

Barkers Store



Barker's Store

For many of us who have been here only a decade or two, the little square red building on the southeast corner of 212th Way SE and SE 32nd Street is an odd question mark, a vague "what's that?" as we pass it on our way somewhere else. But residents who have lived here longer readily recognize it as what was Barker's Store from 1945 until 1977.

The road which is now 212th SE Way was called Sunderhauf Hill Road in the 1920s. (The road was named after John Sunderhauf, co-owner of the Monohon Canoe Company, which was destroyed in the 1925 Monohon fire. Sunderhauf's home stood—and still stands—on the south side of the hill just up from Alexander's Beach.) There had been a smattering of growth on the Plateau during the 1920s, and about 1927 or 1928 one Mr. Wigge (pronounced Wiggie), decided to open a gas station and run an inn out of his house. He bought a lot on the southeast corner of 212th Way SE and SE

32nd Street, and built the little square gas station and the house. He ran the gas station for a year or two, but never got around to opening the inn.



In 1935 Arthur (Art) Barker and his family bought the place, which included ten acres of land. Art's son, Jack, was five years old at the time. "There wasn't much out there then," remarked Barker in a recent interview. "At that point the store was just an empty building." It remained that way for a decade, gradually becoming more and more dilapidated. In 1945 Jack's older sister Marian and husband Arthur Johnson opened the store, remodeled it, set up a 1930s-style gravity gas pump, and ran the store for 18 months or so. After that Art and his wife Elsie took over.

From the beginning the store was named Pine View Grocery, but no one called it that. It was Barker's Store. Elsie ran the daily activities for most of the early years. Art helped on occasion but was often away on his full time job as a truck driver hauling gravel for King County. The store's business was much higher in the summer when people would come out to French's La Pine Resort (usually called "Frenchie's" by the locals) on the east end of Pine Lake. Winter was slower, partly due to decreased traffic once business at Frenchie's slowed during the winter season.

Barker's Store sold a lot of canned goods, some vegetables and groceries, but no meat. (It was rare in that era for "Mom and Pop" stores such as Barker's to have a meat locker, which was necessary to store meat.) Beer and cigarettes were big staples at Barker's Store. About once or twice a month Elsie would make a grocery run to the wholesaler in Columbia City on South Rainier in Seattle to restock supplies. Occasionally the wholesaler came to her, but that was the exception rather than the rule. Elsie had another source for her ice cream: The Issaquah Creamery (later Darigold).

Particularly in the early years, most people charged what they needed and would come in periodically to pay in person. It was an extremely informal, personal operation, astonishingly simple by today's standards. Elsie kept handwritten notes on a tablet for her customer's credit records. But the customers paid their bills, perhaps at a better rate than today: "After all, most of our customers lived in the area and knew each other," remarked Barker.

"Mom let kids bring in empty cans and redeem them for soda pop," said Barker. "She paid two cents for a soda can, a nickel for a beer can. She kept the cans out in a back shed and sometimes forgot to lock the door. The kids would try and sneak back into the shed and bring the same cans back in, but they didn't fool Mom." With a grin and a wink, Barker added "Some of those kids might read this. They still live on the Plateau."

Although the store was never a polling station, Elsie registered voters there. The King County Bookmobile also made periodic stops at the store through the 1960s. (For readers under 40, a bookmobile was a medium-sized van that you could walk into and check out books; it came complete with shelves and a librarian.)

Business slowed down at the store in the 1970s, probably from a combination of reduced traffic after Frenchie's closed in 1966 and increased competition from supermarkets which were becoming prevalent by then. Art died in 1974 but Elsie continued to run the store until 1977, when she sold the house and store and moved to Issaquah. She died two years later.

Ownership of the old store has changed several times in the three decades since. In recent years it has served as an art studio.

---Phil Dougherty
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