

1973

Roadways Rolling Stores Article

Lynda J. South

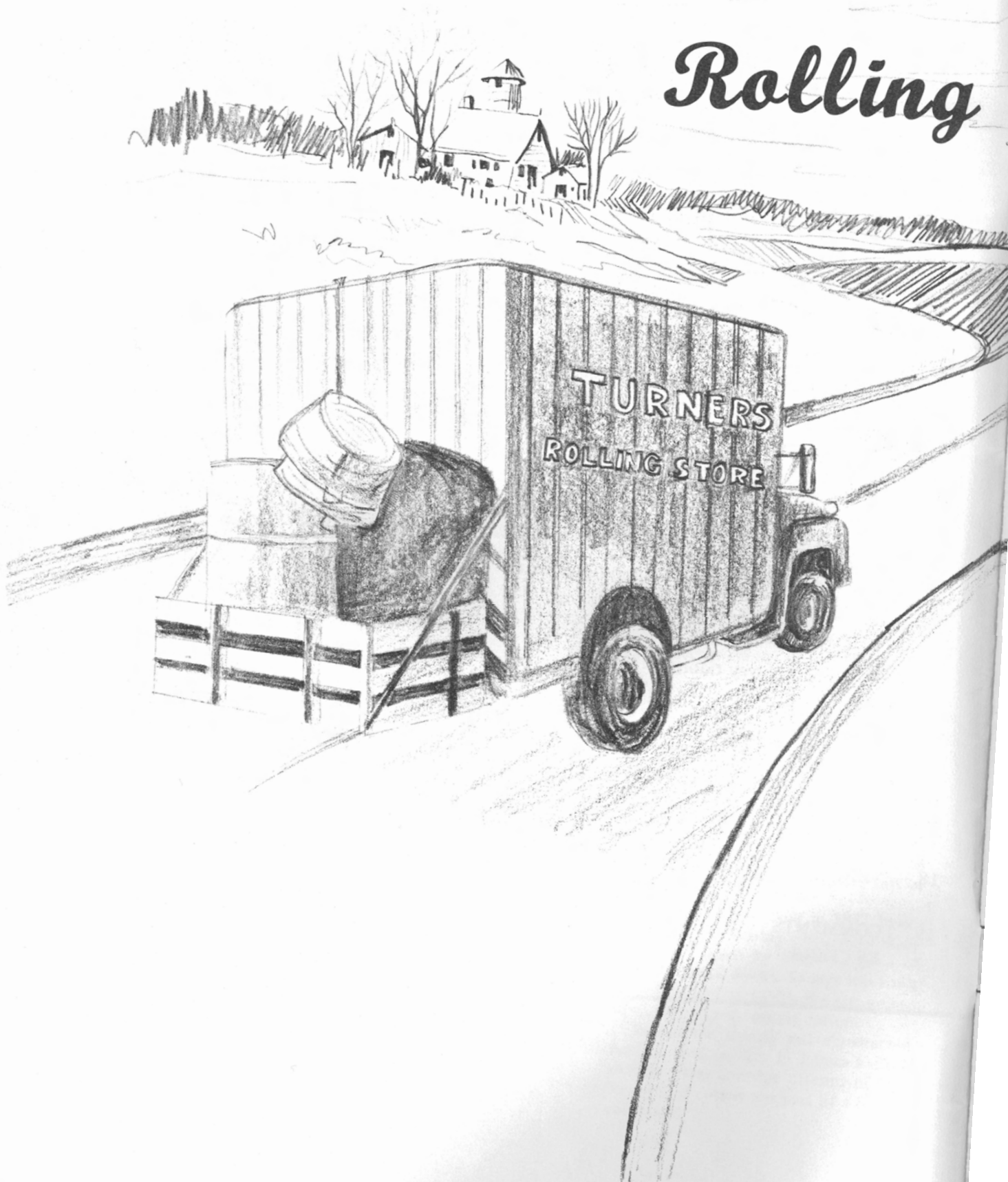
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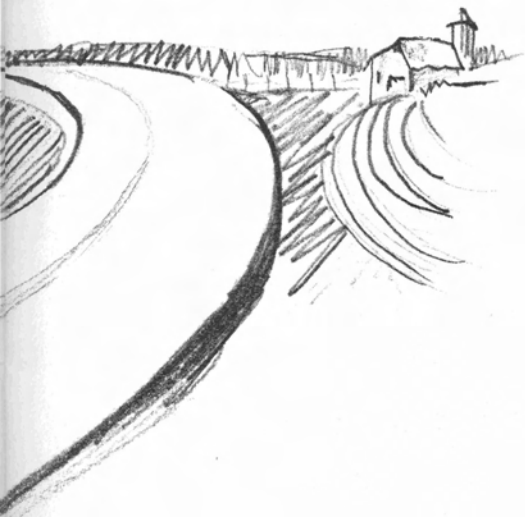
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Rolling



