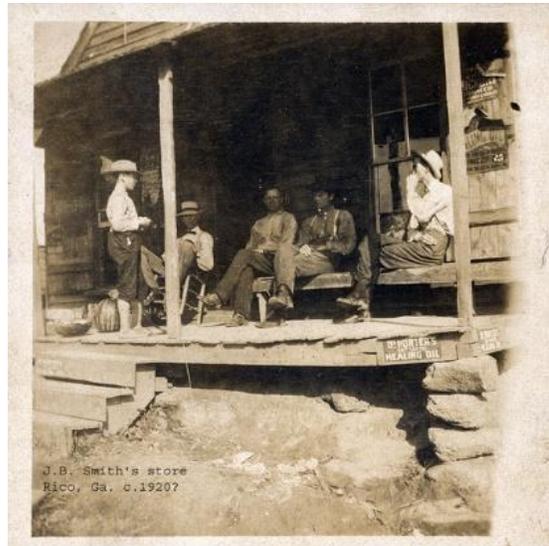


# Smith's Grocery

By: J. Kenyon Langley

October, 2020

That's the proper name for it now, "Smith's Grocery," with Kenny Smith the owner (since 2003). But everybody calls it Smith's Store or "Kenny's." Before that it was John R. Smith Grocery, with John Smith, Kenny's father, the owner (beginning in 1950). Again, everybody referred to it as Smith's Store or "John's." And before that it was J. B. Smith Grocery, with Mr. Burnett Smith, John's father, the owner. I can only assume that most people then also called it Smith's Store or "Burnett's." We are now back to the year 1914. It only took three steps to cover one hundred six years. That was the year Mr. Burnett bought the store from Mr. Adams. Like 106 tree rings, each year encapsulates the history and character of the community known as Rico. I will try to relate some of that history and character.



R100 Burnett Smith's Store, Rico, Ga. c.1920  
Mr. Burnett is in the chair.

The first major trial for Mr. Burnett and his new store came in 1919. That was the year the boll weevil arrived in Rico. In short order, a prosperous economy that had been in place for nearly 100 years, an economy based on cotton, was devastated. Mr. Burnett, along with everyone else, struggled to stay afloat. Many didn't.

Through all of this, Mr. Burnett struggled to keep the store open. He had to mortgage most everything he owned to stay in business. It took the major part of the rest of his life to fully recover. But the store remained open, providing essential goods, often on credit, to people who usually had only one substantial payday a year: the day they sold their crops. A story that John Smith told me illustrates the process of the day. He told of the last year one of my cousins farmed. During much of the year, he farmed his fields, purchasing much of what he required from Mr. Burnett on credit. When he sold his crop, he came to the store to settle up. After my cousin paid his bill, Mr. Burnett handed him back forty-eight cents. Think about that for a minute. For a year's worth of work, you make forty-eight cents. John said my cousin looked down at the change in his hand and just said, "Damn!" He left farming behind and moved to town to find employment.

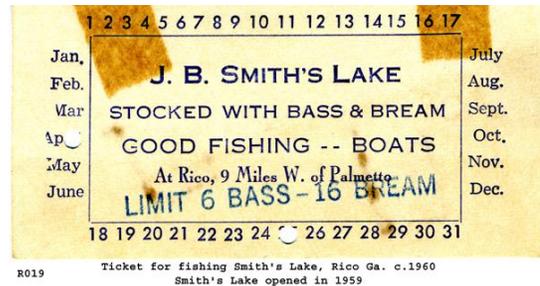
Another thing John said is very illuminating. He said that when the Great Depression came following the crash of 1929, it wasn't the same devastation here as it was for most of the country. Our devastation came in 1919 with the boll weevil. The Great Depression was just a continuation of trials and hard times.

In walking the back hills of Rico, I am fascinated by long-deserted terraces, overgrown with large trees, which at one time were prosperous farms. Some of the terraces on the steep hills were not more than ten feet wide. Imagine all the labor that went into making those terraces. But it was profitable in the

days of "King Cotton." The boll weevil changed all that. Less productive land was abandoned. People moved away, and nature was allowed to reforest the hills.

Mr. Burnett also began to diversify beyond the core business of the store. He built a cotton gin and a gristmill on land behind the store. In his spare time, what little he must have had, he built a small pond less than an acre in size on the little creek behind Providence Church. You can still see the remnants of the dam from Providence's prayer garden behind their fellowship building. He built the dam with a pan pulled by a mule.

Years later he built Smith's Lake. Work began in 1957, and in 1959 the thirty-five-acre lake opened for fishing. People would stop at the store and buy a fishing ticket for one dollar. The lake had a boathouse and a camp house. The fishing boats were flat bottomed, built from plywood and sealed with tar. Fishermen could rent one of the boats for an additional dollar. The camp house was mainly used for shelter and had a coke machine.



