse or a mule. They did not go to town often, so the rolling stores served a need. People in the country also looked forward to the news that they received from the rolling-store driver.⁵¹

In fact, the coming of the rolling store was a social occasion that broke the monotony of rural life, provided excitement, and brought isolated neighbors together when they assembled at a central place and visited while awaiting the arrival of the traveling merchant. The driver was a source of news for many people, especially if they

⁴⁸ Driver interview; Donald interview.

⁴⁹ "Curry Committee," 12; Driver interview.

⁵⁰ Howell, "Marshal-Pope Grocery Store," 21; Culp interview; Nobles interview; Key interview.

⁵¹ Cooper interview; Jones interview; Andrew interview; Hale interview; Wade interview; Collins interview; Culp interview.

had no radio. He informed them about events in town, and they informed him about church activities, sick people, and visitors in the neighborhood. In many cases the visit of the rolling store was not rushed but was like a neighborly gathering of friends who built trust in each other. Some drivers got out of their trucks to converse with customers or perhaps to tell jokes.⁵² S. L. Leak, who owned a stationary store in Bay Minette and drove a store on wheels, served as a “news messenger” by keeping his customers abreast of the latest news and carrying messages from one house to another. On the other hand, some drivers did not take time to socialize because they felt the need to sell, trade, and continue their lengthy route, particularly in areas where the customers lived far apart and had little opportunity to congregate.⁵³

These stores were a blessing to many people—to mill village people living in shotgun houses with no room for a garden; to poor farmers and sharecroppers whose transportation was walking, riding a mule, or driving a wagon; to people who had to walk a distance to the grocery store and could not carry many groceries back home; to country housewives who could get items for cooking on a regular basis; to people who did own cars but had to limit their use when gasoline was rationed during World War II; to farm families able to get goods on credit but pay for them after the crops were harvested; to housewives unable to spend time or money traveling to a regular store to purchase a few items; and to elderly folks fortunate enough to have the rolling store pull close to their house. Some customers showed their appreciation to drivers by providing them with coffee.⁵⁴

Some rolling-store operators assisted people in extraordinary ways. Janette Grantham Carr relates that she was riding with her father, R. C. Grantham, in Coffee County when he encountered an elderly woman who looked longingly at some sewing items but could not afford to buy them. He noticed an old faded bonnet she was wearing,

⁵² Robinson interview; Carr, “R. C. Grantham’s Rolling Store,” 78; Tucker interview; Thomas Smith interview; Jones interview; Byrd interview.

⁵³ Propst interview; Culp interview.

⁵⁴ Nobles interview; Jones interview; Robinson interview; Dye interview; Real, “Rolling Store,” 81; Lee and Rayford, “Rolling Store,” 71; Bryant interview; Culp interview; Jones, “Rolling Stores Were Boon”; Richardson interview.



E. L. Bryant of Brundidge operated "The Big Store" in Pike County in the late 1940s. (Courtesy of Evann Hood Overstreet, Bryant's granddaughter)

stated that his wife could use a new bonnet, and asked if she could make one. She said she would have it ready the following week. Grantham's wife did not wear a bonnet, but he knew that the elderly lady would not accept the sewing materials without trading her labor for them. On numerous occasions Judge C. Everage of Covington County carried boxes of groceries to needy families in the country and socialized with them for a while "to keep them from feeling the sting of charity." When they inevitably offered to pay, he would tell them to repay him when they could.⁵⁵

Children especially looked forward to the coming of the rolling store. During the summer or after school, drivers would often see them on the side of the road, dancing or moving excitedly in anticipation of the arrival of the store on wheels. Many parents allowed their children to collect eggs to trade for a goody. The most memorable part of the rolling store for most children was the candy.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Carr, "R. C. Grantham's Rolling Store," 78; Everage e-mail, August 8, 2002.

⁵⁶ Real, "Rolling Store," 81; Taylor, *Backtracking the Wood Tick Trail*, 6; Grauberger, "Rolling Stores"; William R. Crowley, interview by Claire Capdepon, August 31, 2002; Bond interview; Bryant interview; Culp interview; Mona Wright, e-mail to author, August 25, 2002, RSAVF; Thomas Smith interview.

Customers had different opinions about the prices charged by the rolling-store owners. While some thought their prices were the same as the regular stores in town, others thought the prices were higher but believed this was necessary due to the time, effort, and money spent in servicing the customers. Others concluded that people would not have traded with the rolling-store operators if their prices had been too high.⁵⁷

Although the stores on wheels served well the owners, operators, and customers, their demise was inevitable because of improved economic conditions, improved transportation means and routes, and the increased employment of women in the workplace, which provided the family with more cash with which to shop in town where they worked.⁵⁸ So “the economy moved out of the Depression, ladies moved out of the kitchen, and the Rolling Stores moved out of business.”⁵⁹

A few rolling stores are still in operation, including the one that Junior Walker operates in Montgomery County on a part-time basis close to the border of Pike County.⁶⁰ For the most part, however, they are a phenomenon of the past—a memory, a fond remembrance, a thread that no longer weaves its path through the Alabama historical tapestry but is still woven in the fabric of many human hearts and minds.

⁵⁷ Jones interview; Collins interview; Propst interview; Buck interview; Leslie Duck, interview by Jamie Blair, September 13, 2002; Cooper interview; Robinson interview.

⁵⁸ Jones, “Rolling Stores Were Boon”; Judy Rush, interview by John Patrick, September 27, 2002.

⁵⁹ Lee and Rayford, “Rolling Store,” 71.

⁶⁰ Grauberger, “Rolling Stores.”