

Wal-Mart Cometh

How the retail giant's arrival slashed prices—and a small town along with them.

By Bill Kauffman

IN 1992, WAL-MART COMETH—all 116,000 square feet of it. The Arkansas weed sent up shoots across western New York in the turbid Clinton Dawn. Construction in Batavia, N.Y. “received only minor opposition from those living nearby who feared increased traffic and a disruption of the area’s rural setting,” according to Kevin Saville in the *Daily News*. The silence of Wal-Mart critics spoke volumes. Let the wind blow a stray Wal-Mart plastic bag within 50 miles of Vermont, and the yuppies (if not, significantly, the natives) are up in arms: hereabouts, Landmark Society members and Batavia patriots grumbled. But respect for Free Enterprise (even in ersatz and hypertrophied form) is such that denying Wal-Mart a building permit seemed ... socialistic. And besides, they sell jeans and shoes and charcoal grills cheaper than Carr’s and Genesee Hardware and the diminishing downtown remnant. (Never mind that Wal-Mart is an excrescence of a grand Republican experiment in state socialism, the Interstate Highway System.)

My voice was as mute as the others in that silent night, unholy night. I suppose I am of the old New England school of Thoreau and Emerson in that I distrust political solutions and prefer individual revolutions of the soul. I sympathized with those townspeople who wished to keep Wal-Mart out. But instead of passing laws to compel behavior I would

much rather that my neighbors choose to shop locally. They will only do so when Batavia becomes once more a city with its own flavor and fashions. Whether that day will come I do not know.

The first casualty of the Arkansas behemoth was Newberry’s, Carr’s Main Street neighbor, a dime store with a ’40s-ish lunch counter. (In reveries I see Gloria Grahame spinning on a Newberry’s stool, skirt hiked, smacking her lips over a tuna sandwich.) “But this will never be again,” as one mournful woman wrote to the *Daily News*. “Our beautiful downtown is gone, and we will have to be content to shop the Wal-Marts and Kmarts or the malls in some other city. Our children will never know the homey, warm, small-city feeling that Batavia once had and could have still had.

Who cared if one bought shirts from Wal-Mart rather than Carr’s? I’ll tell you what difference it makes, in anecdotes big and small. (Anecdotal evidence is always superior to statistics: numbers lie, trust the eye.) And speaking of eyes, for close to three decades Ralph Huber at Batavia Optical has fixed the glasses whose bows I am always breaking and pins I am forever losing—and he does it gratis, with just a handshake and smile and “Thanks, Bill.” Wanna try walking into the Vision Center chain with disassembled specs and having them put Humpty Dumpty back together again on the spot, and for nothing?

On a larger scale, take the tractor factory that had been founded by the Allans of Batavia, sold to Yale and Towne, and merged with the Eaton Corporation of Cleveland before being purchased by a German firm. The Germans fired those salaried employees who were within a few years of a full pension. (These included my father, a draftsman.) The Krauts did so without repercussion, for Batavia was no more real to them than an image on a computer screen. Just press delete and we vanish.

Contrast this with the efforts of Steve Carr to keep open his failing department store. Or consider the neighborliness of the Carrs when my dad’s cousin, the irrepressible Eddie Ballow, discovered that a deceased and destitute relative, the black ewe of our family, had left a cairn of unpaid bills. Eddie, impelled by no compulsion but family honor, went around making good on the dead dead-beat’s debts. Except at Carr’s, which in the spirit of Christian charity simply wiped the debit off its books. Try that at Wal-Mart.

Conventional retailing wisdom supplies a standard strategy for battling Wal-Mart: beat a hasty retreat to a niche as yet unoccupied by the invader. Steve Carr fought back as best he could. When Newberry’s closed, and its popular lunch counter with it, Steve tried to sell coffee (he did not, thankfully, call it javahh!). He closed Carr’s second floor,



CHRIS HEERS

and then the basement, bailing water and scrambling for a toehold on the shrinking deck of his sinking ship. He opened the store on Sundays near Christmastime, even though he regarded doing business on the Sabbath as “cut-throat” and “uncivilized.” Carr’s spent the 1990s slowly drowning in the sort of red-ink sea that even Yahweh couldn’t part. Steve dug into the family fortune to keep from laying off the store’s longtime employees. Anyone else—anyone whose name was not emblazoned on the storefront—would have given up by 1995. Yet he pushed on, customerless, hemorrhaging cash, in the way that only the bearer of an Old Family surname can: to certain, honorable defeat.

