

DRUGSTORE Days

Soda Fountains, Sandwiches
for 25 Cents, Pharmacists

Named Doc, and Other Happy
Memories. *By* LARRY ROSEN

FOR NINE YEARS, STARTING IN 1959, I OWNED SMITH'S PHARMACY, at 14th and Clifton streets in downtown DC. A lot has changed since then.

Drugstores today have ATM machines, scanning cash registers, clerks checking inventory with hand-held computers, and more computers behind the pharmacy counter. Gone are the typewriters we used to type prescription labels at Smith's.

The soda fountain was a standard fixture in nearly every drugstore. The fountain at Smith's sold milkshakes for 25 cents and a cup of coffee or a scoop of ice cream for a dime. Most sandwiches cost 25 to 50 cents. The Smithburger was a double hamburger with cheese for 39 cents. Some of the sandwiches we sold would be hard to find today—cream cheese and olive on raisin bread, or lettuce and tomato (no bacon) on whole wheat.

In plain view at most drugstores today is a display of pharmaceuticals. Forty years ago, these were kept in a drawer behind the front counter. Once, a customer requested three "raincoats." A clerk dashed to the stockroom and emerged with a trio of plastic floor-length raincoats.

The pharmacist was always called Doc, and he was consulted for cold, cough, stomachache, and headache remedies. Popular medications for these were castor oil, citrate of magnesia, and cough syrups such as Robitussin AC. Certain cough remedies contained codeine, and although they could be purchased without a prescription back then, the customer had to sign an "exempt-narcotic book."

My pharmacist, Doc Jones, often compounded prescriptions by using an old-fashioned mortar and pestle and a scale. Prescriptions cost \$3 to \$5. Today an uninsured senior citizen can pay around \$250 for 60 Zocor tablets.

The most dramatic change in drugstores is the involvement of insurance companies. I've asked independent pharmacy owners about their profit margin on insurance-filled prescriptions. On a prescription filled that way, the pharmacist nets a profit of only \$2.50 to \$3.50. Without prescription volume, it's a tough road for the independent pharmacist.

My last day at Smith's was April 4, 1968. That evening, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Three days of rioting in DC ensued, and my store was burned down.

Although there was a crisis every day, I enjoyed my job, and I miss it.

After Smith's was destroyed, Larry Rosen (lazer66@msn.com) operated newsstands and gift shops here. He lives in Rockville.



The author and his drugstore in the early 1960s, back when you could enjoy a shake while waiting for your prescription.

Photograph courtesy of Larry Rosen