

Citizen of the Month - Leon Puckett



Milton Puckett and his son, Leon

In communities everywhere, the "General Store" served more than the purpose of supplying folks with items they could not produce themselves. It became the place for people to gather, socialize, hear the latest news, and build community. In the Triune and College Grove areas and later the Eagleville, Chapel Hill and Leipers Fork areas, Puckett's became the most recognizable store and Leon Puckett continued a tradition begun by his great grandfather Jack Puckett and continued by his grandfather and parents.

Jack Puckett began the first Puckett's store and his grandfather Wyatt Puckett was also a merchant. In 1934, Mr. Wyatt Puckett gave Leon's parents, Milton and Grace Puckett \$300.00 and told them to work the store and support the family. This first store was located in Triune. When James Puckett returned after World War II, he became a partner with Milton. In 1935, Leon was born to Milton and Grace Puckett. His mother took him to the store and put him in a box while she worked. Milton and Grace had a daughter Anita and twins Kerry and Kathy who are now deceased.

As a child, Leon began his early education at the Triune School and attended there for his first four years of his education. When the school closed, he transferred to College Grove to continue his education. He graduated from high school in 1953. Following graduation, Leon attended Tennessee Tech at Cookeville. He played on the freshman basketball team.

Leon was not ready to follow in the family grocery business so at age 18 he left middle Tennessee and struck out alone to California. There he worked at the Kizer Steel Mills for eight months.

Knowing this was not the life he wanted, he returned home in 1955, broke and began working in his father's Triune grocery. The store was a general merchandise store and stocked a wide variety of items. In addition to meat, produce and groceries, the store stocked clothing, hardware, appliances, and toys. It also sold fencing wire, feed for cows and feed for poultry. Coal, hauled from Kentucky was also sold to customers. Each Saturday night the drawing for free groceries attracted folks who stayed to socialize, drawing the community together. On the weekends, the store did not close until 11:00 p.m.



Leon with his mother & father



Leon with Leana and Wyatt Puckett

In 1954, Milton, Leon and James Puckett opened Puckett Brothers at Eagleville. Russell Puckett managed the store and Jimmy Wilkinson was a clerk along with other school help. Donnie Chick was the butcher.

Leon was still not convinced that the grocery business was the future he wanted. At age 17 he had joined the Tennessee National Guard. At age 21 he joined the Army. After basic training in South Carolina, he was shipped to Stugard Germany. In 1958 he was discharged from the Army and returned to middle Tennessee and the family grocery business.

In 1959, Leon's father sent him to Eagleville to manage the Eagleville store. Jimmy Wilkinson was the assistant manager. The store catered to the local community in many ways. It was one of the few grocery stores that allowed customers to "charge" their purchases to an account. This practice continued until the store was sold in 1999 and is still a feature in the store today. During these years Eagleville Puckett's customers brought farm raised eggs to sell. The surplus eggs were taken to Nashville and sold there.



Leon, Jimmy, Ronnie and Jack at Puckett Bros. Food Market in 1963.

Produced grown by local farmers was also purchased to stock the shelves at the store for customers to buy. At that time, distributors did not deliver goods to the store. Leon drove twice each week, on Tuesday and Thursday, to pick up groceries and produce from these distributors. With local goods and products from the distributors, the community enjoyed a fully stocked grocery for their needs.



Carl Ralston, Leon Puckett, Bobby Smotherman, Torry Worrick, Henry Ghee and Richard Gleaves.

In 1960 a fire almost destroyed the store. The restaurant adjacent to the grocery burned. The store on one side and the theater on the other were saved. Folks in the community said that if it had not been for the Smyrna Air Force Base Fire Department, the building would have been destroyed. In 1962 the store was remodeled. In 1985, property was purchased from Frank Crosslin and the store was again remodeled. The store grew in size, was modernized and new fixtures were installed.

The year 1960 was also memorable for Leon when he married Betty Jane Shelton Puckett, a native of Eagleville. The couple have enjoyed a

strong marriage and raised three daughters. Lisa Carol Bogle is Assistant Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction for the Rutherford County School system. Dr. Karen Puckett is an OBGYN physician in Murfreesboro. Dr. Kim Puckett Scott is an OBGYN physician in Franklin.

The Pucketts continued to grow their grocery business. In 1961 Leon, his father and an uncle purchased a store in Leipers Fork in Williamson County. When the store was sold several years ago, the owners asked to continue using the "Puckett Grocery" name. The store remains open today. When Leon's father died in 1965 at the age of 48, Leon became the owner of the Triune Puckett Grocery along with James Puckett. In 1974 Leon and Jimmy Wilkinson opened a grocery in Chapel Hill Tennessee. Jimmy and Ellie operated the store for 19 years. Leon continued to own and run the Eagleville Puckett's until 1999 when he sold it to Henry Ghee, a longtime employee and Alan Perryman. Leon retired from the grocery business after a lifetime of work. Leon now "works" hard at retirement, planning his next golf game, playing with his seven grandchildren, and cutting his yard. Leon told us "I have lived in Eagleville for 53 years. I found my wife here. She taught school for 31 years at Eagleville School. I have appreciated the support of my family, my friends, and all of my customers in Eagleville and the surrounding communities throughout the years. I was the youngest merchant when I came to Eagleville. When I retired after 40 years I was the oldest."

In addition to raising a family, running successful groceries stores, and supporting his church, Eagleville United Methodist Church, and the community Leon has always loved baseball. He played on local teams and on teams in the Tri-State League. To honor Leon and his love for the game, his family is sponsoring a ball field at the Eagleville Park, the "Leon Puckett Field". Leon and his family hope that children in Eagleville community will use the field and enjoy the sport he loves.