Middle-class Batavians drove the 30 miles to the suburban malls; working-class Batavians, some resenting the uppityness of Carr’s past and taking a certain satisfaction in seeing them laid low, our own not-so-Magnificent Ambersons, packed the parking lots of Wal-Mart and Kmart. “If it was purely a business decision, it would have been made a long time ago,” Steve said of the closing when it inevitably came.

Lest our vision become clouded by Morning in America mist, I must point out that Carr’s paid the help peanuts. More than one “associate,” as department stores patronizingly term their employees, jumped ship for the iniquitous Marts. And much as my own biases push upon me the Goliath crushes David story of a doughty local patriot vanquished by the corporate behemoth, facts do have an inconveniencing way about them. After all, Steve was educated at Ridley in Canada instead of good old BHS. His two sons also avoided the local academy. Steve and Beth sent their boys to Rochester’s tony Harley School, which accepts shopkeepers’ sons but has no shop class. Moreover, on my last visit before *The Awful News*, Steve urged me to dump our Internet provider, the Main Street son of my old gym coach, and sign up with Time Warner. But now back to our regularly scheduled morality play.

Steve ran the show and kept the dismaying books from the third-floor office, with its exquisite design by Batavia Woodworking, its glass cases full of Carr’s memorabilia from flusher times,

and its pneumatic vacuum tubes that swooshed money, like a vertical ATM, from the first floor to the third floor. (That was back when Carr’s had money enough to swoosh.) The last time I saw Steve before *The Announcement* I had stopped by to pay our monthly bill—in person, Steve stamping it “paid,” just like Sam Walton’s ghost doesn’t do.

The Black Death had in rapid succession claimed Marshall’s News Stand, Sleght’s Book Store, Beardsley’s clothing shop, and even the empire of the Mancusos, the Sicilian moguls who in recent years have lost Mancuso Motors, Mancuso Plumbing, Mancuso Furniture, and now even the Mancuso Theater. (The last-named was sold by one branch of the family to City Church, a growing evangelistic congregation led by “Pastor Marty.”)

Now, one might think that preserving the extruding “Mancuso” marquee would be of interest to those who owe their greens fees and Bills tickets to the Founding Generation. But ancestor worship is the one vice to which the Third Generation is immune. Don’t look back! Keep your eyes on the Glorious Future! Change is Good! Change is God!

In early 2001, the city's toothless Historic Preservation Board, stacked with our preservationist friends, tried to designate the Mancuso Theater a historic landmark. This would have forbidden the removal of the marquee or the effacement of the facade's bas-relief mermaid that is Batavia's topless contribution to art moderne.

The public hearing on the designation took place in old City Hall while City Church and the Mancusos were in negotiation, an unfortunate bit of scheduling that made it look as though the Historic Preservation Board was trying to queer the deal. This *parti pris* was only deepened when a churchman suggested as an alternative to the erasure of the mermaid her transfiguration into "an angel." Wearing a heavenly bra, surely.

Threatened with a lawsuit by the Mancusos, the preservation board retreated; the theater was sold, consecrated, and we prepared to mourn. The

mounted nude statues of movie palace days were wearing shirts. Yet all in all, the theater-to-church modification seemed a nice example of what the preservationists call adaptive reuse. The ecclesiastical style was more than mere Kmart Revival.

We received the bad if unsurprising news in early May 2001: Carr's was closing July 17. Steve was ashamed of his failure. He also dreaded the Buffalo and Rochester TV stations carrying maudlin reports about the death of Batavia's Finest Store. Not to worry, Steve: the stations, owned by remote communications conglomerates, prefer not to acknowledge the funerals as the last of the independents die off.

Steve broke the news to the store's 20-some employees in a morning meeting on the first floor. He stood by the balky elevator that once creaked and groaned as it ascended from floor to floor with all the celerity of Franklin D. Roosevelt climbing the stairs. The employees were

former employees, suppliers and customers of C.L. Carr Company for their loyalty, service and patronage."

