

Working at the Store

By Marilyn Reeves

We moved from Denver to Salida when I was three, where Dad owned and operated a store called Tuttle's Trading Post.

He partitioned off the rear section with pine paneling for the family's residential quarters. There was a small living room and kitchen, a stairway leading up to the balcony that was my parents' bedroom, and a set of bunk beds at the foot of the stairs shared by my sister Janet and me.

To access the bathroom one had to cross the wooden platform of the freight elevator that Dad operated manually with heavy rope pulleys to haul merchandise down to the basement. Off to the side there was an old wooden staircase also leading to the basement with a door at the top where he used to hang his hat and coveralls. This passageway around the elevator was dimly lit and rather spooky, and at night those clothes hanging on the back of the door loomed like a boogeyman. During daylight hours I would brave the journey by myself, but if I had to use the bathroom at night I would wake my big sister to go with me.

The store featured fishing tackle and other sporting goods, as well as knickknacks, souvenirs and toys.

It was a family enterprise. Mom helped out in the background, sticking price tags on merchandise, making out fishing licenses, and dusting. Occasionally, she would wait on customers, but that was hard for her, as she was very shy.

From the age of nine, I was expected to do the same. I was supposed to greet customers and point out things they might like to buy. Turquoise and silver squash blossoms. Alabaster lighthouses. Jackalopes. I found that part of the job to be excruciating. Even at that young age, I disliked the idea of manipulating people. And I felt ridiculous – who wants a little kid hovering over them while they're browsing? Sometimes Dad could be a bit insensitive about other people's feelings.

I also had to help dust the knickknacks – take all the things off the shelf, dust them, dust the shelf, and then arrange everything back in place. I hated dusting. Still do.

I also learned to fill out fishing licenses, operate the ancient cash register, and even to make keys on the key-making machine.

But the worst thing was having to keep tabs on the sweaty, stinky young boys who came in to look at the toys, lest they slip something in their pocket without paying for it.

I myself was allowed to look but not touch. How I loved those pretty Madame Alexander dolls in their fancy dresses! I always wanted one but never got one. On the other hand, I was soon to receive something even better.

In October, 1950, we moved to the big old house on F Street one week before my sister Rosie was born. Now I had a real-live dolly that I *could* play with, and I forgot all about those Madame Alexander dolls. Living behind the store became a memory. I still had to work there until I graduated, however, and Dad continued running Tuttle's Trading Post until he retired, some time in the mid-1970's.