

Senior Thesis  
Department of History

**The World's Greatest Price Wreckers:**  
*The Rise of American Supermarkets in the 1930s*

Sylvie Rosen

Barnard College,  
Columbia University

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## **Introduction:** *The Early American Supermarket*

At the turn of the twentieth century, food distribution in America took place in stores like the image on page two (Fig. 0.2). Today, supermarkets like Figure 0.1 are the norm. Many changes occurred in the early twentieth century to transition between these types of stores. This changed how Americans produced, distributed, and consumed food in cities. Throughout the beginning of the nineteenth century, consumers bought food in public and private markets.<sup>1</sup> However, public market culture declined significantly in the mid-nineteenth century. In its place, neighborhood grocery and corner stores cropped up as food distribution leaned towards privatization. During this time, city dwellers often shopped at multiple stores, each specializing in areas such as meat, fish, dairy, or dry goods. Independent and local businessmen owned these stores—chain stores had not yet infringed on food distribution— but industrialized distribution processes already existed. In order to distribute to small stores, farmers sold their products to grocers in wholesale terminal markets.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, railroads flourished throughout America and the trucking industry burst onto the mass transportation scene.<sup>3</sup> Food system industrialization accelerated in the 1930s when the first supermarket opened in Queens, New York.<sup>4</sup> By 1940, supermarkets served as a main method of food retail distribution in America, instead of individual corner stores. This thesis focuses on the formative first ten years of supermarkets on

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, Creating the North American Landscape (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), XX.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>3</sup> Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America's Wal-Mart Economy*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Most scholars agree that King Kullen in Queens was the first supermarket. However, other stores such as Ralphs in California have also claimed the title. "Michael J. Cullen: An American Innovator," n.d., made available by King Kullen.

the East Coast. I ask why this transformation occurred during the 1930s, how it happened, and I discuss its effects and influences.



Figures 0.1 and 0.2: a standard supermarket in 2018 and a typical grocery store in the 1920s.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Caroline Banton, "The World's Largest U.S.-Based Supermarket and Retail Grocery Chains 2018," *The Balance: Small Business*, February 9, 2019, <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/largest-us-based-grocery-chains-3862932>; James M. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store: The Business Evolution of an Architectural Space* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993), 88.

Scholarship often takes this transformation for granted. Some historians often focus on the post-World War II boom of supermarkets, while others write about public market culture in America in the nineteenth century and its eventual decline. However, the origins and reasons for the transition to food retail through supermarkets lie in the phenomenon's first years, in the 1930s. During this decade, the East Coast hosted most supermarkets, even though the phenomenon occurred throughout the country. The development of supermarkets highlights important changes in consumer culture, such as the inventions of self-service and cash-and-carry systems, which transferred distribution labor from employees to customers and fundamentally changed food distribution.<sup>6</sup> Along with these new business elements, suburbanization, the rise of the automobile, and the effects of the Great Depression all fostered an environment where supermarkets thrived. This thesis discusses how these factors converged to create a successful environment for East Coast supermarkets to succeed rapidly between 1930 and 1940.

Despite the literature's focus on the postwar era, some scholars do discuss supermarkets during the 1930s. Randolph McAusland's book, *Supermarkets: 50 Years of Progress*, draws from food retail magazines such as *Supermarket News* to write about the transition to supermarkets throughout most of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> He argues that supermarkets influenced the American market more than any other phenomenon. While his book focuses on a longer time span than this thesis, he describes important parts of the transitional phase of supermarkets in the 1930s, including a section about King Kullen, the first supermarket in America. He also includes many photographs of early supermarkets. Yet, McAusland, too, frames his argument around the large growth in supermarkets in the postwar period.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Randolph McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress* (Food Marketing Institute, 1980), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

James Mayo's, *The American Grocery Store*, serves as another source. Mayo taught urban planning at the University of Kansas. He concentrated on food retail and honed in on business model aspects of supermarkets. Mayo's book covers multiple centuries of food retail, but he focuses on the 1900s.<sup>9</sup> He argues that economic and technological changes in the twentieth century influenced architectural transformations in the food retail industry.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in their books, Richard Longstreth and Chester Liebs both discuss how suburbia and the automobile changed the American landscape in the twentieth century. Longstreth purports that developments like parking lots and drive-in markets that originated in Los Angeles aided the rise of supermarkets.<sup>11</sup> Liebs argues that supermarkets helped engender the trend of suburban shopping malls in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

Although many scholars only discuss the supermarket's effect on postwar American, businessmen and economists during the 1930s recognized the important changes rippling through food retail. These experts wrote books aimed at industry entrepreneurs to advise them on best practices in the supermarket business. These documents form a rich primary source base for analysis. Specifically, they give insight into how companies changed, designed, and organized supermarkets. Some of these sources come from Carl W. Dipman, editor of *The Progressive Grocer*, a magazine that "targets top management at headquarters and key decision makers at store-level."<sup>13</sup> Dipman's *New York Times* obituary declared him an "authority on the operation of

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<sup>9</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., XVIII.

<sup>11</sup> Richard W. Longstreth, *The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), XVII; Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> "Progressive Grocer: About Us," *Progressive Grocer*, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://progressivegrocer.com/about-us>.

food stores.”<sup>14</sup> As this expert, he wrote two books: *Modern Food Stores* in 1935, and *Self-service Food Stores* in 1946. Dipman’s earlier work insists that stores modify individual business practices, while his second book argues that stores must transform to self-service systems to stay profitable. In both, he provides advice and descriptions to his targeted audience of supermarket owners.<sup>15</sup> The difference in Dipman’s advice between the two books shows how rapidly the food retail industry adapted to supermarkets.

