

# Harris Grocery Revives Past Memo

**Editor's Note:** This is the third article in a four - part series on the Town of Occoquan which will observe its centennial next year.

By Ann Holiday

Harris Grocery is to people who have grown up in Occoquan what the memory of the corner store is to folks from small towns across the United States.

"You could come in here years ago and get practically anything you wanted to get," recalls Raymond Harris, whose father, Ogle Harris, started the business more than 55 years ago selling homemade ice cream on weekends.

So much a part of Occoquan is the store that the sketch of it by Billy Joe Shin of Woodbridge was a top contender in the sketch contest held by the Merchants of Occoquan, Historic Occoquan and the town to raise funds to celebrate the town's centennial in 1974 and the nation's bicentennial in 1976.

Shin's sketch is one of five now on sale in a limited signed edition at selected Occoquan shops.

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People would bring fresh produce from their farms to be sold by Ogle Harris and Sons. Briggs and Armour supplied sausage, hot dogs and luncheon meat.

Ogle Harris was known for his fresh meat. He would buy a side of beef or lamb and cut it up himself. People came from as

far as Lorton and Quantico for steaks, and even people who kept their own stores would come to Harris Grocery for steaks, Raymond Harris boasts.

Ogle Harris ran the store for 35 years before he died in 1949, according to one of his daughters, Saluka Toliver, who lives across the street. Mrs. Toliver, Raymond Harris and their six brothers and sisters were all born in "the home place," she said, nodding toward the handsome green-trimmed white house on the corner just up from the store. The present house replaces the family's original home.

Ogle Harris was born in a house which stood next to the home place.

The sketch was made from in front of the white house. In the yard between the house and the store, now enclosed by the fence in the sketch, Ogle Harris started making ice cream by hand in a 10 - quart freezer.

On Saturdays and Sundays, people would stop to buy ice cream to take home or eat there, and sales totaled as much as 25 gallons on a weekend, according to Raymond.

"Most of the trade was white," Mrs. Toliver recalls. "They came from Woodbridge, Lorton, all over." Many people in Woodbridge and Occoquan

today can remember regular family outings to Ogle Harris' ice cream place.

The cream came from a farm not far outside town, and the flavors were chocolate and vanilla" and it seems to me he made peach and strawberry," Mrs. Toliver said.

The ice cream business grew into a store which "had a little bit of everything," she remembers, "but not as much as Mr. Lynn" who had shoes and rubbers. Lynn's Store is the only other remaining general store in town.

After Ogle Harris started to keep the store, he stopped making the ice cream and started getting it from Sealtest. At first, he remained working at the wharf on Mill Street while his wife and son Arthur minded the store. After the wharf closed, the elder Harris had more time for his store.

He and Arthur worked together, and Arthur carried on after his father's death. When Arthur died, his widow Doris took over. In recent weeks Raymond, retired after 31 years with the government, has been tending the store.

The family lived above the store when the original home was torn down and the present house built. Mrs. Toliver remembers playing house in the space under the old building. Later, the playhouse became a

storage area for 100 - pound sacks of feed and for cases of soda pop.

Canned goods, soap, kerosene, seeds, thread, spices — you name it and Ogle Harris was likely to have it or tell you where in town you could get it. There were as many as five stores operating at once in Occoquan, all quite amicably, as Mrs. Toliver remembers it and they would refer customers to each other for merchandise they didn't have.

Arthur brought the fishing tackle into the store. "He would go fishing after he closed the store and reel in maybe a 15 - pound bass," as Raymond tells it. Other fishermen would observe and ask what he was using for bait. They'd follow him back to the store and buy the special bait — Pleuger Artificial Bait.

"He was a salesman," Raymond smiled.

Fishermen now account for the bulk of the store's business on weekends. Raymond gets 500 night crawlers every two weeks to serve his regular customers. The night crawlers are likely to be sold packed in one of the old yellowed cartons left over from the ice cream days. Raymond found a supply of the wire - handled paper cartons in the attic when he came back to Occoquan to live after retiring.

