

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 24
Number 4 *Around the Courthouse Square, 1900
to 1955*

Article 7

12-21-1998

Hill's Grocery Store, East Side Square

Joseph D. Lay

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lay, Joseph D. (1998) "Hill's Grocery Store, East Side Square," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 24: No. 4, Article 7.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol24/iss4/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

This letter has been written in response to a request from the Foundation. It is followed by another letter to the Quarterly from former resident, Chris Hauer. Editor

Hill's Grocery Store East Side Square

Joseph D. Lay

To the Historic Huntsville Foundation

Gene King has asked me to provide you with some information about Hill's Grocery store on East Side Square. My knowledge will probably be of little help to you due to my age at the time my father was manager, but in any event my comments are as follows.

I am Joseph D. (Joe) Lay, born in Huntsville, March 1, 1931. My parents are Alice W. Lay and the late Conaway (Connie) Lay. My mother, Alice Lay, still resides in Huntsville. I was graduated from Huntsville High School in 1949 and Auburn University in 1953. I have not lived in Huntsville since graduating from Auburn. I am presently retired and a resident of Greensboro, North Carolina.

My father, Connie Lay, was manager of Hill's Grocery from (date unknown) to about 1946 or 1947 when he opened his own grocery store. I have no photographs of the store.

Hill's Grocery was one of three modern self-serve groceries in Huntsville in the early 1940s. It had a plateglass store front with a canvas let-down awning operated by a manual cranking device. (See Fig.2) There was a stairway built into the sidewalk in front and covered by heavy metal doors that was used for access to the basement. The basement was used for storage and trash removal. The alley behind the building wasn't used much. There was a second floor above the store that had been used as an apartment in prior years but was also used for storage during the early to mid 1940s.

Selling Desirable Business Property In Huntsville, Ala.

AT AUCTION

THURSDAY, APRIL 28th, AT 1:30 P. M.

Mr. Howard Gentle has commissioned us to sell on the above date to the highest bidder, regardless of price 20' x 76' Brick store building, located at 300 Church Street, Huntsville, Also 30' x 157 1/2' Brick store building on 5th Street in Huntsville, and 10' x 120' lot North and adjacent to the 5th Street building. (See cuts and details below).

★
\$100
Cash
Prizes
Given
Away



★
\$100
Cash
Prizes
Given
Away

300 Church Street Building

SALE 11 will be the building pictured above. Sale will be on premises. Commencing promptly at 1:30 p. m. It is one of Huntville's better built buildings, sturdy constructed, 27' high walls, metal roof, floor and ceiling, built in refrigeration, metal awning. The fine building with it's corner location, at 300 Church Street, is the home of one of Mr. Gentle's Super Markets. Possession of this property will be given within 15 days from date of sale. As the owner plans to move stock and fixtures to his coast square store in "Huntsville" Anyone interested in buying this building and continuing this dairy business, may arrange purchase of stock and fixtures from Mr. Gentle's privately investigate the possibilities of this as investment property, as an excellent location to upgrade business for years.

Fig.3 Undated flyer for auction, cited by Dr. Hauer as example of first Huntsville store to use the term "super market."
Courtesy Harrison Brothers Hardware Store.

Some merchandise was displayed on the sidewalk, but the merchandise was limited to bags of charcoal, watermelons, and other bulky items. Adjoining the store to the right was James Steak House and to the left was Wimpy's Grill, a combination hamburger joint and pool room. The store was heated but not air-conditioned. Cooling was provided by overhead fans. An overhead fan was also over the front door to help keep out flies. The store had a candy and cigarette counter to the left of the entrance where the clerk also packaged beans and dried fruit. These were purchased in bulk and packaged in 1- and 2-pound bags before being placed in the shelves for sale.

The Courthouse Square was extremely crowded on Saturday nights with shoppers and sightseers. Saturday was the traditional shopping day for farmers. Customers parked on the square and nearby streets in available spaces, and their groceries were carried to their cars by the clerks. No home deliveries were made except for a few within a block or so from the store.

Some memories from that time: Most trash and garbage was removed by a man and wife team who were very heavy, wore overalls, and drove a horse-drawn wagon. The only other horse-drawn wagon that I remember was an ice wagon that made deliveries to both businesses and residential areas. At times, rats were kept under control by several of the clerks shooting them in the basement using .22s.

During the war years, it was not unusual to see red, green, or yellow people in the Saturday crowds. I was told these were Redstone Arsenal workers who had been exposed to chemicals, probably in making smoke grenades for the Army. (They were entirely colored, skin and hair, an unusual sight.) Every year predictions were made that the Courthouse would collapse into the Big Spring.

I realize this information is limited, but hope that it will be of some small benefit to you.

Note: The following letter is a response to Mr. Lay's request for more information from his friend, Dr. Hauer.

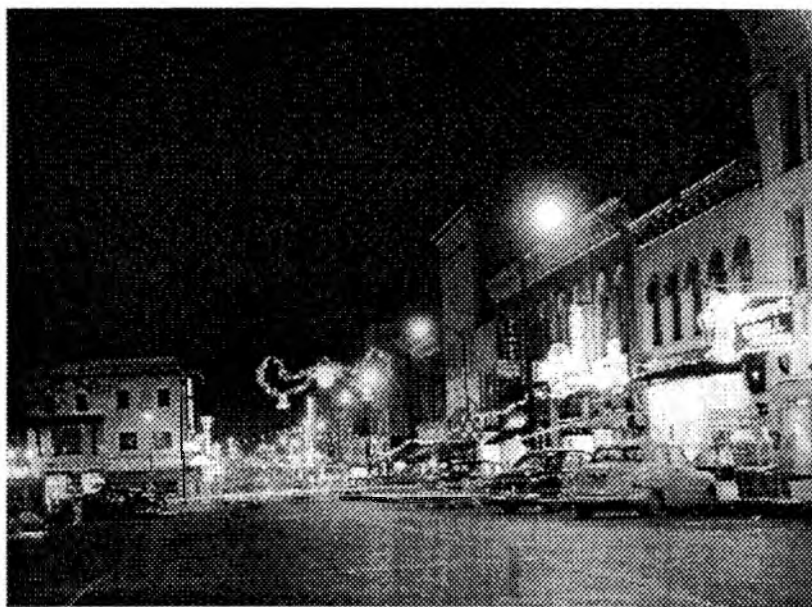


Fig.4 Night scene of East Side Square, looking north, Christmas 1956. Hill's Grocery is next to Wimpy's Grill. The interior is well lighted. Courtesy Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.