

"The Medford Grocery"

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by Jay A. Graybeal

Sixty years ago, Carroll County had a thriving county store that one writer thought might someday rival a national department store chain. The Medford Grocery, located along the former Western Maryland Railroad line between Westminster and New Windsor, offered a wide array of products. The firm's advertising practices caught the eye of A. Edwin Labai, a writer for The Classified Journal, official publication of the Association of Newspaper Classified Advertising managers. His article appeared in the January 1937 number of the publication and was later reprinted in the local press:

Country Store Uses Classified Section of Big City Newspaper

Hip boots, rib roast, dynamite. And that's not all. Kerosene, timothy seed, auto oil, alarm clocks and sliced bacon. Put this all together and add another raft of unrelated items and you have a new recipe for copy. The kind of want-ad that can't be precisely classified, but put in the section and it doesn't wait to be looked for; it picks its customers itself. Once they buy they buy again.

A way back off the State road in Carroll County, Maryland, lays the modest village of Medford. It is on the map, and it has a post office and a railroad station, and something very special in country stores!

When I was there the road leading to Medford was shut for repairs and the detour promised a nice bumpy ride for those who would a-shopping go. After driving into Medford (or getting there some way), you will come upon a group of barn-like buildings. No indication would point to a prosperous business going on inside these structures. But once in, you're amazed at the hustle and bustle inside Medford Grocery Company. Shelves upon shelves of stock—bread, underwear, dishes, potatoes, wallpaper and bird seed; only the gasoline's outside as a compliment to the fire underwriters.

Now enter the office of State Senator J. David Baile who also happens to run this concern—if you can get in. Well, I did crash the gate, but I was wearing a horseshoe I picked up from one of the shelves as I passed by.

In the Senator's office is an improvised table that once was a packing case and is now an order desk with four or five telephones; the orders come by phone—and how! The boss' desk is an old-timer—like the Senator himself. Pigeon holes packed with bills and orders, and more pigeon holes built on top for more bills and orders. "Howdy, Senator!" and the gent's hat remains on his head. Not to be impolite—absolutely not. This is a busy place and the head is the place for a hat anyway, just as it is in the newspaper offices. But the Senator can always find time for a little chat—disposing of politics, his 1,000-acre farm, newspapers and friends. Republican in his affiliation, but democratic in his manner and in his wares.

It all boils down to one fact. Here is a business with an idea, and the idea is original enough to shock the skeptical. Imagine such a conglomeration of items appearing in an advertisement. One would hardly know where to begin to read. Yet were it not for the unclassified nature of the copy, the clever idea behind all this would certainly not click; as it is, there's something of the allure of a bargain sale with something of its discomfort for those taking the trip to the sticks from Baltimore to bring home the

bacon from Medford. Originally Medford Grocery Company advertised in a local county newspaper. The list has gradually swelled and now this company's advertising appears in thirteen county papers and two metropolitan newspapers. The nerve of it—a bold venture into a wide field of advertising by a village store. It proves that there are unknown undercurrents in the advertising game that sometimes start things going in a direction you'd never expect.

Reproduced with this story is a typical Medford Grocery advertisement. Pause a moment and read it. It seems all wrong, doesn't it? Yet here is a wrong that made a right. I am told that the town of Medford is the meeting place of folks from miles around. They come as though to see the old fashioned medicine man perform or as though to hear Al Smith deliver one of his ill-fated speeches. But what they really come for is to buy—to buy table syrup, bed blankets, house paint, fly spray, dynamite and soup beans. If you ask me, this outfit is going places. I can easily envision another Sears-Roebuck or Montgomery Ward.

And yet, once to rise above the quaint setting of that bustling general country store would be a decided setback from the view-point of advertising. But when the romance stuff pulls a sound commercial stunt like this one, that's something else again. Perhaps a lucky gamble—and maybe just COPY!"

At the time the article was written, the business had \$200,000 in annual sales. Labai's prediction, however, that the Medford Grocery might one day become another Sears-Roebuck or Montgomery Ward was not realized. Sen. Baile, who was also the founding President of the Historical Society of Carroll County in 1939, died in August 1944. The business closed and the buildings gradually disappeared. Today, there is little trace of the thriving enterprise.



Senator J. David Baile, proprietor of the Medford Grocery Co, sat for his portrait in Annapolis. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert McKinney, 1980.