Another industry writer named Max Mandell Zimmerman wrote multiple books from the 1930s through 1950s about supermarkets as tools for mass distribution of food. His writings show how he perceived the supermarket as it evolved over time. In his first book in 1937, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, he claims supermarkets to be an insurgent and developing phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> His book from 1955, *The Super Market: A Revolution in Distribution* argues that economists and businessmen grossly underestimated the impact of supermarkets from the beginning.<sup>17</sup> He even contends that supermarkets changed the entire American economic structure, demonstrating how supermarkets quickly dominated food retail.<sup>18</sup>

Michael J. Cullen, the founder of America’s first supermarket: King Kullen, offers additional insight. Cullen first tried to convince Kroger, a formidable chain store company at the time, to open a new kind of store. In 1930, he wrote a letter to Kroger asking them to invest in

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<sup>14</sup> Special to The New York Times, “Carl W. Dipman, Food Trade Editor, Dies,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 1954.

<sup>15</sup> Carl W. Dipman, ed., *Modern Food Stores* (New York: The Progressive Grocer, 1935), 5; Carl W. Dipman, Robert W. Mueller, and Ralph E. Head, *Self-Service Food Stores* (New York: The Progressive Grocer, 1946), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Max Mandell Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution* (New York: Super Market Publishing Co., 1937), VII.

<sup>17</sup> Max Mandell Zimmerman, *The Super Market; A Revolution in Distribution* (United States of America: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955), 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.

his store, while detailing his business plan, ideas, goals, and strategy.<sup>19</sup> When Cullen received no reply, he started his own store, marking the beginning of supermarkets in America. Thus, the letter demonstrates his thought process behind building and opening King Kullen.

After supermarkets started, people's jobs in food retail changed, whether they served as store employees or executives. William Greer's oral history anthology, *America the Bountiful*, consists of numerous interviews with people working in the supermarket and food retail industry.<sup>20</sup> Greer aims to tell the story of the supermarket revolution. As he sees it, many changes in food retail combined to create the crowning supermarket.<sup>21</sup> These interviews shed light on people's experiences as supermarket workers, managers, and owners, as well as on industry executives in companies such as General Mills, Winn Dixie, and A&P.<sup>22</sup> Both types of material create a comprehensive picture of the supermarket's initial years.

Based on these key sources and others, the story of the supermarket's birth emerges. Chapter one discusses essential business elements transferred labor of distribution from employees to customers. Self-service enabled customers to select items themselves instead counter-service, which tasked employees with that labor. Cash-and-Carry meant that stores did not need to keep track of customers' accounts. Parking lots made delivery systems obsolete as they enabled customers to transport their purchases home by themselves. This chapter argues that the combination of these elements, along with shopping carts and one-stop shopping, defined the supermarket from other food retail stores.

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<sup>19</sup> Michael J. Cullen, "The Letter to Kroger," 1930, <http://bi.galegroup.com/essentials/publication/3176?u=columbiau&sid=kbart?>

<sup>20</sup> William Greer, *America the Bountiful: How the Supermarket Came to Main Street: An Oral History* (Washington D.C.: Food Marketing Institute, 1986), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

Meanwhile, chapter two explains how the Great Depression accelerated the supermarket's success. Consumers' need for low prices increased supermarkets' popularity, especially since prices were stores' consistently advertised affordability.<sup>23</sup> Further, changing economic conditions created a prime environment for transforming retail methods. This chapter also discusses how the extraordinary emphasis on low prices in supermarket advertising seized the opportunity presented by the economic desperation of the 1930s.

Chapter three argues that suburbanization cultivated an environment for supermarkets to start, succeed, and expand. When stores opened in suburban locations, the building structure, design, and layout all changed. The story of evolving external structure and internal layout corresponds to how supermarkets rapidly appeared and expanded in their first five years, between 1930 and 1935. More broadly, when more Americans moved to suburbia, consumer culture changed. Suburban residents increasingly relied on the automobile, which enabled shoppers to travel farther, purchase more, and transport all their groceries home. In these years, supermarkets, or "cheapies" as many Americans called them, opened with little design, instead appearing as warehouses with mountains of disorganized merchandise sold at incredibly cheap prices.<sup>24</sup> However, after 1935, the internal structure of stores standardized as the industry settled. As supermarkets consistently held their place in food retail, the phenomenon enforced existing gender roles and socioeconomic inequality.

These three factors: new business elements, the Great Depression, and changing structure and layout are all crucial to understanding how supermarkets became the primary method of food retail distribution by the mid-twentieth century. Supermarkets became an integral part of the

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<sup>23</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 15.



industrialization process in American food systems. Thus, the first years of supermarkets are essential to understanding food distribution processes today.

## **Chapter 1: “DIY”: *How Supermarkets Delegated Labor to Customers***

Supermarkets first emerged in the 1930s, but only after the decades long development of five crucial business components. Randolph McAusland defines a supermarket’s essential elements as: self-service, cash-and-carry, free parking, and one-stop shopping. To McAusland’s definition, I add shopping carts as a critical part of early supermarkets. All these practices show that stores wanted to sell as many items as possible for the lowest cost, and reach the most customers with the least labor. Indeed, these changes transformed employees’ jobs. Instead of providing customers with goods, they organized and restocked products throughout the day.

From analyzing these aspects of early supermarkets, a few key themes emerge. For one, supermarkets increased standardization throughout the distribution process. Increased standardization led to decreased specialization of products and stores in general. Supermarkets also subverted the traditional way information about products reached consumers. Previously, store employees provided that information, but with transition to supermarkets, labels, packaging, and advertisements communicated those details instead. This shift empowered consumers to make better choices because they had more information. However, it disempowered employees, whose expertise grew unimportant.

If that business premise sounds similar to all kinds of chain stores, that is because supermarkets evolved from the chain store concept. For example, chain stores led the transition from credit account systems to cash-based ones a concept essential to supermarkets in their first decade.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the first supermarket, King Kullen, did not invent all the essential elements in

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<sup>25</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 5.

supermarkets when it opened in 1930.<sup>26</sup> Rather, most of supermarkets' crucial features existed elsewhere, in grocery stores and other kinds of retail locations, before companies applied them to supermarkets. When these components converged, they established an environment for the supermarket to flourish.

