

Editor's Word

By Douglas C. Towne

My hiking companion, David Cordova, and I were on a Rocky Mountain high after a backpacking trek on which we hoofed it above timberline to a campsite overlooking North Park, Colorado. Wallowing in the comfort of his stately Oldsmobile 98 on the ride home, David skillfully navigated through the darkness of the Poudre River Canyon while I spun the radio dial. Catching a clear signal at 93.3 from KTCL, an alternative rock station broadcasting from nearby Fort Collins, I heard “Corner Store” for the first time. This tune by Jonathon Richmond and the Modern Lovers echoed my already burgeoning, mid-1980s rebellion against an increasingly monotonous commercial landscape:

I don't care if you have to walk longer,
I'll walk further, I'll pay more,
I don't really want what the new mall got,
I want what they got in that corner store.

I felt this same sentiment when I read Guy Carville's story about Borden's Ice Cream Store featured in this issue. Not surprisingly, in the mood for ice cream, I weighed my convenient options: Carvel's and Dairy Queen. Either seemed a paltry substitute to a banana split dished up in a vintage chrome parlor by magna cum laude soda jerk, Ella Meaux, who has worked her magic at Borden's for 45 years. In the end, I eschewed both predictable options and spared my waistline. But make no mistake, calories—and money—are irrelevant if I ever find myself in Lafayette, Louisiana, and Ella is still dishing out ice cream.

There are other unique ice cream parlors I've been fortunate to visit such as Gunther's in Sacramento,

California, (thanks to Dave Van Hulsteyn) and Farr's in Ogden, Utah—both of which were astonishing for their ambiance and selection of flavors. But sadly, my favorite soda fountain is no longer with us.

Dolly Madison consisted of dairy stores (19 at their peak) and a processing plant started in 1941 in Denver. A family favorite, we often skipped the convenience of buying dairy products at the grocery store and made a special trip to the nearby wood-paneled Dolly Madison outlet for milk, cottage cheese, eggs, and, our favorite, butter brickle or peppermint ice cream—scooped into an open cardboard container and only partially covered with wax paper, making it far from air-tight. I remember wondering at the time how something so precious could be so haphazardly packaged.

On a few occasions, we were allowed to order treats from the soda fountain. My older brother Mark, one not especially given to nostalgic comments, years later definitively declared that something as generic as Coke always tasted best while spinning on a chrome stool at the Dolly Madison counter.

Even in the 1970s, entering a Dolly Madison store seemed like a step back in time. The employees were often kindly ladies, many of whom appeared to have been with the company since its inception. The ambiance was of another era—sort of like visiting your grandmother's house—which both contributed to its allure and made it difficult to compete against its shiny new rivals. Unable to capitalize on its retro elements and suffering from the influence of supermarkets and national ice cream chains, Dolly Madison

closed its remaining eight stores in 2001, much to the dismay of their sagging fan base. The final blow to the company was the death of its patriarch, Ed Tepper, at age 89. As a Dolly Madison employee commented at the time, “You look at this store and it is still 1950. It's a fun business. I'm just sorry to see it go.”

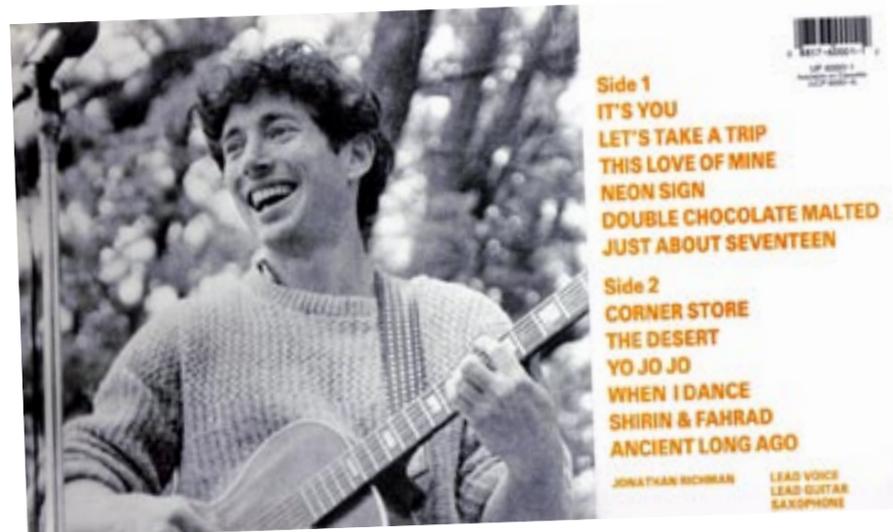
Whether a soda fountain—or motel, diner, or drive-in theater—many of our once-cherished commercial outlets are gone. Those that remain lead a tenuous existence, unsure whether a roadway expansion project, the passing of the establishment's founder, or changing customer tastes might be their death knell. Even when a new

owner appears with a reverence for the business—and deep pockets—there are no guarantees. The cost of renovating, upgrading electrical and water systems, and dealing with hidden environmental costs such as asbestos and lead paint are costly. With such hurdles to overcome, are these vintage enterprises destined to fade into history like the milkman? Will anyone even notice? Is society's affection for these commercial establishments based largely on a romanticized notion? Does the fact that the majority of people don't patronize them speak more loudly than words?

Whatever the answers to these questions, the SCA's mission seems more important than ever with the increasing rate of change along the roadside. One thing is for sure, as in the biological world, extinction is forever. They can't come back, and reproductions don't begin to replace the loss, no matter how wistful the last stanza in “Corner Store”:

I wish the worst for the place I shop,
I don't expect you're gonna know what I mean,
I see a trend that has got to stop,
I want them to put back that corner store.

Jonathan Richman's 1986 release, *It's Time For*, features “Corner Store” and other roadside-themed tracks such as “Let's Take A Trip,” “Neon Sign,” and “Double Chocolate Malted.” This Boston musician has been called “The Godfather of Punk” and his legendary 1972 group, The Modern Lovers, featured future members of the Cars and the Talking Heads. Richman later turned to acoustic music and is perhaps best known for his role in the 1998 movie, *There's Something About Mary*.





Gunther's #1, 2, 3 & 4 – A talented soda jerk known as “Juglin’ Joe” launches a scoop of ice cream over his head and into the cone every eight seconds in this animated neon sign advertising Gunther’s Ice Cream at 2801 Franklin Boulevard in Sacramento, California. The ice cream parlor was started in 1940 and the sign, designed by Herman “Pops” Gunther, dates from 1949. Photo Credit for #4: Tspauld



Dolly #1 – A huge neon sign announced the location of the Dolly Madison Ice Cream sign on East Colfax Avenue (formerly U.S. 40) in Denver in 1988.

Dolly #2 – This nighttime view of the interior of the East Colfax Dolly Madison store shows the ice cream counter, wood-paneled walls, and—tellingly—a paucity of customers on this Friday night.

Farr’s Ice Cream #1 & 2 – You can find Farr’s Ice Cream in stores throughout the inter-mountain West, or you can journey to Ogden, Utah, to sample over 50 flavors at the company store beneath the giant rooftop neon sign at 286 East 21st Street. Dating back to 1929, the company’s name provides a catchy slogan: “Farr Better Ice Cream.”

All images Douglas Towne unless where noted.



Chuck's Corner Featuring photos from the collection of artist and photographer Chuck Biddle.

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