

# *MY MEMORY OF JACOB STREET*

BY PAT MURRAY-SCOTT



**Pat's Prompt Response to her daughter asking:**

**"What Store Do You Remember From Your Childhood?"**

In the photo above, numbering of the houses begins on the right and goes up the hill. A three story house with a flat roof and two chimneys, #1200 Jacob Street, stands on the right corner of the photo. Next door is #1210, a smaller, red-roofed house with three upper story windows in a rented house where my grandparents lived, and where they raised four daughters. Grandma Emma Cain's house.

When I was little, Jacob Street seemed quite steep and long to me, and the three houses beyond 1210? I never saw anyone enter or leave those houses. But the house at the top? I memorized that house at the top of the hill. In the photo above you can just make out the numbers "22" on edge of the building... #1222 Jacob Street, on the corner of Jacob and Thirteenth Street.

See the iron railing on the stairway going up to Thirteenth? The staircase and its rail hides a doorway to a tiny basement "mom and pop" convenience store in the house #1222. Before the 1950's, America's cities had hundreds of convenience shops; in some cities a few free-standing buildings have been saved, but the majority, like 1222 Jacob: a basement room in the homeowners' house, exist only in old-timers' memories. The people at #1222 stocked candy,

gum, sweets, and simple staples like milk, eggs, butter, bread, a little fruit and some canned items, cigars and cigarettes, just enough for nearby neighbors.

The excitement was all mine, the oldest grandchild, entrusted with a fistful of change, to go to the corner store all by myself, up the hill to the end of the block, where cement steps with metal rail bannisters went up to someplace way over my head, and where I was never to go alone.

A dank, shadowy walkway between building and the forbidden stairway led to a door below the numbers "1222." Take two steps down, open an undersized door into a low-ceilinged room that rocked me with waves of fragrances, a mixture of familiar basement odors and the sweetness of fruit, cookies and candy. I really wanted to walk around the baskets of fruit, to read the labels on shelves,

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but that wasn't done in a "mom and pop" store. "Self-service" wasn't a phrase yet in our culture. Every shopper in a "mom and pop" handed her list to the proprietor behind the counter, and waited and visited with others while the items were gathered. I could only watch, fill my head with as many ideas as possible, and wonder. And then, "Come right home!" The doorway, the many fragrances, the closeness of the room, even the counter where the lady would give me a piece of candy (a secret, of course), all that has never left me.

When I was very small, Grandma Emma's kitchen had a wood burning cook stove and an ice box, and some foods were delivered. Milk bottles appeared in a wire basket on that tiny front porch. "Careful! Don't kick the basket!" An iceman in a dilapidated, flat-bed truck delivered a block of ice, hoisted on his shoulder through the hall and dining room into the cramped kitchen. Hot days we loved the chunks of ice he handed to us. Even into the 1940s, a vegetable man came to 1210 Jacob Street in a horse-drawn cart. The careful ticky-tacky sound of horse's hooves on the cobble stones as the old man let his horse pick his way down the bumpy slope told us he was coming.

Jacob Street has come into the modern world. World War II splintered life at 1210 Jacob Street as great historical events do, and the family migrated in various directions. Today Grandma Emma's house is gone. A recent satellite view of the 1200 block of Jacob Street, Wheeling, West Virginia, shows a paved street, concrete sidewalks, and six empty lots. But that makes no mind to me. For my lifetime, Jacob Street has filled my imagination, setting color and context to the literature and drama I love; a sweet memory.