### **Help Yourself: The Radical Concept of Self-Service**

Switching from counter-service to self-service started differentiating grocery stores from supermarkets. In counter-service systems, employees packaged all the products that customers requested on an individual basis. In self-service, customers browsed in stores lined with products and procured the ones they wanted. Although self-service became a hallmark of the supermarket in the 1930s and 1940s, the methodology actually began significantly years earlier. Carl W. Dipman (1914-1954), editor of the *Progressive Grocer*, helped the food distribution industry adapt to self-service through his intended for store owners. In his book, *Self-Service Food Stores*, he writes that food retailers in Southern California started using the term self-service in 1912. Just eight years later, states in the Pacific, mountain, and southwest areas of the country had “dozens of self-service stores.”<sup>27</sup>

Before self-service, stores primarily used counter-service to help customers. Counter-service meant that employees always helped customers choose their items. Counters separated products from customers, so shoppers not access them without assistance. Additionally, most items came in bulk, so workers portioned the desired quantity for every customer. For instance, stores kept items like pickles and vinegar in barrels, which meant that storekeepers would bottle

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<sup>26</sup> Further, the shopping cart, a crucial part of supermarkets discussed later in the chapter was invented in 1936, after King Kullen opened. The first King Kullen also appeared to lack a parking lot. However, it was the first known store to implement all of the other elements and thus earns the title of America's “first supermarket”.

<sup>27</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 11.

and weigh the desired amount of an item at customers' request. Further, when customers asked for packaged items, the store clerks had to communicate requests to an employee who would retrieve the item.<sup>28</sup> All these aspects of counter-service show the lack of standardization in that system. Additionally, in counter service, different customers would receive different prices. John A. Logan, president of the National Association of Food Chains (NAFC) during the 1930s and a food retail employee during the turn of the century, recalls that visibly wealthier customers would receive higher prices than others.<sup>29</sup> But in a self-service system, stores had to standardize prices and product amounts.

Grocery stores first implemented self-service for dry goods, and then transitioned to dairy and household items. Self-service started with these items because distribution companies could easily package them. Initially, merchants never thought that they could apply self-service to fresh food distribution processes such as fruits, vegetables, and meats. Food industry entrepreneurs did not think that companies could package these goods and enable stores to sell them via self-service. However, by 1946, Carl Dipman predicted that self-service would take over every part of food stores, presumably because companies started packaging all types of items.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Terry Gross, "How The A&P Changed The Way We Shop," National Public Radio, August 23, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=139761274>.

<sup>29</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores.*, 4.

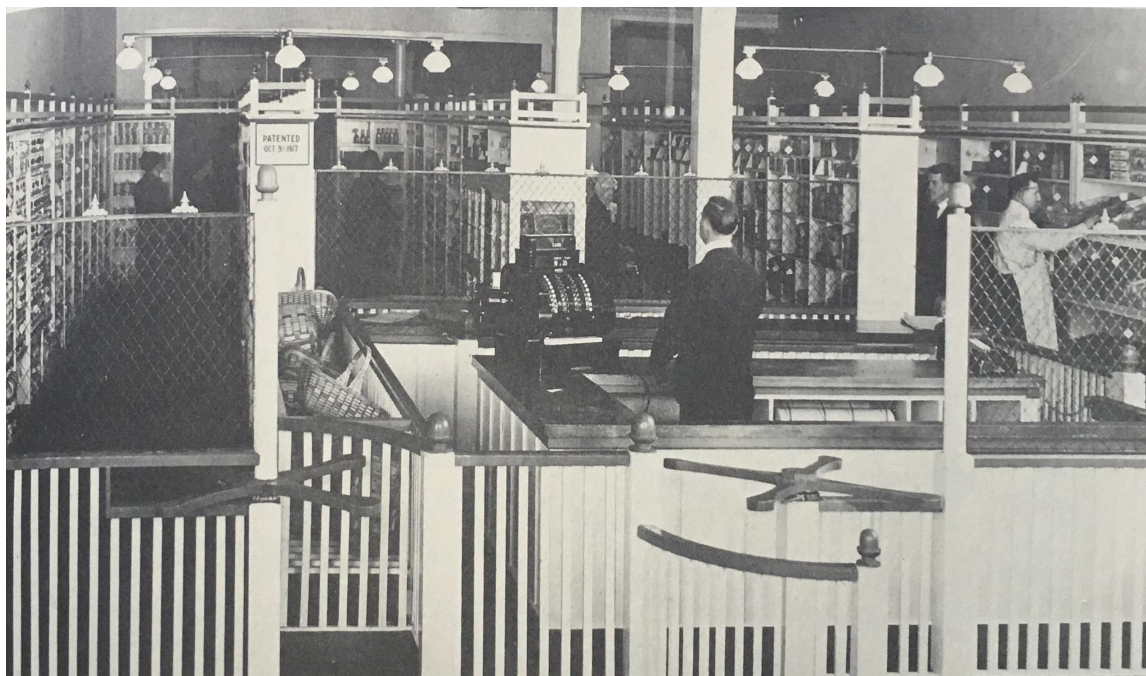


Figure 1.1: This shows the first Piggly-Wiggly in Memphis, Tennessee from 1916. Clarence Saunders conceived of the self-service concept and implemented it here first. The four aisles replaced counters with employees behind them. This store is clearly a proto-supermarket.<sup>31</sup>

*Modern Food Stores* describes the effects of this process. He writes that the “old idea” of food stores has “long lines of counters and show-cases separate customers from merchandise – so the sales person waits on the customer, gets from hidden drawers, boxes, and shelves what is demanded.”<sup>32</sup> Unlike vegetables, which transitioned from counter-service to self-service in 1931 with the introduction of frozen vegetables from Bird’s Eye Frosted Foods, other sections of stores did not experience such drastic or rapid transitions.<sup>33</sup> Even today, some stores have remnants of counter-service. Butcher, fish, and cheese sections often still require employees to assist customers in picking and packaging their items. Thus, in some ways, standardization in food distribution could not entirely displace specialized products or employees’ expertise.