On the first weekend of June, the "Going Out of Business" signs appeared in the windows of C.L. Carr Co. William Cullen Bryant thought June the best month in which to die ("Twere pleasant, that in flowery June / When brooks sent up a cheerful tune / And groves a joyous sound / The sexton's hand, my grave to make / The rich, green mountain turf should break"). But WCB didn't have 50,000 square feet of merchandise to sell off.

In the first days of the sale, the store was crowded as it had not been for years. Carr's was doing a land-office business, even though it had frequently offered the same 20 percent off all merchandise in previous sales. "If we had one day like this a month we could go on forever," said Steve as he helped ring us up—for we, too, flew with the circling vultures.

Abashed Wal-Mart customers sweetened their condolences with sugar-coated lies of their fidelity. "Oh I've always shopped here," blubbered one woman. "I feel so bad." She patted Beth's arm and said, "I've got to go up to the second floor and see the men's section," unaware that the second floor had been shut down several years earlier.

Beth approaches me. "I'm really sorry about the store," I say. "Batavia won't be the same." She grits her teeth. "Part of me says that Batavia doesn't deserve a store like this," she half-whispers, as if hesitant to speak too loudly the un-American truth that the customer is not always right, that sometimes he is a stupid, whinging, greedy bastard. She recounts her string of losing battles as she tried to convince city and county panjandrums to reduce confiscatory property taxes and to locate the unprepossessing new courthouse within walking distance of Main Street merchants.

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last marquee in town would be carted off to the junkyard, and the mermaid's aquatic curves would be forever sandblasted away. But they were not—for the Lord works in mysterious ways—and the good folk of City Church saved the marquee and the mermaid, who was repainted a demure tan.

On a gray May day, my wife Lucine and I peeked into the quondam theater as workmen remodeled it into City Church. Steve Carr joined us. The sanctification of Mancuso's was well under way: the bas-reliefs along the wall had been sanded away, and the two pediment-

saddened, but hardly shocked. It was a long time coming.

Steve's statement to the press was gracious, without the twist of gall that others might have added: "Speaking for all our valued employees, who have become friends and more like family, we will all miss our faithful customers and friends. They have continued to support the store and helped to 'keep the faith' to keep open what we think may be the last independent department store in the state On behalf of myself and my family—the Carrs, the Mumfords and Minors—I want to thank all current and

The air is densely sepulchral over the last weeks; the death rattle is the sound of the movable dress racks and glass display cases being rolled and carried out as Carr's condenses, contracts, like a beleaguered band of soldiers drawing in on the last bunker. The mood deepens when Jim Sloper, the longtime vacuum cleaner repairman at the store, dies. Jim was 79, a farm boy, a cracker-jack fixer who loved to tell his World War II stories and who would stare at you for durations sufficient to earn him a Mark on his Permanent Record from Wal-Mart. But at Carr's, Jim was Jim, laboring over a busted hose like Edison at the bench.

It is hard not to see the death of Carr's as the last nail in Main Street's long-shutting coffin. The largest store vacated, no tenant in sight, just as Newberry's has been empty since 1995. Beardsley's is gone. Mancuso Theater is dark (except, I guess, for the light of the Son). Across Main, the mall is as sparsely populated as the more inclement reaches of the Yukon. My friend Mark Shephard suggests turning Main Street into an interactive prison, as Attica's most notorious fiends could be shipped 15 miles north to be ogled, prodded, and begged for autographs by morbid tourists. Son of Sam, Mark David Chapman: celebrities living in our little town! Maybe that

fetching eternal blond Diane Sawyer could fly in to interview some notorious killer, Live from Batavia! As the New York Lotto ad says: "Hey—ya never know."

The retail hub of Batavia: gone. The old ladies stuck in the two downtown high-rises for the elderly who used to be without cars are now also without Carr's. The walkable center of the city has nowhere to walk to anymore.

The boosters are busy hatching new schemes from the same noggins that produced urban renewal. Expand the airport runway! Bring Lake Ontario water to Batavia, replacing the *aqua vitae* from good old Tonawanda Creek!

