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A window into region's past rediscovered

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Rena Graves leans back on her chair at the C.D. Graves Grocery Store in
Keith Collie

HALFWAY — A box of 40-year-old black and white photos uncovered some 2,000 miles from here have provided a unique look into the area's past.

The photos were taken, and recently rediscovered, by a Western Kentucky University graduate named Keith Collie.

Collie, a Paducah native, joined the Navy in 1969. When he got out, he enrolled at WKU on the GI Bill. His major was mass communication with a concentration in photography.

He also worked as a maintenance technician for RC Cola while going to school. That work took him to remote areas, such as Halfway in Allen County, where, at the intersection of Old Bowling Green and Pope roads, he serviced the soda machine at the C.D. Graves Grocery store.

Once common parts of rural life, the country store was already a vanishing breed in 1978 when Collie got to know the store's owners, Cecil D. and Rena Graves.

Rena was especially proud of her home-made pickles. Before he left from his first visit to the store, she insisted Collie take home two jars of preserves, a jar of pickle relish and a bar of lye soap (good for getting the smell out of old socks, Rena said).

Collie decided that documenting the store could fulfill a future assignment for one of his photography classes.

"I loved the country stores," Collie said, and the Graves Grocery "epitomized for me the country store. ... It was something I wanted to record."

On an off day, he spent about 90 minutes at the store, which was thankfully not very busy, taking pictures.

He also took notes:

Cecil Graves was 77. He had been operating the store for 35 years. Despite a recent operation, he "still gets out and mows the lawn in 85 degree weather and is still just as feisty and spirited as a restless schoolboy," Collie wrote.

Cecil Graves was largely oblivious to the camera.

Rena, 73, however, "was nervous and very tense," Collie wrote. She eventually warmed up to Collie and would on occasion "break out with an impish grin."

The result of the trip was a series of photos that Collie developed and printed, but never used for a class. The prints were up packed up and forgotten.

Until Collie, now retired and living in San Diego, uncovered them last month – "It brought back some precious memories of a time long lost," he said. "It was almost like the first time seeing them."

Doing some research put Collie in touch with Hal Parrish, who married Cecil and Rena's granddaughter and remembers when the store was a community staple.

"People came from all around to shop there," Parrish said. Cecil and Rena "were both pretty set in their ways. They were true characters in the community," Parrish said.

As was common for country stores, the C.D. Graves Grocery served as a community hub.

Many area students would wait for the school bus to pick them up at the store, and after school, some students would wait at the store to be picked up by their parents as they returned from jobs in Bowling Green or Scottsville.

Michael Cooksey worked on the grain truck that Cecil also operated as a second business.
"He was one of a kind," Cooksey said.

The Graves Grocery, like other country stores at the time, was where "everyone got together, talked and carried on," he said.

The one-room grocery was lined with shelves featuring neatly stacked staples – everything from candy to seeds and canned goods to cigarettes.

For the increasing number of electrical devices in the store, Cecil plugged extension cord into extension cord – "nobody could figure out how the place didn't burn down," Parrish said with a laugh.
"There were wires hanging everywhere."

Cecil Graves died in 1982, around the time the store closed, and Rena died in 1994.

The building has been largely vacant for decades. Today, it still sits nestled amid encroaching woodland. The floors are rotted, windows are mostly broken out and the metal roof has more than a few holes.

Parrish has had the land for sale for some time as the store sits a relic, largely forgotten.

During a recent visit to the crumbling building, Parrish reminisced about the time when the building was full of life under the careful watch of community stalwarts Cecil

and Rena.

"Everyone loved them," Parrish said.

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