<sup>31</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 16-7.

<sup>32</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Don E. Marsh, *Marsh Supermarkets, Inc: Sixty-Four Years of Continuous Smiles*, Newcomen Publication 1473 (New York: Newcomen Society of the United States, 1996), 10.

Despite lingering counter-service, however, self-service clearly revolutionized food distribution methods. This system began on a small scale: in the first Piggly Wiggly (Fig. 1.1), a proto-supermarket, customers could retrieve their own items in just four aisles. Yet even limited self-service drastically impacted customers' experiences. With self-service, shoppers selected what they wanted by themselves and they inspected each item before deciding to buy it. As Dipman describes: "self-service stores permit them [customers] to walk up and down the aisles, examine products, labels, and values, and make their selections with ease and greater satisfaction."<sup>34</sup> In contrast, counter-service did not enable customers to shop in any of these ways. Self-service enabled customers to do more labor in the food distribution process because they relied on information from products, labels, and advertisements to make purchases instead of information from store employees.<sup>35</sup>

Because self-service made customers more responsible for more parts of the distribution process, employee's jobs changed as well. Indeed, self-service stores reduced employees' jobs as much as possible because they spent less time helping customers select items and creating orders.<sup>36</sup> Dipman writes that, "employees do not spend so much of their time in drudgery, taking steps, and carrying this from here to there. There is a tremendous saving of time."<sup>37</sup> Instead, workers devoted time to more behind-the-scenes tasks, such as stocking shelves and organizing displays.<sup>38</sup>

Yet Dipman argues that self-service stores actually increase opportunities for salesmanship. The time that employees spent in the "drudgery" could not be used to give

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<sup>34</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 251.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

customers suggestions and advice. Instead, employees in one department easily referred customers to specific products in another department by telling them what displays to find.<sup>39</sup> In this way, employees interacted and advised customers more in self-service stores because they did not spend all their time packaging goods for individual orders. Thus, some expectations of employees during the counter-service era remained.

This radical shift led to the idea that self-service stores had “a cold, mechanical system,” which shows how supermarkets fit into the themes of chain store industrialization in the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, self-service started with food stores in Saunders’ Piggly Wiggly, rhetoric about self-service echoes themes from the industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup> For example, Dipman emphasized that food retail stores must consider “eliminating steps” as the primary goal in improving stores, a typical industrial revolution message.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Dipman equates the grocery stores of his time to “modern food department stores.”<sup>43</sup> Factories prioritized removing any excess labor from the production line and supermarkets with self-service also considered this essential. Indeed, self-service lowered labor expenses by 25 percent when compared to counter-service, according to Dipman in 1946.<sup>44</sup> Dipman’s citation of this statistic shows that he wanted to measure self-service’s effects and see if it worked as a business model. Indeed, supermarkets became economically viable and even profitable partially because of self-service. When Michael J. Cullen (1884-1936), the founder of the first supermarket, wrote a letter to the chain store, Kroger, in 1930 to pitch his idea, his plan

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<sup>39</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 252.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Although Dipman writes about self-service stores in Southern California, Piggly Wiggly seems to be the earliest documented self-service store. Ibid., 11.

<sup>42</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>44</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 18.

hinged on the idea that his stores would be “20% service and 80% self-service.”<sup>45</sup> Clearly, both Cullen and Dipman saw self-service stores as the future of food distribution.

Beyond its effect on employees and customers, self-service affected the actual food products sold because it enabled stores to sell more items. For example, McAusland records that the first Piggly Wiggly store had 605 items when it opened in 1916.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, when Michael J. Cullen pitched his idea in his letter, he wanted to sell 1,100 items.<sup>47</sup> He also writes that he wants to sell groceries, meat, and fruits and vegetables all in the same store, when the food retail industry traditionally sold them in separate stores. Cullen thought the switch to self-service would enable this synthesis and in just fourteen years, self-service became a viable method to sell thousands of items in just one store. This alone revolutionized food distribution.

Self-service also led to increased food safety throughout the industry. In Greer’s oral history, many food retail executives discuss the unhygienic environments of neighborhood grocery stores in the twentieth century’s first two decades. John A. Logan recalls that “grocers used to turn the meat over in the case so it would look fresh, with the old, stale side down,” and that stores kept cats around the meat counter to catch rodents.<sup>48</sup> Clarence Francis, the eventual president of General Foods in the 1930s, remembers that “streamers hung from the ceiling to catch the flies. The stores had very little light, air or refrigeration. They were a mess.”<sup>49</sup> John Mugar, a food retail employee and eventual president of Star Market Company— a supermarket chain in Boston— talks about how fowl arrived at the stores with all their entrails still inside them

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<sup>45</sup> Cullen, “The Letter to Kroger.”

<sup>46</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



so employees had to clean them out, He added that the process was “very unsanitary.”<sup>50</sup> This lack of hygiene changed in the 1920s and 30s. Self-service and packaged goods induced more cleanliness and food hygiene because items in individual packaging stayed fresh longer than bulk products.<sup>51</sup> This transition marks one way that stores started to modernize.

Additionally, less spoilage meant that stores took less risk when buying these items. In contrast, Cullen writes that 25 percent of chain stores selling fruit and vegetables threw “half the profit away” because those foods spoil so quickly.<sup>52</sup> If customers did not buy them immediately, packaged items could remain on shelves for weeks and months instead of days. The information and advertisements on packaged goods helped stores sell more products with self-service, and the increase in supermarkets supplying packaged foods meant that stores did less of the labor. Self-service consistently contributed to lowering overhead costs so that stores could sell more products for less money and less employee labor.