The lake's opening day was a festive occasion. Mr. Burnett had Melear's Barbecue sandwiches for sale, and other people brought additional items. There were all sorts of treats available, including frog legs and turtle. This was the first time I had tried either. I loved the frog legs, but you can keep the turtle.



From the earliest days of the store, a special item needs to be mentioned: the clock. Ever noticed the old clock on the wall by the front door of the store? It's been a store fixture for a while. And, yes, the clock still runs. Kenny doesn't use it anymore because it has become hard to regulate and requires frequent adjustment. The internal gears are all badly fish-hooked from wear. For about 100 years the clock has encouraged customers to "Drink Chero-Cola." Have you ever drunk a Chero-Cola? You probably have but didn't realize it. In 1934 Chero was reformulated and the name changed to Royal Crown. If you have ever drunk an RC, you've had the new version of Chero-Cola.

Smith's store has also been the solution for the community's communication needs. Ever since I've been around, and I'm sure it was the same long before that, Smith's store was where you went to find out what was happening in the community. People went to the store to shop, to socialize, to communicate. When passing along information, how many times have you said, or heard said, "I heard it at the store."

In the mid to late 1970s, before Fulton County built the current fire station, the County helped us organize a volunteer fire department. The fire truck was kept in William White's barn. When a fire call went out, a siren at the barn would sound and a signal would be sent to a radio receiver located in the volunteer firefighters' homes. This receiver was called a Plectron, for the manufacturer. The location of the call would be announced over the radio. Each firefighter had a Plectron. And so did Smith's store. Community communication. Want to know what's going on? Call Smith's store.

Got something you want to show off? Bring it to the store. People would bring their prized catch from Smith's Lake to the store to be weighed. As a kid, during the summer I remember many times someone would bring a rattlesnake to the store (dead, of course) to show everybody there. Even today, during deer season, many hunters will bring a large buck they have shot by the store. Even some not so large. Some hunters have a lower threshold of pride than others. The same was true with fishermen.

Passing time at the store also provided others an opportunity for a good game of checkers. An article in the Atlanta Constitution dated March 29, 1953 about country stores shows Mr. Burnett and G. W. Bryant engaged in a thoughtful game. It should be noted that this picture was staged just for the benefit of the reporter. Mr. Burnett rarely played checkers. But the reporter needed a good picture for the article, so Burnett and G. W. obliged. The old men I do remember playing outside on the porch by the gas pumps were Mr. Anderson and Geat Tanner. They were regular players, perched on Coke flats with the board between them.



Turtle from Chattahoochee River  
J. B. Smith's Store, Rico, Ga. c. 1930  
L-R: Howard Tatum, Roy Croker, Frank Hurt  
R102 Turtle caught in Chattahoochee River, Rico, Ga. c.1930  
l-r Howard Tatum, Roy Croker, Frank Hurt



Staff Photos—Sandy Sanders  
**RED-HOT CHECKER GAME AT SMITH'S STORE IN RICO COMMUNITY**  
G. W. Bryant, 79 (Left); J. B. Smith, 74, Amid Mops and Brooms  
R108 Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 3-29-1953

And of course, in addition to checkers, there were the games of chance: dice, coin toss, and pulling Coke bottles. Pulling Coke bottles might require a little explanation. Back when Coke came in thick glass returnable bottles, and was more substantial than today's watered-down, low carbonation, fructose sweetened swill, each bottle had the city of the Coke bottler molded into the glass on the bottom. Each person would pull a Coke bottle from the box and check its city. The furthest city from Rico won and the loser bought the Cokes. Simple, fun, and a good geography lesson. The closest bottler to Rico was in Newnan, so that was a sure loser.

As a community gathering place, the store was also the source of many practical jokes. One of the best was the needle in the counter. One end of the counter was flat, and people would often sit on it while socializing. One of the boards had a small knothole in it. Some ingenious person saw the placement of the knothole as a gift from providence and rigged up a needle on a pivoting stick under the counter. A string was run from the stick to the end of the counter so that when pulled the needle gave a surprise bite to anyone unfortunate enough to be sitting over the hole.

In beginning this story about Smith's Store, I said I would try to relate some of its history and character. Hopefully I've done that. But there is another facet that needs to be remembered: The Smith family. I've recounted some of Rico's history. I've tried to capture some of the character of the community over the years. But Smith's Store wouldn't be "Smith's Store" without the Smith family. Smith's store is a business, but it has always been more than that. It's been a business with a heart that comes from the family's character and values. Over the years I've witnessed countless expressions of those values. I will relate two.

