

## **ALPINE'S FIRST GENERAL MERCHANDISE STORE, A PLACE FOR PEOPLE**

The country store—a place for people to gather, to hear about the latest news and to obtain much needed necessities. In a pioneer settlement, the store is usually the hub of business, political affairs and the social center as well as the post office.

This was the case with Alpine's first general merchandise store, begun most likely in the early 1860s. Henry J. Whitney owned the one room board building on the south side of present Alpine Boulevard which he named Whitney's Store. The store stocked all the necessities: kerosene lamps, skillets, granite coffee pots, guns, bullets, rope and hand tools. Mr. Whitney ran the store, and served as postmaster, for over 20 years and around 1890 sold to Charles F. Emery. Mr. Emery changed the store name to The Alpine Store and was the proprietor and postmaster until a fire destroyed the building in 1904. This left the village with no market place until the new one was built later that year.

A larger store building was built on the north side of the road, facing the site of the first store, and T. M. Albee became merchant and postmaster. In 1909 the store was taken over by Edwin B. Snow. The store changed hands again in 1913 when John B. Wilkinson, Jr. took over and less than a year later Mr. and Mrs. Harold Flegal became the proprietors. The Flegals decided, in 1916, to devote full time to making pure grape juice from the Brabazon Vineyard and C. V. Hilton and his wife Maude bought the store.

Mr. and Mrs. Hilton were energetic merchants with a talent for dealing with the public. Old timers report that items on the shelves were not marked with prices. A customer would enter the store and ask for a price. Maude would ask her husband in the back of the store for the price, he would reply, "Who is it?" and a price would be quoted! The Hiltons were a very popular couple and, when the store burned down in 1933, the community was saddened. The Hiltons rebuilt the store and leased it to Art and Alice Simmons who ran it until 1936.

Mava and Gordon Wilson and their four children arrived in Alpine from Alberta, Canada, in 1936. They had run two stores in Canada, but needed a milder climate for the health of both Gordon and their daughter Jean. They managed the store for the next 27 years, longer than any other merchant since Mr. Whitney.

Beatrice LaForce, in *Alpine, History of a Mountain Settlement*, describes the Wilsons as, "Good merchants and friendly hosts as well, the Wilsons made a visit to The Store seem as much a call on friends as a shopping trip. Mava, plump and pretty, was often behind the counter as was Jack, the eldest son, and when not in school, Jean, and in time the younger ones, Stanley and Gail. They all liked to take a turn at minding the store. Thus everyone came to know the Wilsons and they to know everyone for miles around." Mava and Gordon ran the store until 1951 when they retired and turned the business over to Jack who ran it until February 29, 1964. Bea also said, "With the closing of The Alpine Store a unique phase of village life ended, for the Wilsons were just right in the difficult role of merchant-hosts to a pioneer settlement." The building has never again been used as a grocery store. It currently houses the Frontier Gallery.

At the April meeting of the Historical Society, the Wilson's daughter Dr. Gail Wilson Guth has agreed to reminisce about the old store. She has even enticed some of her siblings to come along. Mark your calendar for Sunday, April 20 at 1:00 p.m. at the Alpine Woman's Club to hear the stories of a true Alpine landmark—The Alpine Store. When you go to the Frontier Gallery, think of those early pioneers who came before all of us, picture their horses and wagons in front of the store and the friendly merchants ready and willing to serve. Our history is rich!

*Carol Walker and her husband Paul lived in Alpine for 19 years. Carol is the Membership Chairman of the Alpine Historical Society. She can be reached at [cwalker@alpinehistory.org](mailto:cwalker@alpinehistory.org) or 619-741-4629.*



*Wilson's general store in the 1950s, Alpine Boulevard.*