### **Cash-and-Carry: A New Purchasing System**

Another important difference between supermarkets and other forms of food distribution was that supermarkets accepted payments in cash. Instead of making customers order ahead, the cash and carry system allowed people to shop more casually. Consumers could simply walk into a store, without having placed their orders already, and choose what to buy when they got there.

Before cash and carry, most stores operated on a variety of credit systems. Customers had open accounts at stores they frequented and each time they shopped, they would simply tell the employees to add it to their book. In John C. Walker’s memoir, titled *Along the Way*, he writes

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>51</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 14.

<sup>52</sup> Cullen, “The Letter to Kroger.”

about how his shopping experiences changed with the advent of the cash-and-carry system.

When describing the credit method, he writes “no cash changed hands” throughout the process.<sup>53</sup>

He goes on to say:

I can see the ‘cash register’ area now with special ‘racks’ nearby to hold the dozens of small 2 1/2 by 5-inch books in which to record what you were taking out of the store. The books contained both original and carbons on which to record the items, but I cannot remember even taking a copy home...your “purchase” was just on the ‘book.’<sup>54</sup>

Walker writes about how his parents would drop by their local store every month or so to pay their bills there. He also remembers that Shuppard’s Home Delivery Service brought food right to people’s houses. As he writes, “the grocery guys would make a list of your needs from your phone call and go through the store gathering your order for the home delivery service, and even then, no money changed hands. It was paid for later.”<sup>55</sup> With these details, Walker demonstrates the daily operations of a store on credit system.

Walker also remembers that the first cash-and-carry store appeared in his town in the mid 1940s, a few years after the first supermarkets opened in America. It fundamentally changed the way his community shopped for groceries. “The ‘charge’ books disappeared,” he wrote, “and if you went for groceries you’d better carry cash, or take your checkbook.”<sup>56</sup> Gone were the “cashless” days that Walker remembers from his childhood: instead, a system with cash registers became the norm (Fig. 1.2).

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<sup>53</sup> John Walker, *Along the Way: Stories Growing up in “Small-Town, Rural-Indiana” 1931-2005* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1.2: This checkout system at an early (unnamed) supermarket in the 1930s shows the implementation of a cash-and-carry system.<sup>57</sup>

Cullen advocated for cash-based systems in his store. Based on his letter to Kroger, it seems that credit systems often resulted in stealing. Cullen's assessment echoes Ned Fleming, who led General Foods as an executive from 1931-1954 and called the credit system "risky business."<sup>58</sup> John A. Logan remembers that employees would put their thumb on the scale when weighing meat to make customers pay more.<sup>59</sup> According to Cullen, starting his stores with a "cash register check system" would make stealing "impossible," thus leading to higher profits.<sup>60</sup> Cash based systems also led to higher profits for supermarkets in the 1930s, a necessity

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<sup>57</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 12.

<sup>60</sup> Cullen, "The Letter to Kroger."

particularly important during the Great Depression. Indeed, smaller chain and other independent stores switched to cash to help them compete with larger chain corporations.<sup>61</sup>

Just like other key elements of early supermarkets, the cash-and-carry system let customers do more work and employees do less. Store records did not need to link purchases to specific customers, so employees did not have to remind customers to pay up their account. Further, cash-and-carry system also enabled stores to attract a wider customer base. Because customers did not need to have an account to shop at a store. Consumers could go into any store, regardless of whether they had shopped there before, and buy food on the spot. This made these stores accessible to more customers, a major goal of supermarkets.

As stores engaged a wider customer base, these places became less integral as community institutions. Relationships between employees and consumers that had characterized neighborhood corner stores began to disappear. Supermarket owners wanted as many customers to shop at the stores as possible: it did not necessarily matter if those customers returned every day, as long as the same number of people shopped. For example, when Big Bear, an early New Jersey supermarket, opened in 1932, it famously attracted thousands of customers and exceeded expectations. As Max Mandell Zimmerman writes in 1937, consumers “flocked” to the store and rumors about it “flew left and right.” This resulted in “fabulous” profits previously “unheard of” in the food retail business.<sup>62</sup> By implementing a cash-and-carry system, stores like Big Bear could check out customers expeditiously.

Cash-and-carry became the method of choice for early supermarkets for these three reasons. It decreased the risk for customers leaving unpaid credit, attracted a broader customer

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<sup>61</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, V.

base, and processed customers' purchases faster. Similar to self-service, all three factors point to the similarities between supermarkets and factory models of production and distribution.

### **Free Parking: Free Convenience!**

The rise of free parking at retail establishments became another essential element of the first supermarkets. Although most scholars agree that the supermarket trend began on the East Coast with stores such as King Kullen, some argue that the earliest supermarkets appeared in Los Angeles. The reason for this interpretation is simple: more space. Cities in the West and Southwest popularized free parking lots long before this concept arrived in the East because stores in the West had more space.<sup>63</sup> In Richard Longstreth's book, he discusses the role of the parking lot in 1920s Los Angeles. However, although many parking lots existed, businesses considered them simply extra space, unimportant.<sup>64</sup> Yet, parking lots allowed large markets to appear in Los Angeles in the late 1920s.<sup>65</sup> Despite the focus of this thesis on East Coast stores, the early presence of supermarkets in the West tells the story of how parking lots developed at Eastern establishments. Free parking also became particularly essential during a rapid increase in car accessibility in the 1930s, a subject further discussed in chapter three.

Michael J. Cullen recognized the increase in automobile culture and argued that he should build his stores "one to three blocks out of a high-rent district with plenty of parking space." He writes that although "you may object to my locating two or three blocks from the business center...one great asset...is parking space."<sup>66</sup> Cullen envisioned customers driving to

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<sup>63</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Longstreth, *The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Cullen, "The Letter to Kroger."

his store specifically because they would save money at his establishment: “one of our talking points would be, the reason we sell at wholesale prices is that we are out of the high-rent district.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, free parking became another way that supermarkets attracted more customers. People drove from anywhere to stores and parked for free. This accessibility also enabled shoppers to purchase more food per trip because they could drive the groceries home in their cars. Transporting their own items also saved money compared to paying for a delivery service.<sup>68</sup> This aspect shifted labor from employees to consumers again.