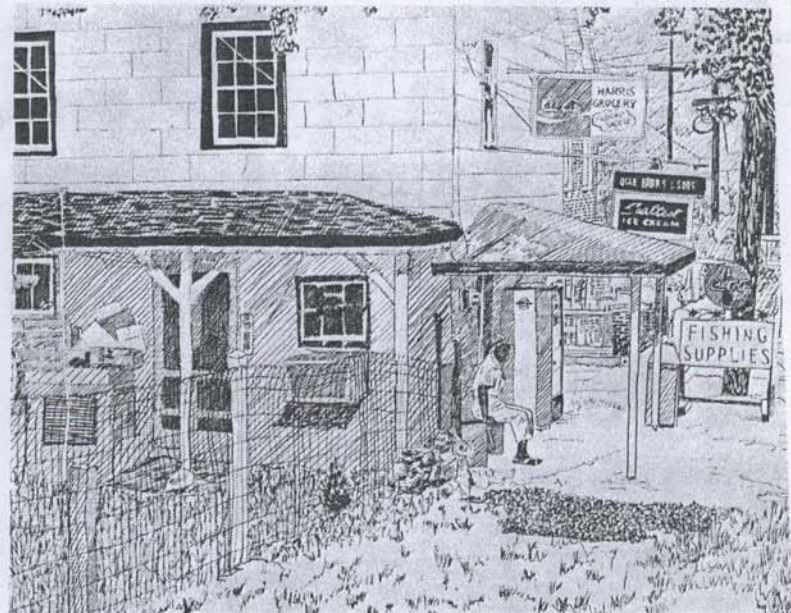
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The documentary covers the fields of politics, sports and entertainment and casts light upon the manners and customs of the day.

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The store's main sellers now are soda pop, candy and fishing supplies, although the shelves carry canned goods, soap and other items.

The ceiling is hung with age - darkened display racks, and a placard bearing the Ten Commandments hangs from a razor blade rack near the ceiling. Next to it is a string holder advertising Post Toasties.

Now only two grocery stores remain in the town, Lynn's Store and Ogle Harris and Sons, and even the Harris store closes up in the fall and reopens in the spring.

The decrease in business, Mrs. Toliver believes, has come because of the cars and the supermarkets up the road in Woodbridge. The smaller stores are finding it difficult to compete.

"When the supermarkets had to charge 29 cents a pound for chicken, Arthur had to pay that much and charge more," she said.

The store stopped selling fresh meat after Ogle Harris died, and the packaged meat went after Arthur's death, about eight years ago.

But while the store's busy days are gone, probably forever, it remains to many as a landmark in Occoquan and a comfortable memory of a different time.

