

CORNER SHOP (Published in Perspectives, The Courier-Mail, 2003)

Our corner shop has closed down. It didn't make the headlines and it will no doubt fade into the memories of yesterday like so many other corner shops, but it was a sad event around here.

Apart from anything, from now on we'll have to think ahead and make sure we've got enough milk for breakfast cereals. No longer possible is the sprint up the street to get the emergency morning supply.

We were alright the day after the shop closed however, because I'd bought their last bottle. It was full fat and my partner and I always get reduced, but the distinction seemed trivial under the circumstances.

Some will say, "so what" about the closure. Corner shops are relics of the past, like home delivered bread and correctly placed apostrophes. Everyone's got a car and the supermarkets are open around the clock, so who needs a dumpy little building nearby that sells groceries with dubious use-by dates at marked up prices? Sure, they might be useful if you run out of milk or have a chocolate craving, but otherwise you can safely avoid them.

That's the attitude that's contributed to our little corner shop's demise, and admittedly I'm guilty of frequently feeling the same way over the years. On the odd occasion that I might've been doing some baking and realised a crucial ingredient was missing, I'd head for the supermarket rather than risk buying icing sugar or flour that might've seen better days than sitting for a few months in an unairconditioned environment.

But it was nice to know it was there. Just in case. That doesn't put food on the shopkeepers' table though, does it?

Shopkeepers. It's an old-fashioned term. How many shopkeepers are there these days? There are shop owners and shop assistants, but shopkeeping is a notion probably destined to fade into oblivion in the 21st century along with corner shops.

What we want, or rather what we've been conditioned to expect, is 24-hour convenience. Too bad about the poor employees of all these shops who have to forego any semblance of a family life to front up on nights, Sundays, and what used to be public holidays. But the mighty dollar must win every time. And who among us will be shocked when 24-hour trading is introduced? As each barrier is knocked down, it paves the way.

Our local shopkeepers, who I'll call Mr. and Mrs. B., finally had to close their doors after 13 years when Sunday trading came in. A few years back, the introduction of night trading hurt them badly but they struggled on, staying open every day and night for those who patronised them for basic items such as papers, bread, milk and cigarettes. But they just couldn't survive when their Sunday trade went as well.

It was a disheartening sight the last week they were open as they let their stocks go down, never to be replenished. The rack for potato chips and the like had dwindled to two packets, one of the fridges had been turned off with its few lonely items placed in the other fridge, and the small oven that held meat pies was emptied and unplugged.

I went up to say good-bye on the last day, and Mrs. B. said she'd received a bottle of champagne from one tearful customer and a bunch of flowers from another. She regretted that she wouldn't get to watch my baby grow up as she loved seeing her so much when we called in.

It's that seemingly insignificant but actually crucial sense of community which our corner shop helped foster. We didn't say we were going to the shop, but rather that we were going to B...'.s. They were people who ran it, not a corporate name.

Mr. B., always on hand with a dry-witted comment, would sit out back watching TV between serving the ever-decreasing number of customers. Mrs. B. would often be on the phone, barely interrupting her chatty conversation to tell you the price of your purchase. Or sometimes they'd both be trying to control the sea of young grandchildren visiting and causing havoc in the shop.

But it's all gone now, and newspapers cover the insides of the windows. We'll have to keep making sure we've got enough milk for our breakfast cereals the night before, but it's much more than that slight inconvenience that irks. It's a piece of personal and community history gone forever.

Vicki Englund

ends  
approx. 750 words