Spanning the Gap

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Spanning the Gap
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Grocer, Storekeeper
Another look at the Millbrook Store Register

Six or seven customers a day, spending an average of 90 cents each (about a day's wages), 400 different items on the shelves: Philip Garis' general store at Millbrook reflected the changing purchasing patterns of rural America after the Civil War. Garis' 1874-1876 register of sales is raw material in the search for the economic realities of life in Millbrook.

A job for George Smiley, one thinks, when handling the bulky, oversized day-book. In his novel *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, John le Carré's scholarly spy maps out the story of a fellow agent's life by slowly, carefully, reading his way through years of routine office correspondence. *Surely Smiley would find out what went on here.*

Wading through the 350+ pages of sales at the Philip Garis' General Store at Millbrook, recorded in the store's daily register, or *day-book*, from 1874 to 1876 would seem to require, at the very least, the patience of a Smiley. Though le Carré's character had the help of his skilled creator in trimming the heap of documents down to those that pointed to the truth, in another sense, we have an edge over Smiley: our characters are real, not fictional. Their homes are still standing in Millbrook Village, and their gravestones in the village cemetery.

The General Store at Millbrook Village today. This building was moved to Millbrook Village in 1973 to the site of an earlier store, which had burned down.

The interior of the store today. Store buildings had only residential-style windows, and could be dark inside, but they were well-ordered and had to be efficient to survive.

Earlier years of interpretation at the Millbrook General Store centered on a concept of *bartering*, exchanging goods for goods in the "primitive" economy of a remote village. A closer look in 1995 by museum technician Kathryn Clippinger noted that while cash transactions were few, exchanged goods were always assigned a cash value all the same. Thus the general store actually functioned as a sort of village-wide "credit union". You could bring in items and get a credit in the store's accounts, then "buy" items by having their value deducted from your total credit.

Cash was scarce indeed. After the financial panics of the 1870s, money in the hand was a rare thing. At Millbrook, the only person who seemed to always have cash was the hotel owner, buying his box of cigars, but his trade may have supplied him with ready money from travelers passing through. Farmers paid their day-laborers by giving them a credit (called a *self-order*) at the store. Young women, even from comfortable families, would bring in a dozen eggs from the chicken coop and leave that day, or soon after, with a yard of lace or a pair of corset stays. Even *services* to the store went on account: hauling goods from Newton, or ripping and sewing old clothes for rag rugs. As befits an era of changing ideas about equality, entries for unmarried daughters, and sometimes for wives, were recorded under the names of the male head of household, but widows could buy and sell in their own names.

The commerce in eggs. Exchange rates for eggs and butter were fixed.

Bottling supplies *(top)*cotton laces, men's collar stays *(left)*, and notions. Sewing goods and thread were among the items purchased most often. Machine-made glassware was common in the late 1800s.

Yet still, the question remains: how did this system really work? Or, **did** it work at all?

Consistently there are entries like this:

Bought beef 15 pounds for $1.50 followed by *Sold beef 10 pounds $1.00*,

or

Bought butter 1 pound for 25 cents followed by *Sold butter 1 pound for 22 cents*.

It does not take the investigative skills of George Smiley to see that a grocery store would not stay in business long using beef and butter as "loss leaders." Even if villagers were tolerant of a certain mark-up, storekeeper Garis could hardly drive for extreme profits. If he did, villagers could deal among themselves in true barter fashion and bypass his store altogether. Besides, being a Garis to start with, and marrying four times in his life, Philip J.S. Garis was "family" to nearly everybody in town.

Yet Garis and his store did thrive, even with competition from other stores. While he would buy almost anything for credit - examining the register, one does wonder who ate all those eggs - in the end it may not have mattered much if this exchange operation barely scraped by. The real mark-up - 40 to 60% - was on items that villagers could not make easily or cheaply; items that they could not "price" based on what they were paid for a dozen brown eggs last week; items they were coming to depend on, like sugar and molasses, tea and coffee, ginger and patent medicines, lamp oil and matches, dishes and pans.

Garis carried a range of fabrics, from bed ticking and jean cloth to fancier dress material. Muslin cost 8 cents a yard; velveteen $1.40. Ready-made clothing was also available, but was rather expensive. (A skirt cost $1.00 -- about a day's wages.)

Gentlemen's corner: tools, tobacco, imported cigars. Jacob Cole, the proprietor of the hotel across the road, bought a box of cigars every few weeks for $2.75 in cash.

Far from being remote or primitive, as Ms. Clippinger rightly noted, Garis' general store was part of the nation's changing economy, both on the more immediate scale of reaction to passing cash shortages, and on the more permanent scale of converting to consumption of time-saving manufactured goods.

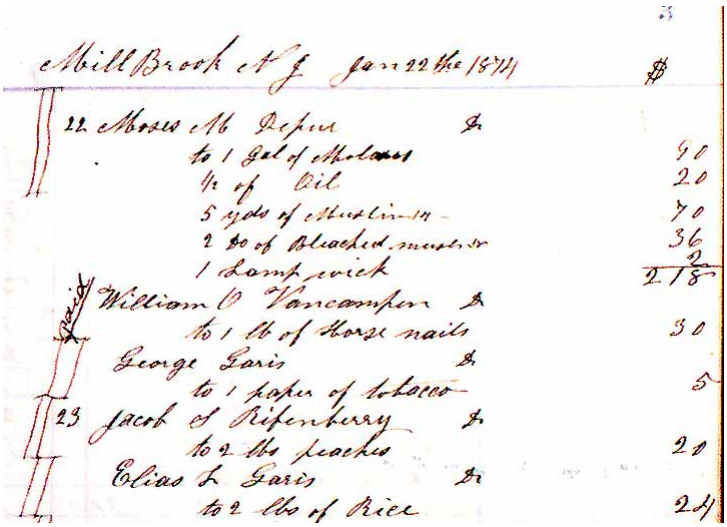
At his death in 1908, Philip Garis owned $923 worth of goods, including a number of harnesses perhaps left over from his inventory at his store.

Thus though seeming to us now a quaint and friendly place where you picked up your mail, brought in your eggs, or bumped into your neighbors, Garis' store may well have thrived not on the items that were "bartered" or exchanged for credit, but on the mass-produced goods of a rising consumer culture. This is a political subtlety that the Cold-War spy Smiley would no doubt have appreciated. And no doubt more subtleties still lie in the Millbrook Store register, awaiting more history-minded Smileys to bring them to light.

(Above, top) Store ledger replica and receipts.
(Above, middle) A corner of the store.
(Above, bottom) Weighing an egg.

Post office boxes and window (with storage crates on top.) Garis was postmaster from 1863 until 1897.

(Left) Section of a page from January 22, 1874. *(Middle)* The spine of the register. *(Right)* Marbling on the inside covers.



Mill Brook ct J Jan 22 the 1874

			$
22	Moses M Depew	Dr	
	to 1 gal of Molasses		90
	½ of Oil		20
	5 yds of Muslin 14		70
	2 lbs of Bleached muslin 18		36
	1 Lamp wick		2
			2 18
paid	William O Vancampen	Dr	
	to 1 lb of Horse nails		30
	George Garis	Dr	
	to 1 paper of tobacco		5
23	Jacob S Rifenberry	Dr	
	to 2 lbs peaches		20
	Elias L Garis	Dr	
	to 2 lbs of Rice		24

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