Store Still Rolls Along



The groceries were to be loaded into a two-ton truck with its hollow van filled with shelves. After Heard loaded the truck, he took the wheel of a rolling store, a little general store on wheels, that continues to thrive in Union and Pontotoc Counties.

Heard is one of three drivers who are continuing the era of the rolling store, a part of Mississippi's past, which has been kept alive by Lamar Turner, the store's owner.

The rolling store once traversed Mississippi mudholes in reaching its customers with goods that included kerosene, groceries, packages or catologs. It was part of a novel era, the kind when circuses at New Albany attracted funlovers from eight counties, or when Saturday night square dances were still staged in barns filled with hay.

Once each week, the women would make their lists, comb their hair and wait for the peddler whose goods jangled over the countryside with vibrating kerosene jugs or flour barrels.

It was a necessity which farm people anticipated almost as much as fall harvest.

One man who remembered rolling stores said they were an "institution in Mississippi." He said stores would stop for anybody anywhere and everybody would run down to meet it. People would spend from one cent to \$2.00, he said.

But with city markets and improved transportation the peddlers became city butchers, automobile dealers or service station operators. The rolling stones became memories, except for Lamar Turner.

"They were once all over the country," Turner said. "In Union County three or

four different fellers ran them. We're the only ones rolling now. At least I don't know of any more. There may be some in Mississippi, but I haven't heard of them."

The stores roll on and leave the morning darkness for stops in Black Zion, Cherry Creek, Punkin Ridge and Bald Hill and other communities in Union and Pontotoc Counties whose names deserve patents.

Rolling over dirt and gravel roads, these stores sell groceries in 40 to 60 homes a day, six days each week, and the business which once exchanged chickens and eggs, now exchanges welfare and social security dollars.

"Welfare checks and social security keeps the business going. Years ago there wasn't welfare and social security. Times have changed, haven't they," Heard said.

Floyd Turner, Lamar's brother and driver on Thursdays, said when he first started "peddling", he would come back to the store with red roosters and white hens on top of his truck.

"A lot of the customers would say, 'Wait, I've got to go to the hen house and gather my eggs or catch my chickens before I can buy anything.'"

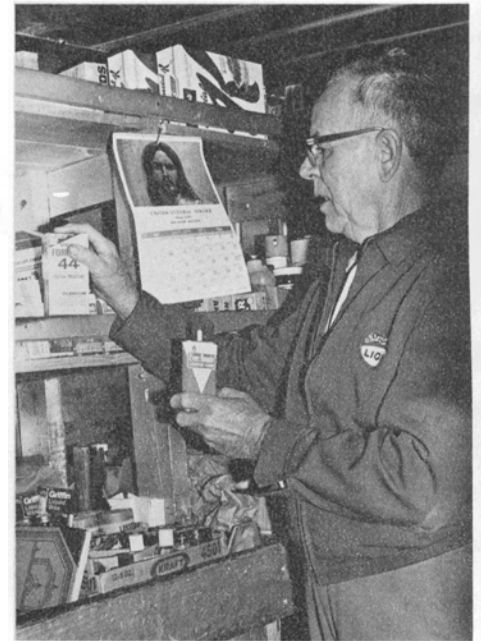
"You'd be surprised at the people who were once kids that did those things (selling produce to peddlers) who are now bank presidents in Jackson, Mississippi, or Memphis, Tennessee."

Lamar, who runs the general store across from the warehouse, said he used to never sell milk, eggs, or dog food but sold flour by barrels. "Now they buy flour by five pounds and dog food by 50 pounds," he said.

A dark, cold morning swept through North Mississippi's farmland as Garrett Heard drove his pickup to a brown, weathered warehouse along Highway 15. The wind began to blow harder as he slipped off his gloves to search for the key to unlock the door.

He walked in and turned on the bare light bulb that dangled from an extension cord. A rusted, potbelly stove sat in the middle of the warehouse and Heard began to stock it with coals. Surrounding the store were neat rows of dog food, paper towels, jellies, matches, washing powder and cake mix.

