

Forgy Brothers: The Largest Department Store in Franklin County

“We Buy and Sell Everything”

By L. Jarod Pearson



In the early half of the Twentieth Century, the largest department store in all of Franklin County was Forgy Brothers. Between the years 1921 and 1945, this family-owned company in downtown Cowan operated under the slogan "We Buy and Sell Everything."

Jim, Ellis, and George Forgy started out in Butler County Kentucky near Forgytown where they operated a small mercantile. The brothers relocated to Davidson, Tennessee in order to operate a company-owned commissary for the Davidson, Hicks & Greene lumber company.

DH&G relocated from Davidson to Cowan in 1917, but did not relocate the Forgy brothers' mercantile. According to Mrs. Norma Rhea Forgy Anderton's published memoirs, "the owners of the company believed there to be ample retail outlets in Cowan." A few years after the relocation, DH&G asked the Forgy brothers to open a private, family-owned mercantile in downtown Cowan. This new enterprise would receive business from the company plus the opportunity to do business with the people of Cowan.

All three brothers along with their wives and children relocated to Cowan in 1920 and rented the largest retail building in Cowan, which was owned by Mr. Glenn Clark Hodges. The store opened in 1921 as J.N. Forgy and Company. Some years later, the name was changed to Forgy Brothers.

With fifteen departments plus a seed & feed center, Forgy Brothers was unusually large for a town the size of Cowan. According to store records, customers came from as far away as Winchester, Decherd, Sewanee, Sherwood, Monteagle and Tracy City traded with the Forgy's due to their amazing selection.

The departments operated at Forgy Brothers give us some insight into the incredible variety the store offered.

The **Candy Counter** was a large glass display case filled with colorful selections. In the early days, the candy counter was stocked with homemade loose candy displayed in porcelain trays. In later years, the counter featured popular regional and national brands, such as Lifesavers, Wrigley gum, and Tennessee's famous Goo Goo Clusters.

The **Domestic Department** was a two-story section of the store with men's and women's clothing. Men could choose from selections of shirts, formal and casual, socks, suspenders, and ties. Women had a larger selection with undergarments, hosiery, lingerie, and both casual and formal clothing. The Domestic Department also had a sewing desk where women could order materials, buttons and accessories to make their own clothes at home. A display case contained fancier accessories such as pocket watches, wrist watches, hatpins, garters, brass buckles, and other fancier, trendier items. A customer who could not find his or her desired item could order from one of several store catalogs. Special orders could be processed and delivered to the Railway express office at the Cowan Depot across the street from the store.

The **Farm and Field Department** took up a large amount of floor space in the one-story section alongside the Domestic Department. Local farmers could choose from traditional farm equipment, such as horse-drawn plows and mechanical corn huskers, to everyday tools such as wrenches, saws, rakes and hammers. Tack and saddles for horses were also popular as many people in the area did not own automobiles. The Forgy's also sold guns and ammunition, which were very popular during the autumn hunting season.

The **Grocery Department** carried staple goods including coffee, cereal, produce, dairy products, fruit preserves, flour and cornmeal, and freshly baked bread. As snack foods became more popular, this department started carrying Cracker Jacks popcorn, animal crackers, and other well-known items.

The **Household Goods and Appliances Department** carried cookware, dishes, flatware and cutlery along with gas and oil lamps. As electricity grew in popularity, the Forgy's carried electric light fixtures, electric lamps, and modern electrical appliances. This department also carried "knick-knacks" and ornamentation for home decorating.

The **Meat Department** was probably the most distinguishing part of the Forgy Brothers enterprise. One of their claims to fame was building one of the first refrigerated meat departments in the entire rural South. Refrigeration allowed the brothers to carry a variety of meat selections in large volume with a higher degree of freshness and flavor than was previously available in the area. Until the Forgy brothers came to town about the only meat the locals could afford was high-salt bacon. The refrigerated meat department at Forgy Brothers gave residents easier access to quality pork, beef, and chicken, all cut fresh to order by a dedicated butcher.

The **Medicine Department** carried modern medicines, such as pain relievers and salves, but also carried basic ingredients for popular home remedies, such as ginseng, leafy herbs, turpentine and old-fashioned tonics. This department also sold sundry items such as lotions, shave cream, soap and women's cosmetics.

The **Music Department**, perhaps the smallest of all the departments, sold musical instruments and sheet music. On certain summer nights the store would bring in live music to entertain the store patrons.

The **Seed and Feed Department** was a separate building behind the store where farmers and ranchers could purchase ground corn, oats and other animal feeds. Seeds for crop planting, seeds for vegetable gardening, fertilizer and other related items were on hand as well. Across the street from the small feed mill was a fenced yard where customers could buy coal, cement mix, and even roofing materials. Some of these items were housed in one-story wood frame buildings.

The **Sporting Goods Department** contributed to the love of sports and athletics in the Cowan community. Everything from baseball mitts to golf clubs was on display and priced to sell, in addition to fishing poles and tackle.

The **Tobacco Department** was probably the biggest money-maker in the store. Men could choose from name brand chewing tobacco, popular cigar brands, pipe tobacco and related accessories, or a simple, hand-cut-to-order locally grown tobacco. Cigarettes became more popular with men and women alike as the years went by.

The **Toy Department** was busy year round with something for every age, from infancy through the teen years, and for boys and girls. However, it really came to life in the Christmas season when the trendiest sellers made their way onto the retail floor amidst decorations and special sale items.

Then there was the **Third Floor** - a part of the store rarely visited and scarcely ever talked about. This was the infamous department where patrons could purchase ready-made caskets, coffins, tomb stones, binding cloth, shrouds, and other funeral-related accessories. Forgy Brothers even offered to transport deceased loved ones to local cemeteries using the company wagon! Mrs. Anderton could not help but mention the thick dust and numerous cob webs that complemented the spooky ambiance of the mysterious Third Floor!

As you can see from this overview, "**We Buy and Sell Everything**" was a slogan the Forgy Brothers truly lived up to. The store was a legend in its own right and a vital part of Cowan history.



Anderton, Norma Rhea Forgy, The Forge Department Store: A Reminiscence of Norma Rhea Anderton, October 1999.