### **Shopping Carts: Buy More, Save Space**

The invention of the shopping cart further enabled customers to shop self-sufficiently. Before shopping carts, customers brought their own baskets, or stores provided wicker baskets and then delivered food to shoppers’ homes.<sup>69</sup> Shopping carts let customers purchase more items without having to carry them around stores. Sylvan N. Goldman of Oklahoma developed the first shopping cart in 1936, which he based on a folding chair frame and then added baskets.<sup>70</sup> He wanted the carts to fold up when not used in order to save space. The device generally proved very successful, but the folding aspect presented some difficulties. Frank Cochoy writes about how the cart’s folding mechanism required too much labor from the consumer in the checkout process, because they had to take their groceries and fold up their carts at the same time. Employees found this impractical as well because they had to help fold the cart while helping

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 51.

<sup>69</sup> Catherine Grandclément, “Wheeling Food Products around the Store...and Away: The Invention of the Shopping Cart, 1936-1953,” in *Food Chains: From Farmyard to Shopping Cart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 237.

<sup>70</sup> Franck Cochoy, “Driving a Shopping Cart from STS to Business, and the Other Way Round: On the Introduction of Shopping Carts in American Grocery Stores (1936—1959),” *Organization* 16, no. 1 (January 2009): 39.

their next customer check out at the same time. Despite these difficulties, the shopping cart also promoted the concept of self-service and increased consumption of food items by enabling customers to purchase more goods.



Figure 1.3: Two women in a 1930s supermarket with shopping carts. With the invention of carts, customers could easily inspect items, look around stores more and gather more items.

Shopping carts not only enabled customers to purchase more items, they also freed more employees' time because they did not have to assist customers hold their items as much. In fact, companies marketed the shopping cart to store managers, not customers.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the cart

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<sup>71</sup> Grandclément, "Wheeling Food Products around the Store," 233.

enabled customers to purchase more goods without assistance from store workers. In this way, shopping carts added to the self-service trend because it gave customers more freedom and responsibility. The self-service and shopping cart process starkly contrasts from counter-service, where customers requested each item from an employee. Further, both shopping carts and free parking encouraged consumers to buy more and more, which contributes how supermarkets lowered costs.

### **One-Stop Shopping: The Ultimate Convenience**

The last fundamental difference between supermarkets and other food retail distribution establishments stems from what each store sold. Similar to other elements of supermarkets, one-stop shopping largely did exist prior to the 1930s. However, wealthier housewives in the 1880s and 1890s preferred the convenience of one-stop shopping instead of having to go to different stalls for each item.<sup>72</sup> One-stop shopping truly blossomed with the first supermarkets.

At Big Bear, a New Jersey supermarket, only thirty percent of their items fell into the grocery category.<sup>73</sup> The store had 50 thousand square feet for commercial space and used just 15 thousand square feet for selling food. Big Bear devoted the rest of that space for departments such as tobacco, drugs and cosmetics, radios, electrical and auto supplies, paints, and a luncheonette.<sup>74</sup> The trend spread to other stores too: one article from the *Long Island Daily Star* describes a new supermarket called Barney's Market, and writes that the store included departments for "groceries, meat, vegetables, hardware, fish, drugs, dry cleaning, shoe repairing,

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<sup>72</sup> Tangires, *Public Markets and Civic Culture*, 184.

<sup>73</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 150.

<sup>74</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 18.



and household utilities.”<sup>75</sup> Michael Cullen planned to have similar departments in King Kullen, dividing them into meat, dairy, deli, and household items.<sup>76</sup> With these trends, the supermarket became a place for customers to purchase all kinds of household goods. Enabling shoppers to buy everything they needed in one place set the supermarket apart from other food retail stores and shows how supermarkets encouraged customers to purchase more goods.

In some cases, stores started stocking non-food items to fill extra space with random items because their buildings were just too big. In a book about the history of Marsh supermarkets, a food retail chain that started in the thirties, Don Marsh— the store’s founder— writes that he initially did not order enough groceries to fill their store of over six thousand square feet. To fill the rest of the space, Marsh bought house paint and sold that as well.<sup>77</sup> In other stores that had empty shelves, supermarkets bought health and beauty items to stock the store.<sup>78</sup> Although this aspect of supermarkets started out of the need to fill space, it made the stores more popular. (The subject of supermarkets’ changing internal structure will be explored in the third chapter.) According to the US Census of Business, one-stop stores constituted 31 percent of total food sales in 1929, and over 60 percent by 1946.<sup>79</sup> With this design, the one-stop shop store attracted more customers and sold more items, two main goals of early supermarkets.

## Conclusion

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<sup>75</sup> “Unique Design Planned for Flushing Market,” *Long Island Daily Star*, March 26, 1934, “Retail Trade,” vertical files, Archives at Queens Library.

<sup>76</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 18; Cullen, “The Letter to Kroger.”

<sup>77</sup> Marsh, *Marsh Supermarkets, Inc.: Sixty-Four Years of Continuous Smiles*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 46.

<sup>79</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 13.

This chapter shows how the distinct elements of early supermarkets in the 1930s – self-service, cash-and-carry, free parking, shopping carts, and one-stop shopping – enabled stores to achieve their goals. All of these business practices allowed stores to sell more items for less money and transferred distribution of labor from employees to customers, further lowering costs. Although these elements all came together in the 1930s, many started developing at least two decades previously. This shift meant that advertisements and products themselves conveyed information about the foods, instead of store employees discussing the items with customers. In this process, the roles of customers, employees, and the stores fundamentally adopted to an industrial complex designed to function as cheaply as possible.

All these changes are important to the supermarket's early years, but the story of the institution's first decade does not end here. The 1930s also saw the worst economic downturn in American history: The Great Depression. The next chapter focuses on the Depression's effect on the development of the supermarket.