Rolling Store



Turner's rolling stores load in New Albany to make their daily trek down the red clay and gravel backroads in North Mississippi.

Turner's rolling store carries everything from tractor fan belts to dog food. Garrett Heard has been driving one of two rolling stores since 1947.

"We call on lots of older people who can't get out of the house. They put their lists behind the screen door or in the mailbox. The driver knows where to find it."

Mrs. Turner, Lamar's wife, said sometimes the drivers put the groceries on the table. "We don't do that as much as we used to," she said.

"A lot of them we've called on for years," Lamar said. "It misputs them if you're broken down and can't make it."

Mrs. Turner said they try to sell quality merchandise at a fair price. "We try to treat them as right as we know how," she said.

Supermarkets have taken some of Turner's customers and four routes have been trimmed to two, with the three drivers, Heard, Floyd and William Hill.

"The major customers are still with us. Competition is something that's good in anything, but big business is bad I'd say. It does away with competition, and our whole nation is gradually going to the

major controller. It don't look good to me," Lamar said in a typical Mississippi meaning.

Lamar said customers buy "oncest" a month and in patterns. "When I drive up, I can name eight out of 10 things they're going to buy," Floyd said.

"There are two things everyone buys," Lamar said. There's tobacco or snuff in every house," he said.

The farm families along the store route seem to have their own North Mississippi dialect, pronouncing bananas, "nanners" or "taters" for potatoes. Fat-back is known as white ham.

Floyd said he used to get a kick out of an old woman who said 'Ya ain't got no nanners are ya?' He'd say yep.

Besides delivering groceries to women behind screen doors, the rolling store also delivers packages. About 7:30 one morning, an Ingomar woman came in with a package she wanted delivered.

"It's on your way, isn't it," she asked

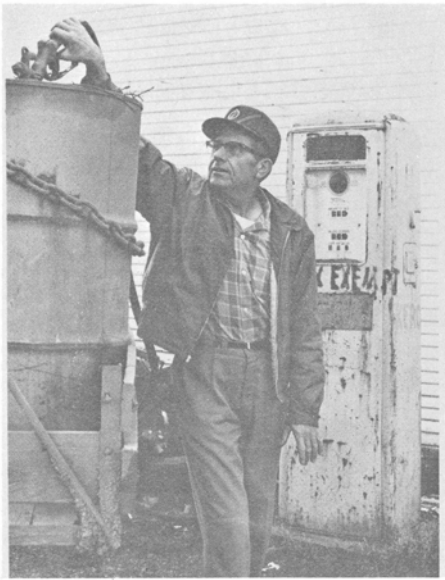
Heard. He said yes and added the package to his collection.

"This was a service we got into years ago," Turner said, observing the situation. "We can't hardly quit. Oh, we could quit, but it would inconvenience the customers so much."

It was in 1946 when Lamar began driving a rolling store for his uncle, J. L. Tutor. He began driving, he said, after he 'worked a piece of a year as a salesman.' Heard has been driving since 1947, Hill for 13 years.

Lamar bought the business from Tutor and Sons in 1958 and maintains it in Ingomar, an open community five miles south of New Albany, four miles north of Ecu, east of Liberty and "over yonder" from Bald Hill.

Mrs. Turner, who could not guess Ingomar's population, said it is a community "with good schools and good teachers, two churches (Methodist and Baptist), and goes out for basketball."



Kerosene is major merchandise for some customers.

While the rolling store rambles from 7:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., the general store is open from "can till can't." That's usually from 6 A.M. to 7 P.M., depending on trade "late of an evening."

"An antique cheese-cutter and old-fashioned scales where chickens were once weighed are the only old timey things in the store," Mrs. Turner said.