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In mid-June I elevate up to the third floor to chat with Steve Carr. Peter Mumford, grandson of C.L. Carr—Petermumford in my daughter's portmanteau pronunciation—is with me; he points out that Steve's tie is decorated with life preservers, a nice bit of sartorial happenstance. When I later ask Steve to pose before Nina Mason Booth's portrait of C.L. Carr, Petermumford suggests that he strip to the waist, for after all he's lost his shirt. Cousinly kidding, gallows-style.

Before we discuss the autopsy results, Petermumford leads me through the unseen Carr's, the warehouse and basement and rooftop, telling stories about each room and portal, every wall crack and fixture. I think of the 86 years' worth of oral history that will die with Petermumford and Steve and Beth and all the other wanderers of the coming Carr's diaspora. The mannequins are lined up as if for execution on the second floor, in the former men's wear department.

Petermumford shows me the vestigial damage from the 1935 fire that destroyed the neighboring Dellinger Theater on Jackson Street and filled Carr's with smoke and water. We peer up the shaft of the ancient elevator, which in my boyhood had an operator to draw closed the grille.

Our cook's tour of Carr's ended, Petermumford and I sit down with Steve at a table affording a nice view of a flowery still life by Peter's mother, Virginia Carr Mumford. Over the years I've done more than a hundred lengthy interviews with the famous, from men who would be president (they all lost) to men who bum money from me to score crack (Eldridge Cleaver) to men who wrote the American epic (Shelby Foote, who greeted me at the door of his mossy Memphis home, hair long and disheveled, wearing ratty pajamas, and said, "Ah wuz jes' fixin' ta go ta tuh whiskey stoah"). Never had I dreaded a talk as I

did this one. Kicking a man when he's down is one thing; sticking a tape recorder in his face and asking him to describe the view from the floor is the same thing altogether.

But Steve is well bred, and he did his manly best to maintain a cheerful mien. He conceded that the store had been "struggling for a long time. But when your name is on the door, there's a responsibility to the history of the business. And the responsibility of being a citizen downtown." History. Citizen. Responsibility. Egads, Steve.

Selling Carr's was never really an option. "Nobody buys a business like this. They just sort of fade into the history books. The real estate sits empty." I ask whodunit. Urban renewal. Wal-Mart. The obvious suspects. Steve's dad, a progressive businessman, had favored urban renewal: "Our position was that if there was going to be a mall, we were happy that it would be across the street from us." Steve's wife, Beth, the Connecticut Yankee, "was very opposed to urban renewal and said so, but she was not anatomically correct enough to have an opinion."

THE ONLY COMPANY THAT CAN PUT ONE OVER ON WAL-MART IS ITS EVIL TWIN KMART, WHICH MOVED SO THAT THE FAITHLESS SHOPPER MUST PASS THE BIG K BEFORE ARRIVING AT SAM WALTON'S BOX.

"Beth is of the opinion," says Steve, assenting, "that with the demolition of downtown Batavia, it lost so much of its character that there was not enough left to hold people, to give them a feeling of community and of belonging." Anchorless, unmoored, Batavians cast about for any port in a storm. How can one be loyal to a place whose structures, whose shape, whose very outline, have simply been erased by its men of substance?

(Such substances deserve abuse, puritanical prohibitionists be damned.)

Beth also tried, in vain, to convince Wal-Mart to locate downtown so that at least its overspill might sustain the homegrown merchants. Fat chance. The only company that can put one over on Wal-Mart is its evil twin Kmart, which moved from Eastown Plaza within the city limits to a location just this side of Wal-Mart, so that the faithless shopper must pass the Big K before arriving at Sam Walton's box.

The volk loved it. "Batavia embraces low-price retailers," shrugs Steve. "Every time I turn around something closes and a dollar store opens." (In an inversion of Clarence the Angel's dictum that a bell rings every time an angel gets his wings, a new dollar store also opened as Steve announced the closing of Carr's.)

Old Bob Carr was "progressive": all businessmen are. He co-founded the Progressive Associated Retailers, an organization through which the owners of independent stores in small cities of the Middle Atlantic states might trade tips, trends, tricks of the trade. "All of

the stores in PAR are to their town what we are to this town," said Steve in 1990. And then, in the blink of an eye in Bush-Clinton-Bush America, they were gone.

