

Mr. Scrim

by Gordon Laird

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"Stop that infernal whistling!"

I hadn't noticed the tune that was on my lips as I stocked the shelves. But I had learned to receive my boss's outburst without taking it too personally. Mr. Scrim ran the grocery store like his own domain with his own rules. I would now call him a curmudgeon.

Even now, some 50 years later, I think of Mr. Scrim whenever I brush my teeth! I take care to use up every bit of the contents of one toothpaste tube before opening a new one. I had been carefully trained in what I later learned to call the "FIFO" system of inventory control: First In, First Out. When I stocked the shelves I was careful to bring the older stock to the front, and carefully place the new stock behind it.

This was even more critical with oranges and grapefruits! Oh, oranges were not dumped into a bin, they were carefully stacked in pyramid-like structures, so as to look inviting from the front window.

Even today I buy the potatoes in our family. That's because I learned the mysteries of the various kinds of potatoes from Mr. Scrim: "Dry-belt" potatoes, grown in Ashcroft, in the dry interior of B. C., were best for baking. "Wet-belt" potatoes, grown in the Fraser Valley, were best boiled.

I learned about cheese in Mr. Scrim's store on 41st and Yew, in Kerrisdale. Prior to that all cheese was Velveeta. But when I had opened a round cheese box myself, and placed the huge wheel-shaped round of cheese under its glass cover, and then when I cut off pieces for customers with a wire (and often a sliver for myself) I have never recovered from experiencing "Real Cheese". I tasted my first exotic cheese in Mr. Scrim's store: real blue cheese. I was hooked for life!

I learned how to pack groceries with careful attention not to pack the soap near flavour-sensitive food items, such as cheese, or even pasta. I still

watch the Safeway bag-boy carefully to this day, to see if he knows how to pack the bags.

Mr. Scrim was usually grumpy and complained about constant pains in his legs from wartime injuries. And the war was not far behind us: chocolate bars were still hidden under the counter and were doled out carefully to "good customers".

Many people ordered their groceries by phone, and they had learned to rely on the good advice of Mr. Scrim, as I had. Purchasing your groceries was not simply a matter of reciting off your prepared list. There was a discussion with Mr. Scrim about "what looked nice today".

Among my duties were: Oiling the floor. Lighting the oil stove. Sweeping the sidewalk in front of the store. Scraping the ice from the sides of the open deep-freeze. Cleaning the employees' bathroom, which was unbelievably filthy. I acquired the reputation as a good bathroom cleaner!

I don't know what became of Mr. Scrim, but I do know he lives on in me, whenever I use up the last of something before starting something new. I am a "FIFO" kind of person. But I am still whistling!