

The general store: a decidedly American institution

There are still some places in the U.S. where you'll find a more or less authentic general store, a concept which was born in the days of the Old West and the pioneers. With nothing but wilderness for many miles around, the general store was the place to go to find all of your household staples, from sugar, flour and coffee to mining tools, blankets and fabrics. With a bit of imagination, you might see that this retail store was the predecessor of the modern mall.

During the 1800s, a family who chose to emigrate to the western parts of the U.S. was hard-pressed to find the supplies readily available on the East coast. However, the proprietors of these stores made sure that all of the essentials were in stock, as well as a few luxury items. You might not find fine silks and china, but you would find durable fabrics from which to make your clothing, as well as cookware, basic dishware and crockery necessary to run the household.

For the pioneers, the general store was also a social gathering place. You could chat and exchange gossip and news with other people who came to gather supplies for their land, animals and homes. Children could be found by the candy counter or the pickle crock. Ranch hands might exchange pleasantries and experience. A trip to the general store was a genuine outing for the pioneers.

Even today, in remote areas of the U.S., such as Alaska's Yukon, you can still find authentic general stores which operate to the same purpose as they did over 150 years ago.

Elsewhere, the pioneer spirit has been immortalized in museums and interpretive centers which provide a glimpse into the life of the 1800s pioneers. Some small communities have general country stores, which sell groceries to the local population, as well as authentic artifacts of those long ago days. Ladies hats, arrowheads, old tins and Blue Willow china are among the antiques represented in the modern version of the Old West store.

Interestingly, some of the individuals who own and operate these stores look as though they are genuine artifacts themselves. An old, leather-faced man apparently in his 80s, still dresses in coveralls and plaid shirts, despite a summertime temperature soaring into the 90's. You'd swear his dog, following closely behind his wizened master, is named Yeller.

If you're traveling along in the West, a little off the beaten track, and spot a sign which boasts 'The General Store', take a minute to investigate. You may well be transported back to a time when there were no malls. It's an interesting

experience.