Thirty-four stores have been associated with the Progressive Associated Retailers over the last quarter-century. With the demise of Carr's now there are two: Dunham's in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, and Friedlander's in Wooster, Ohio. The global economy, it seems, has

broken PAR. It's a dirty job but somebody's got to do it: closing stores, that is. "We've never done this before," said Steve. He met with a man who had "closed a number of my PAR brethren, but he ran out of stores to close and so he closed."

There is a tawdry route to closure, the road most traveled, it seems, but the Carrs did not want a tacky funeral. Steve describes the game: "You pay these people handsomely to come in, you give up control, you buy cameras and VCRs and such and as people shop, they get points toward these gifts. They also bring in merchandise that is not your normal merchandise—they mark it way up so that they can mark it way down and sell it profitably. It's not of the same quality as what you typically sell; some of it is the dregs left over from the last three or four businesses that they closed. It leaves a bad taste in people's mouths. We decided to handle it ourselves and just go out with our own stuff."

The last day was not July 17, as planned, but two weeks later. The shelves were bare, the workforce had shrunk to three, and instead of the high drama and pathos of an Official Final Day, Steve just shut out the lights, turned the key, and said that was that. The next week he and Beth and the boys left for a month's tour of Europe: a nice Ambersonian touch, I thought, an insouciant up-yours to the Wal-Mart shoppers whose August vacations consist of waterskiing and tossing empty beer cans into the Finger Lakes. ■

The author of five books, Bill Kauffman is currently at work on The Education of a Front-Porch Anarchist. This piece is excerpted from Dispatches From the Muckdog Gazette: A Mostly Affectionate Account of a Small Town's Fight to Survive by arrangement with Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Coalition of the Coerced

America's allies rethink their Iraq commitment.

By Eric S. Margolis

THE PERSIAN KING Xerxes summoned his vassals to war against Athens in 426 B.C. thus: "... we shall bring all mankind under our yoke, alike those who are guilty and those who are innocent of doing us wrong. If you wish to please me, do as follows: when I announce the time for the army to meet together, hasten to the muster with a good will, every one of you; and know that to the man who brings with him the most gallant array I will give great gifts ..."

Xerxes did a splendid job of browbeating scores of satraps and vassal kingdoms into sending troops to join his expedition against Athens, which the Persian emperor warned was a dangerous, lawless, insolent state that threatened the civilized world. Unfortunately for Xerxes, his invasion of Greece proved a military disaster.

President George W. Bush's crusade against Iraq was just the opposite: it managed to convoke only an embarrassingly skimpy assemblage of vassal states, but the invasion proved a smashing military success, if a subsequent disaster.

Now, over a year later, many of America's 32 allies, tributaries, supplicants, and camp followers that sent a total of 22,000 troops to Iraq are wishing they had never become involved and are seeking escape or giving thanks they are well out of the growing carnage in Mesopotamia.

For many of them, involvement in Iraq became a political poisoned chalice that enraged voters and threatened to undo governments from Tokyo to Tegucigalpa.

What initially seemed like an easy, risk-free way of currying favor with Washington and obtaining more foreign aid, cheap oil, or White House photo ops has become a grave electoral liability, a diplomatic minefield, and a nightmare filled with car bombs and head-chopping fanatics.

Originally trumpeted by the Bush administration as the Coalition of the Willing, the grab-bag of military contingents dispatched at enormous U.S. expense was widely viewed across the world as a fig leaf to cover naked Anglo-American aggression against Iraq.

The incessant repetition of the coalition mantra by the White House, Pentagon, and the U.S. mainstream media was designed to portray the occupation as a humanitarian mission instead of what it really was, an old-fashioned imperial adventure that violated international law and the UN Charter. "Coalition of the shilling" was a more accurate sobriquet. Never has so much bought so little.

Only two nations sent militarily meaningful numbers of troops to Iraq: the U.S., 140,000 and Britain, 9,000. Add to this Anglo total roughly 40,000 U.S. and British-paid mercenaries, known in Orwellian-Pentagonese as "civilian contractors."

George W. Bush and Tony Blair are currently reaping a political whirlwind for the unnecessary war they started in Iraq. A majority of Americans and Britons now believe the war was a terrible mistake. Yet in another shameless political whitewash, an official inquiry in Britain