

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 5, 2009

Visiting Wilmington, Then and Now: Someone my age finds it easy to get lost today in downtown Wilmington, this despite the fact that I went to school there in the 1930s, often visited its many stores with my parents, and had a travel agency there for 14 years, 1949–63.

In my earlier years, there were no shopping centers or malls where almost everything can be purchased very close to where your car is parked. Shopping for us at Yorklyn was at Grover Gregg's general store or going by car to Kennett Square (4 miles) or to Wilmington (10 miles). Most of our food and pharmacy shopping was done in Kennett, as was our banking, as my father was on the Board of the National Bank and Trust Company of Kennett Square. But 90% of the other serious shopping was done in Wilmington (three or four times a year my mother would go to Philadelphia, either by being chauffeured or on the train from Wilmington).

My mother would often frequent Crosby & Hill, Kennard and Pyle Company (Kennard's), and Wilmington Dry Goods, not to mention F. W. Woolworth and S. S. Kresge 5-and-10-cent stores, all fronting on Market Street, with back doors accessible to Shipley or King Streets, where it was easier to park, usually illegally. My mother, a tiny woman only 5'1" tall, was good at talking her way out of parking tickets. Purchases at these stores were usually dry goods, such as cloth, towels and bed linens, cotton thread, and much more not very interesting to a young boy. But then there was the Reynolds Candy Company at 703 Market. The most interesting thing most of these stores had was the system for getting cash collected by the clerk at the counter to the bookkeeper at a hidden location one or two floors above. A mechanical system of tubes and light rope moved a canister with clicking noises similar to an electric trolley car to its destination, with the proper change and a receipt coming back on the return trip. Electronic banking today would marvel at the speed of these transactions. Most of my clothes came from James T. Mullin & Sons at 6th and Market, where the third floor, complete with a small merry-go-round, was devoted to boys' clothing. Rosenbaum's Toy Store between 8th & 9th on Market was a wonderful place to look at and buy Lionel electric trains. There were good furniture stores, such as Wilmington Furniture Company and Miller Brothers, across from each other at the corner of 9th and King Streets.

My father's trips to "town" usually involved a stop at Mac's Texaco station at Pennsylvania Avenue and Union Streets, where B & O steam passenger trains could be viewed crossing an overhead bridge, a visit to the Delaware Electric Supply Co. (Desco Corporation, much more of a plumbing supply house than it was electrical), and to the Delaware Hardware Company, the latter two located on Shipley Street between 2nd and 3rd. Desco was never the same when it moved out of town and became McArdle-Desco, and when Delaware Hardware Co. went out of business, nothing ever quite replaced it. (The discounts were attractive: I bought a hand truck about 1948 that listed for \$40; after all the discounts, I paid \$31.36, and we are still using this hand truck in our shop today.) Back to the 1930s, after dropping my cousin and me off at school, my father would frequently make his rounds of these supply houses and also stop at the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington, where his partner, Frank W. Diver, was successful in selling and servicing Packard cars (after 1936 at the present location of Diver's Chevrolet).