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THE BUTCHER-SHOP QUARTET, LESS TWO
Minstrels Harold Rood and Merritt Olsen.

Butcher Adds 'Ham' To Shopping Order

By MARILYN DUPREE
Staff Writer

Birmingham, a city of 265,000, I don't believe it — at least not after stopping in an ordinary market to pick up an ordinary piece of meat on an ordinary day.

Not so. There's nothing at all ordinary about Olsen's Market at 307 W. Brown. Unless, that is, one is accustomed to a "countrified" atmosphere in the midst of town. Yes, Olsen's is the swiftest, singiest butchering meat market around.

I casually walked in, totally unaware of the existing situation. I surveyed the market — it was small, but it looked like most any other market. Was looking for Merritt Olsen, so I asked a fellow clad in white butchering attire where I could find him.

He asked if I was selling something, and I quickly assured him I was not. Later I was informed if I had been a peddler, Olsen would not have been in.

I then met the Mr. Olsen. He told me he'd get me a paper to sit on and then we would talk. He brought me a piece of brown butchering paper, carefully spread it over a wooden barrel and indicated my seat.

HE SAT on a crate of something or other—onions I think. We were in the back room by the meat coolers, sawdust on the floor and a broom and dustpan secured to the wall. Everything was neat and clean, and we began to talk.

There has been an Olsen meat market in Birmingham for over 10 years, first located where Jimmie's Grill now stands on S. Woodward. Merritt Olsen's father was a butcher, too. Olsen's first job was dressing chickens. They were brought in alive from the farms, and 16-year-old Merritt was in charge from then on.

How did the Olsen's get into the meat business? Merritt Olsen said, "It just happened that way. My dad was in the ice business, cut ice on Quorton Lake in the winter and peddled it."

A Mr. Brown owned a slaughter

house in the parking lot behind where Sfire's Market is now. Old Mr. Olsen delivered ice to the meat store and slaughter house and in his spare time worked inside salting meat, cutting and butchering.

MERRITT OLSEN can tell anybody just about anything about the city of Birmingham. His mother and her mother were born and raised in Franklin, and his dad came to Birmingham in 1910. He knows the life story of nearly "everybody" that ever set foot in the city.

After the chicken dressing, the next job was delivery boy. He delivered in a Dodge truck, and before that, a Model-T Ford with a box on the back was the delivery truck. He delivered in the country — as far as Orchard Lake—and to the surrounding country clubs, for they all bought locally then.

Young Olsen went to college for two years, but decided butchering was for him. He said, "I'm in the last batch to manage to swim without a master's degree."

OLSEN'S MARKET moved in 1950 to his Brown Street location. Vegetables were introduced to the little meat market in the early 20's, groceries in the 30's, and cake mixes and frozen foods when the time came. Olsen said, "We had to keep abreast of the times."

Olsen still has about six customers who traded with his father. He remembers them coming into the store, "when I was a kid."

"We handle quality foods," said Olsen, "that's our philosophy. We can't carry everything, but a complete line of anything is impossible." Olsen's Market carries fresh Lake Superior fish; they're not frozen. And fresh chickens, too; not just on holidays, but all year around.

I ASKED about service. He proudly sat up and explained, "With the retailing revolution, stores have become impersonal. If a person wants to complain, there is nobody to complain to."

"Personal stores of this type are concerned to please. We care to satisfy our customers; we get to know them and their meats."

"Are your prices higher?" I asked.

"Now that's a difficult question

to answer," he told me. "Prices are hard to measure; the elements of service, quality and satisfaction enter into the total."

About that time, Harold Rood, the other butcher, came out to where we were sitting, screwed a grinder to an attachment and ground some beef. That's the first time I ever had hamburger ground in my lap—almost.

OLSEN HAS two daughters and a son. He said his two daughters would walk several blocks out of their way coming home from school to avoid the market. Afraid they'd get put to work.

And eight-year-old Billy thinks the market is a "fine place to get poppies." His dad said Billy will trim the fat from a piece of meat for about two minutes, but then decides he'd rather go out and play.

I asked about the work. Olsen laughed and said, "We have six employees, but it's questionable how much work we do. But we're all a bunch of farmers; we do a little bit of everything."

"It's different when you're dealing with products not manufactured. When you handle the natural, you take what you can get."

I HAD been eyeing the decor of the market. It was adorned with stuffed trout, Edison phonographs, violins and banjos. So I asked for an explanation. Not only did I get an explanation, but a demonstration.

Had the best time—a marvelously improvised concert! Harold played the dulcimer, and Merritt fiddled fast and furiously. I heard "Soldier's Joy," "Haste to the Wedding" and "The Jumpin' Toothache." Called out square dances and had a good old fashioned, knee-slapping time.

And the biggest surprise—no one was surprised! Customers came in and "didn't bat an eye." One woman said they're "the hammiest butchers I've ever seen."

I guess maybe they are. Relaxed atmosphere, customer consideration and a wonderful time. But a joy to go to market? You bet! Even if they are all "full of bologna!"

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