**THE GENERAL STORE**

Allen Nelson Peltier

It was the American free enterprise system

stripped of all artifice and pretension, the

living spine of Yankee supply and demand.

Charlie Keesling’s general store occupied

a corner of brother Stephen’s pasture, and

faced the narrow road threading through

the center of the village. Since Charlie was

one of the patriarchs of the Keesling family,

and, considering the fact that almost everyone

in the village was a Keesling, was married to

to a Keesling, or owed one of them money,

made Charlie’s little store an integral part

of village life. The Keesling blood line ran

so deep and wide through the valley, every

villager under voting age called the gray-haired

bespectacled man behind the counter

“Uncle” Charlie

The store building was about the length of

a Norfolk & Western boxcar and was only

slightly wider. A once-white wooden structure,

the building was faced by a narrow porch, two

smoke-stained glass windows and a sturdy

double-locked door. Not a man to take pride

in the gleaming fixtures of high-end merchandising,

Uncle Charlie’s store consisted on one narrow aisle

running between massive wooden display cases and

high, dark-painted shelves. The aisle ended at the

pot-bellied iron stove at the rear. Two naked

40-watt bulbs, hung over the aisle, eked out

just enough feeble light for the customers to

count their change.

The store was filled, summer and winter,

with the heavy aroma of cigar smoke,

cinnamon, saddle soap, rock candy

Johnson’s wax and a dozen other scents

common in a 1930s general merchandise

emporium.

The Keesling establishment opened its doors

sometime between dawn and mid-morning

Monday through Saturday. People waiting

to do business at the store knew to have a child

watch the road for Uncle Charlie’s daily drive from

his Slabtown home to his little fiefdom The locals

knew he customarily fired up his Ford pickup

after downing his third cup of

Aunt Donna’s morning coffee.

Uncle Charlie usually closed up shop around the time

Mrs. Keesling’s salt-cured ham slices started sizzling

in her iron skillet. There were days, however, when

the Virginia sun tempted the rainbow trout to

nip at low-flying insects down on Cripple Creek.

On such days, Charlie Keesling went fishing.

One might assume that proprietor Keesling

was something less than serious about the

business of doing business, but he remained

totally focused on two basic components of

Appalachian village strore-keeping; checker

and harassing traveling salesmen.

A wood-framed, glass-covered checkerboard

rested on the end of the store’s left-side

counter, not far from the pot bellied stove.

For several years, that board was the field of

combat for the village’s best checker-players,

and the glass had been etched and scarred by the

thousands of checker moves across its surface.

During the cold seasons, when snow lay on

the pastures and the work-horses dozed

in their stalls, grizzled old farmers came

down from the hills to sit on nail barrels

in the rear of Charlie Keesling’s general store

and play checkers for hours at a time.

They chewed their Red Man tobacco,

expectorated into the Charlie’s brass cuspidor,

talked weather and politics and ranged across

the checkerboard like ancient knights traversing

Palestine. The winners had little time to savor

their victories because the top man had to play

Charlie Keesling, and Charlie Keesling

was the checkers king of Rye Valley.

Although good-natured and playful,

Uncle Charlie had elevated the act of

harassing, humiliating and humbling

traveling salesmen to a genuine folk art.

The suspender-supported, bow-tied

beyond-the-valley drummers who

crossed Marion mountain to solicit

Uncle Charlie’s business, seldom

left his general store with their

self-esteem intact. The harness and

hardware salesmen were forced to

listen to subtle but scathing commentaries

on the inefficiencies of their shipping

departments, their sloppy accounting

procedures and their foppish shoe and tie

choices. The canned goods men left

believing they had been dismissed as

the idiot offspring of a degenerate race.

The facial powder, mascara, lip rouge

and vanity products salesmen suffered

the most. The hapless cosmetics drummer

who happened to arrive while Uncle Charlie

was holding court with his small corps of

weathered and calloused sod-busters, was soon

battered by waves of finely-tuned country sarcasm

directed at his product line, his profession and

his tobacco and automobile preferences.

Ultimately that unfortunate person was

stripped of his last vestige of personal dignity

in exchange for 20 inches of Uncle Charlie’s

shelf space.

Though Uncle Charlie’s business hours were

frustratingly flexible and his selection sparse

and frequently dust-covered, the valley folk, who

came to him for their Ivory soap, nails, straight razors,

pocket knives and washboards, seldom complained.

They counted out their hard-earned dollars or traded

their chicken or eggs for his canned goods and

were content. In their innocence, they believed

that any item they couldn’t grow, order from

Sears or purchase at Charlie Keesling’s store

wasn’t something the Almighty wanted

honest, hard-working people

to own anyway.