

Valdese AMOCO Service Station

Before convenience stores there were service stations

By Virginia Carswell Parrish

Met Herb. Herb runs Valdese Amoco Service Station in the 1950s. “Runs” means he owns it, operates it and works 12 to 14 hours, six days a week, waiting on people. Yes, he provides service for customers. Most of Herb’s customers buy gas for their cars or trucks. Sometimes they need tires and oil changed, filters replaced, and their car washed and waxed. Herb does it all.



Herb’s service station looks like a white cement box with a two-car garage attached. The front of the building has two plate glass windows and a center door. The garage section is not for parking and working on cars, nor is it even called a garage. It is referred to as “the bays.”

In front of the station are two gas pumps attached to a cement platform. Hidden underground are two tanks which hold 500 gallons of fuel each. The gas company, Amoco, which supplies the service station with fuel, sells two types of gas—regular and “white gas.” Most of Herb’s customers use “white gas.” With the proper adjustment of the engine’s timing, “white gas” is supposed to give an automobile greater power.

The Valdese Amoco Service Station is on the outskirts of the town of Valdese, Burke County. It is on a two-lane road that brings most of the workers from the South Mountains into Valdese to work in the bakery, hosiery mills and furniture factories. Traffic in front of Herb’s store is made up of local people who live within a 10- to 15-mile radius. They are people Herb knows by first name and family.

The first thing you see when you pull into the station is a man sitting on a bench outside. On any given summer day, Pop Teague is sitting on the bench watching the world go by. When Herb has to run an errand such as pick up a car at one of the factories to bring it back for

Photos: [1] Herb goes out to the car, greets the driver, pumps the gas, cleans the windshield and back window, checks the oil and water, and the tires if asked. [2] In the winter the regulars sit around a black potbelly stove smoking cigarettes, visiting and embellishing their stories. [3] Herb sponsored No. 35 for local races.

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an oil change or detailing, Pop Teague minds the store.

Most any time of the day, trucks and cars are parked on both sides of Valdese Amoco. The owners of the parked vehicles are in the service station sitting around talking. In the winter they sit around a black potbelly stove smoking cigarettes, visiting and embellishing their stories. The men—wearing work pants and shirts, overalls, felt hats or caps, and work shoes—answer to names like Pop, Potleg, Obie, Fat Farr, Doc Ollis, K.O, or Tot. Occasionally one of the men gets up and saunters out the back door to the bathroom out back or to take a drink out of the communal jar. The plain half-gallon jug filled with local brew is in a “poke” (paper sack) in an old tire behind the store. Not everyone is privy to this information.

Most of the regulars have a jar of peach brandy or “white lightning” at home or in their trucks, and one or two even supply a jar from time to time. More than one of the regulars has spent time in prison for making liquor.

The chief of police and a few local officials drop by from time to time and meander out back. Making and selling illegal alcohol is against the law. Everyone knows that. But the law of the land at this time in a close-knit service station community is simply live and let live.

Some women and children are at Herb’s Service Station, too. Herb’s wife, daughter and son might be behind the counter, out front pumping gas or letting Herb go to the house for a meal. When a woman or child is present, the tone of the regulars is respectful. Children are treated with great tolerance. When a child can’t come up with enough money to buy candy, Herb or one of the men finds extra money in his pocket.

A lot of “business” is handled here. A customer drives by, sees someone’s truck or car parked beside the station and comes in to conduct business. Several of the regulars are carpenters and one is a plumber, another a shade

tree mechanic. If the regulars can’t do your job, they tell you who can.

Doctors, lawyers, bankers and ministers stop by Herb’s to get their cars filled up with “white gas” and catch up on the news. Whether it’s something personal or professional, being respectful is expected. But no one has heard of being “politically correct.”

When a car drives up to the gas pumps it runs over a hose that rings a bell inside. Herb gets up, usually from a tire he is sitting in, goes out to the car, greets the driver, pumps the gas, cleans the windshield and back window, checks the oil and water, and the tires if asked. Gas sells for 20 cents a

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gallon. The service is free.

If Herb is busy working under a car on the grease rack, one of the regulars or another customer will go out to help the person at the gas tanks. The customer pays for the gas. The regular takes the money, opens the cash register, deposits the money or makes change out of the drawer.

Over the years, Herb’s Service Station adds milk, bread, snacks, cigarettes and “fast foods” to become more than just a gas station. When you enter the service station, there’s a drink box to the right, stocked daily with Pepsi, RC Cola, orange soda. On the left end of the drink box there are bottles of white and chocolate milk. On the bread rack in front of the back counter there are stacks of bread, small cakes and cookies. The bread man comes every day bringing fresh bread baked at the bakery a few blocks away.

Behind the back counter, shelves contain the fast foods of the day: cans of Vienna sausages, potted meat, sardines, pork and beans, soda crackers. When anyone gets hungry he gets a can off the shelf, opens it with the can opener attached to the wall, adds vinegar from the jar left on the counter,

sits on a stool behind the counter and helps himself to the “sodie” crackers. Most days Herb or someone opens a loaf of bread, leaves it on the back counter and anyone who wants to make a sandwich helps himself and pays for it.

A lot of Tom’s peanuts are sold and added to a “dope” (soft drink in a bottle), usually a Pepsi or RC Cola. At the checkout counter there is a big jar of hot sausages. Men buy these. Everyone buys Moon Pies.

Once in a while someone will ask Herb for credit until payday. Herb lets that person run a tab to buy gas, tires, even bread and milk. Payday rolls around and the first person who sees the customer’s check is Herb.

If someone has a flat tire they call Herb. Herb goes to where the person with the flat tire is stranded, puts on the spare tire or brings the tire back to the station to

repair, and then takes it back to put on the car. On snowy, icy roads someone runs into a ditch and calls Herb. Herb cranks up his tractor and goes out in the bad weather to help. At closing time Herb gives a ride home to whoever needs it. And occasionally Herb gets a call from the sheriff to come get someone out of jail.

Whether by necessity or by choice, families around here in the 1950s stayed together. We ate at home, traveled locally, pretty much lived, worked and died within a 25-mile radius of our home. We traded with local merchants, bought our gas and had our car serviced at a neighborhood service station.

We could use more 1950 service stations in neighborhoods today—a safe haven where service is more important to the customer than speed. The hard part would be finding someone like Herb to run it. 📍

Virginia Carswell Parrish, daughter of Herb Carswell who owned Valdese Amoco Service Station from the 1950s to the early 1980s, lives in Valdese. She and her brother, Gary Carswell, own the family farm in George Hildebrand and are members of Rutherford EMC. The Valdese Amoco station is now the Small Engine Performance Center.