## **Chapter 2: The Incubator Environment: *The Great Depression's Effect on Supermarkets***

### **Introduction**

As discussed previously, many changes occurred during the first three decades of the twentieth century that enabled the transition from neighborhood grocery stores to chain stores to supermarkets.<sup>80</sup> The foundations for supermarkets— such elements as self-service, cash-and-carry, parking lots, shopping carts, and one-stop shopping – rose in popularity mainly in the 1920s. However, the Great Depression hastened many of these changes' implementation across the country.

The Great Depression was the most significant economic recession in American history. Unemployment rose significantly during the Depression, forcing many Americans to save as much money as they could. Specifically, employment dropped by 27 percent from 1929 to 1932, and at the economy's lowest points, a quarter of employable people did not have jobs. Even people who retained jobs saw their wages fall significantly.<sup>81</sup> In 1929, the national income in billions was \$83.3, but in 1930 it became \$68.9, \$54.3 in 1931, and \$40.0 in 1932. This sudden, drastic economic decline occurred at precisely the same time as the appearance of the first supermarket, King Kullen. As such, the Depression significantly contributed to supermarkets' rapid spread. McAusland argues the Depression provided an excellent “social” environment for the supermarket to triumph.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, supermarkets started in the throes of the Depression with the first “cheapies,” early supermarkets in abandoned factories that were disorganized and often

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<sup>80</sup> Although chain stores and supermarkets existed contemporaneously, chain stores appeared during the 1920s. Thus, chain stores technically started before supermarkets. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 85.

<sup>81</sup> Frank J. Charvat, *Supermarketing* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 20.

<sup>82</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 5.

chaotic. As a result, it is no coincidence that supermarkets rose to rapid success in the Great Depression.

### **The Depression as an Accelerator**

During the Depression, executives in the food retail industry recognized the need to adjust to changing economic conditions because they saw customers' suffering directly. As Artemus Darius Davis, who served as vice chairman of Winn-Dixie, said, "I had lots of customers who bought cans of dog food. They didn't have a dog. They ate it." Paul Willis, the president of the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) during the early years of the Depression serves as another example of food retailers adapting to the changing economy. At the Detroit Manufacturers' Representatives' Trade Dinner in 1931, he said:

...a depression is a period of adjustment necessary to enable us to meet new and changing economic conditions...a depression lasts just so long as it takes us to adjust our businesses to meet the new and changed conditions.<sup>83</sup>

In a similar vein, Ned Fleming, who started a wholesale grocer in 1915, found it "amazing" how quickly customers changed their food purchasing habits. He noted how people started purchasing rice and beans instead of steak to show how their eating patterns drastically changed out of economic need.<sup>84</sup> Fleming says that consequently, the profit margins for stores sunk and the food retail industry had to find ways to adjust to the economic conditions. In one interview, Michael Cullen said, "These are tough times...I will do more than any other man in this country to save the American people money. I am making it possible for hundreds of thousands of people to get all they want to eat."<sup>85</sup> Cullen thought his stores made it easier for

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<sup>83</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 24.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>85</sup> "King Kullen; America's First Supermarket Celebrates 60 Years of Quality, Service & Innovation," *King Kullen*, June 5, 1990, 6A, "Retail Trade," vertical files, Archives at Queens Library.

people to feed themselves and their families during the Depression, and he was right.

Interestingly, some grocers reacted to the conditions of extreme hunger and poverty with kindness by maintaining credit systems with customers who they knew would never be able to pay the credit. The rise of cash-and-carry makes this practice quite surprising. In these ways as well, the Depression caused changes in food distributors' practice, although these adjustments only occurred in the short term.<sup>86</sup>

The Depression also made the fledgling supermarket more popular. James Mayo argues that customers sacrificed shopping in more aesthetically pleasing stores and patronized early supermarkets like warehouse "cheapies" to save money.<sup>87</sup> Mayo implies that without the Depression, supermarkets might not have succeeded so early and so well. McAusland even refers to early supermarkets as "a robust child of the Depression."<sup>88</sup> Clearly, early in the 1930s, the Depression changed consumer habits.

### **Advertising during the Great Depression**

Food retail entrepreneurs recognized their customers' changing needs as price grew increasingly important during the economic downturn. Longstreth even argues that the supermarket served as the food retail industry's direct response to the Depression.<sup>89</sup> Advertising serves as the most obvious example of supermarkets' adapting to the Depression. Indeed, supermarkets' advertising makes the Depression and Americans' desperation evident. In Cullen's letter, he writes: "When I come out with a two-page ad and advertise 300 items at cost and 200 items practically at cost,

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<sup>86</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 27.

<sup>87</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 146.

<sup>88</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 15.

<sup>89</sup> Longstreth, *The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space*, XVII.

which would probably be all the advertising that I would ever have to do, the public... would break my front doors down to get in. It would be a riot.”<sup>90</sup> While Cullen clearly exaggerated by claiming that he would instigate a riot and never need to advertise again, his model did succeed immensely. Seemingly taking advantage of the need for lower prices in the Depression, Cullen branded his store as “The World’s Greatest Price Wrecker.” He also terms his stores the “world’s most economically operated,” the “world’s greatest Thrift Centers,” and “the world’s most daring price wrecker” (Fig. 2.1). Not only did Cullen advertise his stores as low-cost, he also demonstrated to customers that it took risks and sacrifices to get these low prices, which other stores did not take. Consumers, in need of cheap prices during the economic stagnation, perhaps felt that they could trust Cullen to deliver on his promise. Through his advertisements, Cullen showed shoppers that he knew price was the most important aspect during the Depression.

