

## A & P Files for Bankruptcy

I have a new routine. Every Tuesday and Thursday morning, I take the T to Boylston Street and walk over to Tufts Medical School to take part in a study. At the Brookline Village stop, I pick up a copy of the free paper, the Metro, then board the trolley. I almost always get a seat because I am carrying my cane, and there is usually a thoughtful young woman who offers me her seat. And these days, I always take it, thanking her profusely. (Yes, it is interesting that it is almost always a young woman.)

This morning, as I sat down and opened my paper, I was shocked to see a featured story headlined: "A & P grocery files for bankruptcy after 110 years." The memories the story brought back. The formal name of the A & P is The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company. When it opened in my neighborhood on Southern Boulevard off Longwood Avenue, I was around 10 or 11. I wondered how they could grow so big selling tea. It may have started as a tea company, but it has certainly come a long way: taking up a quarter of a block, and selling a lot more than tea. I had never seen such a big food store.

At that time, the late '30s, I was an experienced shopper. My mother regularly sent me to the neighborhood grocery store to buy bread, butter, milk, cheese, an occasional "measure sour cream," canned goods, paper goods; to the fruit store for lettuce, tomatoes, apples, bananas, string beans, potatoes, carrots, and "soupn greens with a petrushka." And even to the appetizing store, for lox (real lox, not Novia Scotia) and halavah and pickles and "mislinis" (black olives). My mother only entrusted me to buy "chop meat" at the butcher. She bought the chickens, meat for roasting, lamb chops and liver, herself.

We knew all the storekeepers. They were our neighbors. Many people had an "account" with the different storekeepers. They would buy something, and the storekeeper would keep a record of the amount, and every month, they would "settle up." My mother didn't do that. She paid for everything she bought, and if she couldn't pay for it, she wouldn't buy it. She gave me the money for whatever she asked me to buy. I was always impressed with how fast the storekeepers totaled up the bill. They would taker a paper bag and a pencil, which was always behind their ear, look at all the items I was buying, write down the cost of each item, and immediately come up with the total. Then put everything in the same bag. When I got home, I would occasionally, check the arithmetic. It was always correct. It was helpful to know the storekeepers because we went to the grocery stores for cheese boxes, and to the fruit stores for fruit crates. They were essential for so many of our activities. But I am digressing.

Even though it was still the depression, the neighborhood stores stayed in business and life went on. All the stores on Longwood Avenue between Southern Boulevard and Fox Street seemed permanently in place: the fruit store, the shoe repair store, the candy store, the Chinese laundry, the delicatessen, the grocery store, and on the corner, the drug store. When the economy started to improve, it was assumed that the storekeepers would do better, as well. That is, until the invasion of the monster store.

Food stores were rather small. You step in from the street, and there is a narrow aisle. On one side is a counter with a cash register, and behind the counter is the proprietor. Behind the proprietor are shelves. Under the counter is a case displaying merchandise. Sometimes on the opposite wall are more shelves with merchandise, and sometimes there is merchandise in the window. Always, there is merchandise in the back. You tell the storekeeper what you want and he gets it for you. You do not handle the merchandise. Fruit stores were different. They had boxes of fruits and vegetables on stands from the street to the interior of the store. There were prices written in large colorful numbers on paper bags stuck on the boxes. As with the grocery store, you did not handle the merchandise. In some neighborhoods there were markets made up of several small stores huddled together in one larger indoor store. But then came the monster store, much larger than any market anyone had ever seen. It was a “super market.”

For the first time, shoppers found themselves in a store with lots of aisles, and with lots of shelves overflowing with lots of merchandise. And you were able to help yourself. There were carts that you would wheel through the aisles and load up with whatever struck your fancy. The prices were marked on the shelves, and on the merchandise. In the old grocery store, you asked the storekeeper for an item, and asked how much. If it sounded too expensive, you said, “never mind.” In the “super market” you saw different brands with different prices. The real bargains were the items which carried the “super market’s” own brands. That you couldn’t buy in the grocery store. The “super market” had a fruit and vegetable section where you could help yourself, so you no longer ended up with bruised, green or over-ripe produce.

The section that really impressed my mother was the meat department. She took pride in knowing her meat, and she could not get over the meat on display in the “super market’s” display cases. Not only did the meat look fresh, and just like the meat in Mr. Margolis’ display case, the prices were one fourth. It took my mother many months before she brought herself to buy meat from the A & P. It is one thing to overcome the feeling of disloyalty to the local storekeeper, by buying groceries and fruits and vegetable from the super market. It is a much greater hurdle to overcome to buy meat from a non-Kosher butcher. My mother’s rationalization: “It is better to pay Kosher prices for non-Kosher meat, than to pay non-Kosher prices for Kosher meat.” What my mother didn’t know was that the meat sold by the A & P was the same meat sold by Mr. Margolis’ Kosher butcher shop.

I have no idea how many years it took for the A & P to drive out the local merchants. The change was compounded by the changing character of our neighborhood. Following World War II, there was a transition from Jewish to black and Puerto Rican. Gradually, the Jewish storekeepers were replaced, but some of the new merchants specialized in merchandise for a specialized clientele, which the super market didn’t carry. The bodegas and carnecerias survived, but in countless neighborhoods, when the A & P moved in, the local storekeeper was driven out.

I drove by my old neighborhood a few months ago, and noticed that the old A & P had been replaced by a super market with a Spanish name. What its significance is, I don’t

know. I learned from the news article that the A & P also operated under the names of Waldbaums, Pathmark, Food Emporium etc. That came as a surprise. I thought that the A & P was the A & P, and that Waldbaums was Waldbaums, not that Waldbaums was A & P. However, if here in Boston, Star Market is Shaw's, then one retail store can be another. The article noted that A & P had assets of \$2.5 billion (a lot of money) and debt of \$3.2 billion (even more money). And it was the wholesale clubs that did them in. That's capitalism.

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