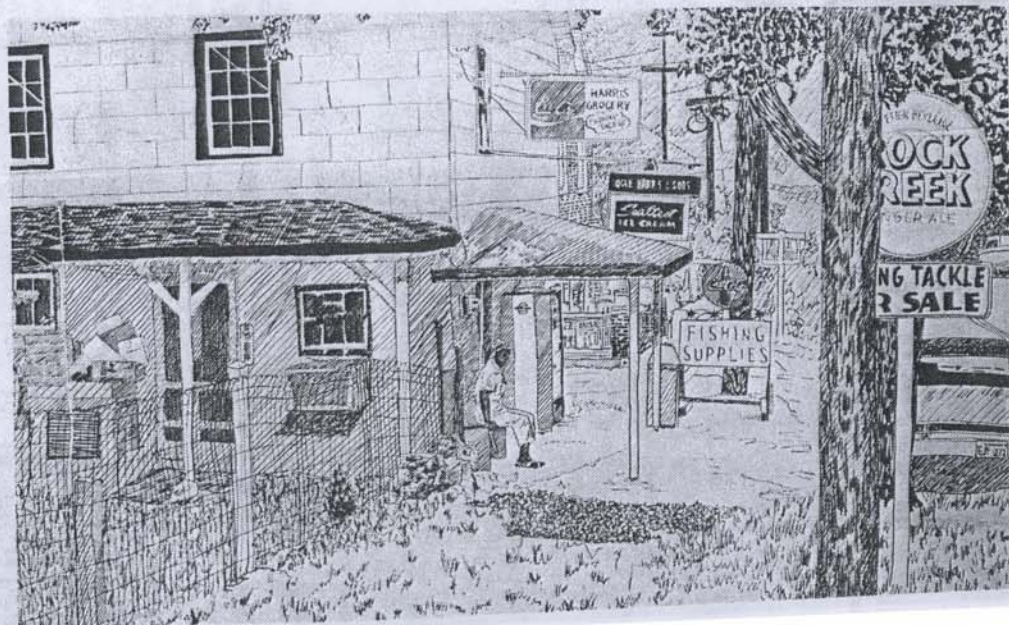
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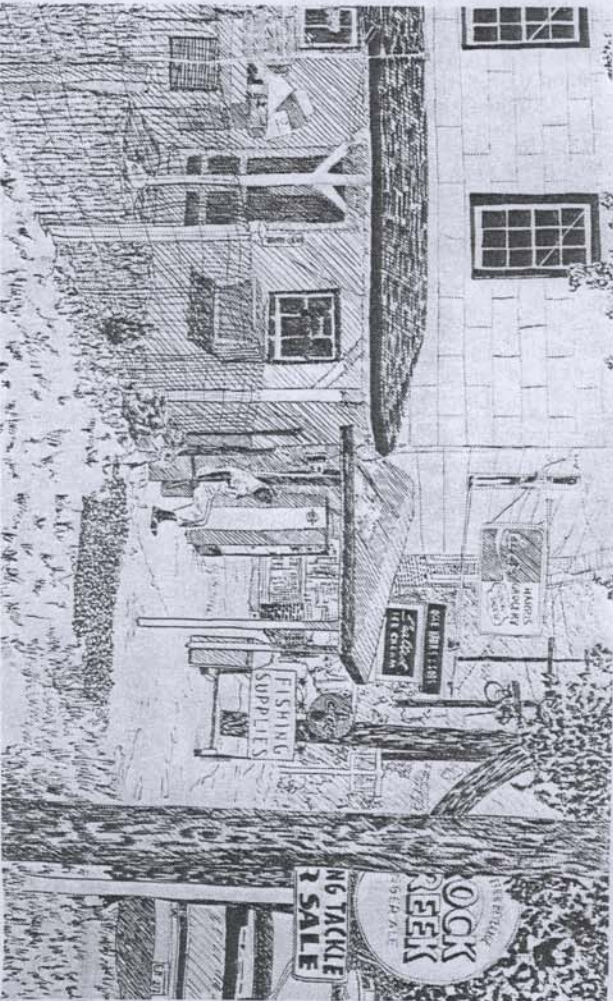
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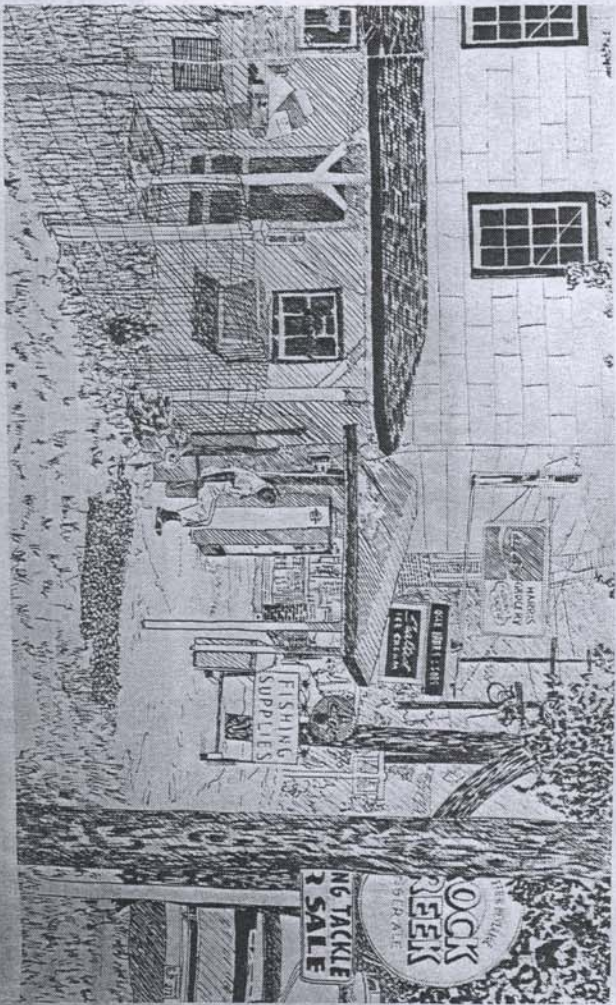
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