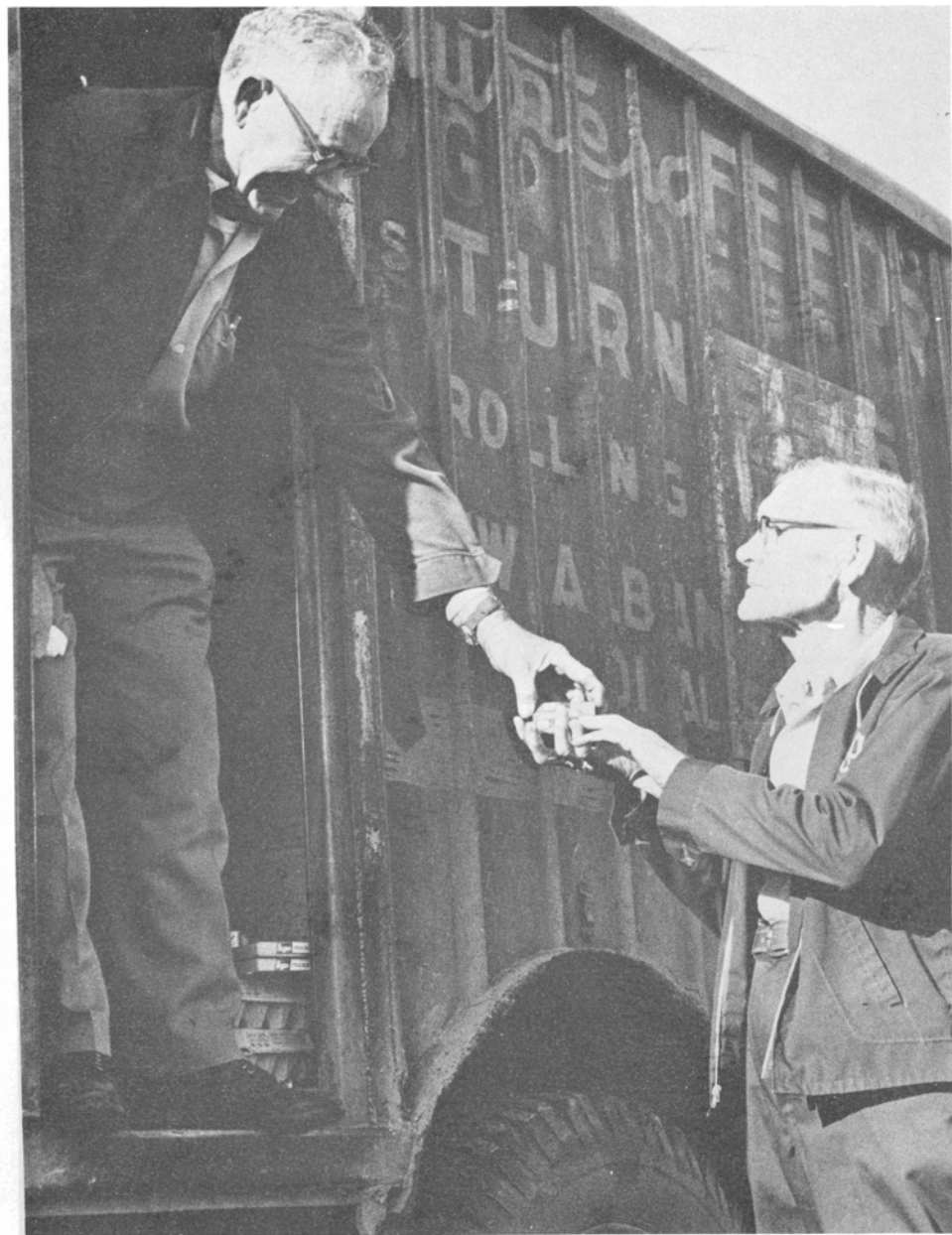
A customer can still buy a lunch of bologna, hook cheese and crackers.

"This store is from the old operation," Lamar said. "This was built in 1934-1935 when there was 30 cent cotton and 40 cent meat."

Besides a grocer, Lamar said he was a farmer. "That's what I am. I'm just as plain as they come. I was born and raised in Yocana Bottom in Pontotoc County."

"Don't make it sound too old and hoosery. Of course we are country, but not Possum Valley or Coon Hollow," Mrs. Turner said.

Possum Valley and Coon Hollow are



A customer who has been trading for over 40 years with the rolling store asks for chewing tobacco, a popular product for some rural Mississippians.

not stops for the rollings stores but name-wise they could be if the stores continue in operation.

Across from the general store stood stakes left by a Mississippi State Highway Department surveying crew. The stakes were a few feet in front of the doors of the warehouse, and will be there as the Department plans to widen and overlay Highway 15. The situation will cause changes in Turner's operations.

"They've been talking it for years," Lamar said. "I guess we'll move back and

build somewhere else if we can, but I don't know what we're going to build. We're supposed to be out within 90 days, after they buy right-of-way. They haven't bought it yet, but it will be within the next six months anyway."

"I'm proud it's coming through. You always need improvement. There's so many autos, they don't hardly have room for them."

He then glanced to his warehouse across the highway. He was thinking of the future, but staring at the past.