It seems that being lost is the way many travelers find Rico. Sometimes they are not only lost, they are almost out of gas. And also, sometimes out of money. Many times I've seen John and Kenny let them have enough gas to get home or at least get someplace where they can get help from a friend. They are always profusely thankful and promise to return and pay for the gas. Guess how many strangers over the years have actually returned to pay? If you guessed zero, you just pulled the Coke bottle with Seattle on the bottom.

Years ago, Rico was a different place from what it is now. Crippling poverty was not uncommon. Working the fields and sawmills generated barely enough income for a family to survive. For some, there wasn't enough money at Christmas to buy presents for the kids. Many times at Christmas I've seen families come into the store, and John would tell the kids to get themselves an item from the toy rack. It wasn't much, but when you have nothing it meant a lot. One time when John did this, a person in the store asked him, "Why do you do that?" John's simple answer: "Somebody's got to do it."

In Helen Selman's history of Rico titled "We Wanted to Be Called Green Eyes," she relates a story from the days of Mr. Burnett's store:

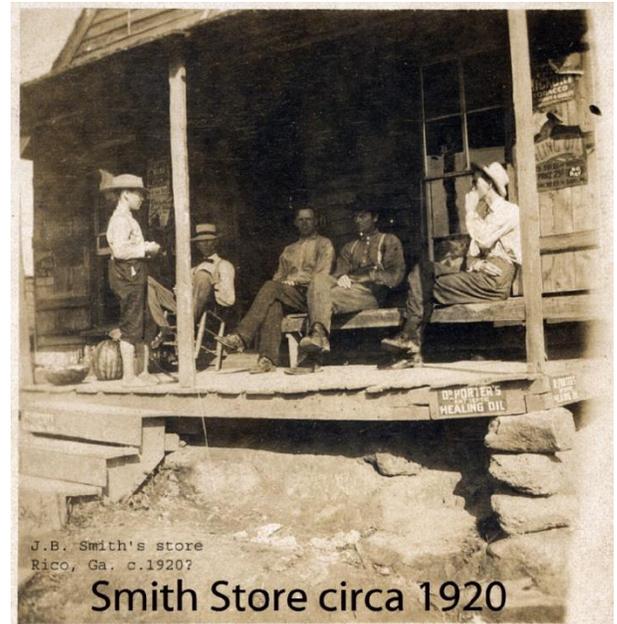
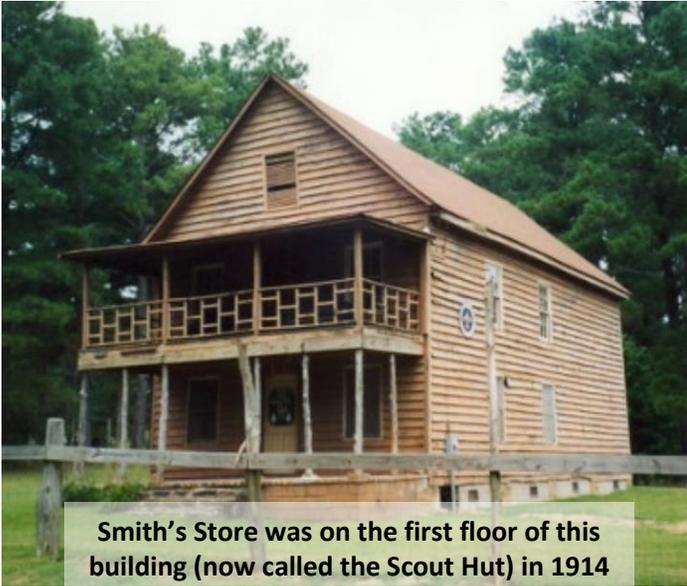
In the early 1900's a drummer walked into Smith's Store in southwest Campbell County and asked the directions to Rico. Mr. Calvin Smith was among the group sitting around the potbellied stove in the store. "You are standing in the middle of it right now. If you take a step in any direction you will be out of it," answered Calvin.

For one hundred six years and counting, Smith's Store has indeed been the center and, more importantly, the heart of Rico.

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See Photos on next page.

## Smith's Store Through the Years



### Smith's Grocery Store location

1. The original location of the store was in the building now called The Scout Hut, located at the NW corner of Upper Wooten Rd at Rico Rd.
2. The current location of the store is 6400 Campbellton-Redwine Rd Chattahoochee Hills, GA 30268

## Smith's Store Family Photos



John & Kathleen Smith at the steps of Smith's Store with baby Kenny (future owner)



R053 1-r Kathleen Smith, Bud Ray, Jean Smith, Kenny Smith inside Smith's Store, Rico, Ga. c.1954



John Smith at Store



Kenny Smith at Store. Photo taken in 2017 to be included in the Chattahoochee Hills time capsule.