

Litchfield store set to reopen

By STEVE CARTWRIGHT
Staff Writer

LITCHFIELD — Residents need not fear, the owner of the old Litchfield Corners store, hub of local gossip and hot coffee, will re-open.

Temporarily closed, the place has been in business since before anyone can remember, as a general store, lunch counter, gas station, a speak-easy selling liquor during Prohibition.

"I was born in 1916, and it was there then," said Litchfield native Byron Campbell, who worked at the store as a boy, even helping with the bootleg booze end of the business. "It was immensely popular."

The beer, brewed in the store cellar, was a favorite during intermission at the Litchfield Corners dance hall, a building long gone. There was a still for producing stronger spirits. The speakeasy was common knowledge in town, but if anyone called revenue agents to shut it down, they were paid off, Campbell said.

"Its been changed considerably, but it's probably 150, 200 years old," he said.

For many years the old corner

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store was owned and operated by Byron's uncle, Charles Campbell. It was "Chas. Campbell's Store," and he signed his checks "Chas."

As a boy, attending Litchfield Academy, Byron lived upstairs and worked for his uncle, before the advent of electricity and refrigeration. Food was kept cold with ice from an ice house out back. At the time, no local roads were paved, and people visited the store by horse and wagon.

The store sold grain, hardware, clothing, other dry goods, and you

could buy "two big scoops of ice cream for a nickel. It was good ice cream and a lot of ice cream for the money.

"People would come from miles around," he said, recalling the 10-gallon ice cream maker at the store. "He'd start out with vanilla, and work on to strawberry and end up with chocolate," avoiding having to wash the apparatus in between flavors. "I got to clean the dasher."

Hot dogs sold for 5 cents, sloppy Joe style hamburgers for a dime. With old-fashioned candy, "all you needed was a couple of pennies. You can't even buy a postage stamp for two cents anymore."

The store was at the heart of Litchfield, near school, church, dance hall and the doctor. "The town has moved up above me now," said Campbell, who lives diagonally across from the store.

Some farmers came to his uncle's store without money. They simply swapped butter or eggs for grain. The store sold things in bulk, without fancy packaging. If you wanted molasses from the 50-gallon barrel, you brought your own jug.

The local institution will likely re-open by mid January of 1991, said Richard Lagueux, who with his wife,

Theresa, operated the business for 11 years.

For the past few years, Lagueux has leased the store, but the latest owner wasn't able to make a go of it. He said the new operators intend to run a combination store and restaurant, something he said was popular during his tenure in the store.

"We had people drive from Topsham, Bath and Brunswick for fresh pie. We always made our own hamburgers, no machine-pressed patties," he said of the lunch-counter at what was then known as Richard's Market.

"It's a gathering place — it has been a gathering place for years.

"I'd like to take it over myself. My love is in retailing," said Lagueux, 44, who used to live above the store and now lives in Wales. But he is reluctant to give up his current job of wholesaling novelties with a truck route. It takes a lot of money to start up a store, even a well-established business, he said.

"Storekeepers are watching their pennies. You've got to pay attention, and play your cards right," he said. You've also got to be ready to put in 12-hour days.



Charles Campbell and Dr. Ralph Goss stand in front of the Corner Store in a photo taken about 1915.