Opal (Bailey) Beasley
Remembering when the lights came on…

When Opal Beasley looks back on growing up in Licking in the 1940s and 1950s, she doesn't begin by telling you about what her family didn't have. She remembers what they did have.

They had a bustling downtown where people knew one another and gathered on sidewalks to visit. They had neighbors who helped neighbors, friends who became lifelong friends, music, church, Saturday movie matinees and community celebrations. They had a town that was busy from morning until night. And, in Opal's words, they had a "booming downtown."

Some of Opal's earliest memories are from an apartment above what is now remembered as the old MFA building at the four-way stop in downtown Licking. In those days, the building wasn't MFA. Brown's Grocery Store occupied the first floor, while Opal and her family lived upstairs.

Technically, the family had electricity—but by today's standards, it was a very small taste of what electricity would eventually bring to rural homes. There was one, single pull-string light.

There were no electrical outlets, no refrigerator and no running water. The family relied on an icebox, with a man delivering a block of ice each week to keep their food cold. There was no indoor bathroom, and a wood stove provided both heat and a place to cook.

Water had to be carried upstairs for drinking, cooking and bathing. Afterward, the dirty water and any waste had to be carried back downstairs to the outside bathroom. Firewood also had to make the trip upstairs.



Opal speaks with particular pride when she remembers her mother, Alta, and all the work she did to keep the household running. "She was tough!" Opal said with a smile. Her mother washed clothes with a ringer washer, and Opal still remembers pulling frozen socks from the clothesline during Missouri winters.

The family didn't own a car during those early years, either. Fortunately, they didn't need one very often. School, church, the grocery store and nearly everything else they needed were right outside their door. And downtown Licking was a busy place.

Opal remembers a time when finding a parking spot downtown wasn't easy because there were so many people coming into town. People sat along the sidewalks and streets visiting with one another while they went about their shopping.

One of the sights Opal remembers most vividly was the front porch of the hotel and restaurant. Eb Craig

and Mr. Gordon could often be found sitting in rocking chairs there, visiting and watching the activity around town. As a little girl, Opal would see them sitting there and remembers that, more than once, they would give her a nickel to go buy an ice cream.

It was a small gesture, but it is the kind of memory that has stayed with her for a lifetime: two men rocking in their chairs, visiting with one another, a little girl enjoying an ice cream and a downtown where people took the time to know one another.

Local businesses were plentiful. There were several grocery stores, including Brown's, Hall's and Dierbergs. There was Walker's Drug Store, a feed store, two car dealerships, Smith's Clothing Store, a lumber store and Western Auto, owned by the Williams brothers. There was a jewelry store, hardware store, two barber shops, Ester's Beauty Shop, the newspaper office, Mrs. Leonard's Cafe, the hotel and restaurant, churches, the school, a funeral home and even the movie theater. Most of those businesses stayed open until 9 or 10 p.m.

“It was just so busy back then,” Opal remembers. “I didn't want to miss anything.”

Living right downtown also meant that Opal's apartment was frequently filled with children. Her mother understood the convenience of their location, especially when school activities or events kept children in town after school. Friends who lived outside of town didn't have to make another trip home and back, so they often stayed at Opal's. There were sleepovers, pillow fights and plenty of late-night giggling.

Opal remembers her friend Norma Jean, who would later work at Intercounty, and her friend Sue, with whom she shared many childhood adventures. Those memories of the upstairs apartment remain some of her favorites.

Music was another important part of Opal's childhood.

She and Sue were involved in the school marching band when they were only first-graders. Their little legs sometimes couldn't keep up with the older students, so the high school boys would occasionally end up carrying the two girls when they wore out.

Opal loved music and singing, and she remembers how strongly the community supported musical activities, with concerts and shows being a regular part of life. And then there was the movie theater.

Opal loved going to the movies, where the cartoons and main features provided a special kind of entertainment. Roy Rogers and Gene Autry westerns were favorites, and the Saturday matinee included another chapter of a serial that would leave viewers wondering what would happen next—and eager to return the following Saturday.

When Opal was 9, her family moved from the downtown apartment to a two-story white house at the corner of what are now Maple Avenue and Highway 63.

She loved the apartment, but she loved the house, too. There was more room, and Opal even got to have a cow. The house still didn't have an indoor bathroom or running water throughout, but to Opal, it felt like luxury. There was a pull-string light in every room and, most importantly, a water spout right at the kitchen. Her father soon put in an indoor bathroom.

Opal's father owned the hardware store in town and had also become involved in the funeral business. In the early 1930s, Robert and his friend Eubert Ferguson established a funeral service business in Licking. The two served the community until eventually selling the business to Don Fox 40 years later.

Opal remembers the hearse—and how it sometimes served another important purpose. It could be used as an ambulance, transporting local residents to the hospital or nursing home in bigger towns like Rolla.

Her father also left her with a piece of advice that has stayed with her throughout her life: "Always be loyal to your town." It was good advice then, and Opal believes it is worth remembering now.

Today, a person can pull out a phone, place an order and have something delivered to their doorstep within days—or sometimes even hours. But Opal's memories remind us of a time when shopping locally wasn't simply convenient. It was part of being connected to your community.

People knew the shopkeepers. They knew their neighbors. They visited while they shopped. They supported the businesses owned by people they knew. And they depended on one another.

Opal remembers the Fourth of July picnic in Licking, complete with a carnival and even a Ferris wheel. She remembers the REA's annual Easter egg hunt at the park, where golden eggs meant special prizes and the whole event was something children looked forward to.

She remembers her classmates, too. Especially the graduating class of 1957. Opal doesn't hesitate when she talks about them. "The best class in the whole wide world," she says. And, nearly seven decades later, many of those classmates have remained friends. They made an effort to stay connected after graduation and continued getting together throughout the years.

When Opal reflects on growing up before so many of today's modern conveniences, she doesn't dwell on the inconvenience of carrying water, hauling wood, hanging laundry in freezing weather or living with only a single light bulb. Instead, she remembers the people.

She remembers how friendly everyone was. She remembers how willing people were to help one another. She remembers a downtown full of activity, children filling homes after school, music drifting through community events and neighbors taking the time to stop and visit.

Electricity and modern conveniences would eventually transform life in rural Missouri, making countless everyday tasks easier and opening the door to a world of new possibilities. But Opal's memories offer another important reminder: technology may change the way we live, but it doesn't have to change the way we connect.

For Opal, the greatest conveniences of her childhood weren't found in an appliance or a light switch. They were found in the people around her. And she considers herself fortunate to have had such a great childhood.

Today, she takes every opportunity to share those memories—and that gratitude—with her growing family, making sure the stories of an earlier Licking live on for another generation.