King Kullen did not just advertise its cheap prices; it actually did have lower costs. Michael Cullen’s economic retailing strategy purchased items wholesale, which many chain stores did at the time. However, unlike all other food retail institutions, Cullen did not have warehouse costs, which significantly cheapened the operation. In his letter he writes that he would eliminate warehouses because his gigantic store’s turn-over would eradicate the need for storage.<sup>91</sup> Without a warehouse, King Kullen greatly reduced overhead costs because the company did not need to pay for another building, insurance, or labor. He also increased the square footage in his stores, which further eliminated costs because stores could sell more items in one location instead of paying for buildings in multiple locations.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Cullen, “The Letter to Kroger.”

<sup>91</sup> Zimmerman, *The Super Market; A Revolution in Distribution*, 33.

<sup>92</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 140.

Cullen had the utmost confidence in his plan. He even writes in his letter: “I would convince the public that I would be able to save them from one to three dollars on their food bills. I would be the ‘miracle man’ of the grocery business.”<sup>93</sup> In this instance, Cullen comes across as pompous, but also trustworthy. He presents himself as an advocate for the community and his customers, and not as someone who only wants to profit from his idea. In all these examples, the advertising portrays King Kullen as inherently different and better. In other words, Cullen advertised effectively.

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<sup>93</sup> Zimmerman, *The Super Market; A Revolution in Distribution*, 33.

**Extra** The Inside Story, of a New Idea and an Amazing Success! **Extra**

PUBLISHED BY KING KULLEN FOR LONG ISLAND'S THRIFTY MILLIONS

# EXPOSED! The Reason Why 150,000 HOUSEWIVES CRASH THE WORLD'S BIGGEST FOOD MARKET



Here is a close-up of a busy day at a King Kullen Market. Note the evident intelligence and prosperity that just radiates from our customers! Good sense brings 'em here—and King Kullen does his bit to KEEP them prosperous. Get the idea?

Day after day, week after week, hundreds of thousands of Long Island's Smartest, Shrewdest and thriftest housewives literally jam the huge KING KULLEN Markets. If you want to know why, turn to the inside pages — Every line is a revelation in economy!

## The World's Most Daring Price Wrecker **KING KULLEN**

**DO YOU KNOW?**  
**THESE FACTS ABOUT**

**KING KULLEN MARKETS**  
World's Largest in Area.  
World's Biggest Assortments  
World's most economically operated.  
World's most popular.  
World's greatest Thrift Centers.

12 GIGANTIC MARKETS 12

*There's One Near You at*  
**QUEENS BOULEVARD**  
**Near Woodhaven Blvd.**  
**ELMHURST, LONG ISLAND**  
**Plenty of Parking Space**

**Don't Miss A Single Page**

Figure 2.1: An advertisement for King Kullen from the 1930s focuses on housewives as the primary customer base. It also describes King Kullen in superlatives such as the “World’s Largest in Area” and “World’s most economically operated.”<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, the founders of Big Bear, Robert M. Otis and Roy O. Dawson, called their store “The World’s Greatest Price Crusher” (Fig. 2.2).<sup>95</sup> Max Mandell Zimmerman wrote extensively about supermarkets during the 1930s-50s and discusses Big Bear in his book *The*

<sup>94</sup> Zimmerman, *The Super Market; A Revolution in Distribution*, 37.

<sup>95</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 15.



*Super Market* from 1955. He writes that articles about Big Bear boasted taglines such as “Big Bear Crashes into New Jersey” and “Big Bear, World’s Champion Price Fighter.” In one advertisement, Big Bear celebrated Halloween with a “stupendous price-reflection event” where it assured customers they would “save as you never saved before!” That same advertisement also promises that Big Bear “always reflects” the lowest cost possible. Big Bear clearly emphasized its prices to convince consumers that the store offered the largest savings. The way that industry writers during the 1930s characterize the establishment also shows the focus on price.



Figure 2.2: This advertisement for Big Bear promotes a Halloween event at the store complete with a raffle, a cash gift, and savings for everyone.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Zimmerman, *The Super Market; A Revolution in Distribution*, 41.

The resemblance between the main slogans of each store, “World’ Greatest Price Wrecker” and “World’s Greatest Price Crusher”, cannot go unnoticed given the sole difference of one word. Zimmerman points out that while many supermarkets failed in the 1930s, the ones that succeeded often had “a flair for the dramatic” when it came to advertisements. These taglines demonstrate that concept.<sup>97</sup> Both stores echo the Depression-era need for affordable food and other necessities. Each advertisement also mentions their stores’ thrifty natures, which connects to the appeal of “cheapies” that lacked design and saved costs by piling items on shipping pallets, like Big Bear did. Thus, both demonstrate the perception of supermarkets as a new and exciting approach to food retail during desperate times when consumers needed changes to afford food. Zimmerman and Mayo both remark that the opening of King Kullen and Big Bear and their ensuing success generated national news.<sup>98</sup>

These trends persisted across the early supermarket industry, not just with King Kullen and Big Bear. Supermarket advertisements commonly used the slogan: “pile it high and sell it cheap.”<sup>99</sup> Taking a leaf out of King Kullen and Big Bear’s books, most other early stores also advertised in newspapers with full-page and even double-page advertisements. Zimmerman writes in 1937 that only seven years after the debut of King Kullen, some supermarkets “dominate” the food sections of newspapers.<sup>100</sup>

Supermarkets also advertised with the actual products sold. Because of the transition from counter-service to self-service, stores sold many more packaged goods. The increase in items sold this way also stemmed from new technologies that enabled food companies to

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<sup>97</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, 45.

<sup>98</sup> Zimmerman, *The Super Market; A Revolution in Distribution*, 40; Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 144.

<sup>99</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 12.

<sup>100</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, 49.

preserve food for longer.<sup>101</sup> Mass production of food items in factories became increasingly common and led to a greater diversity of products, while eliminating labor for the grocer, as discussed in Chapter One.<sup>102</sup> With increased packaging, brands grew more important and items advertised themselves with text and drawings.<sup>103</sup> Supermarket experts advocated for more packaged items because they thought that customers wanted to inspect and pick up products before buying them and advertising through packaging helped customers in this process.<sup>104</sup> More advertising also helped stores market their low prices, an essential theme in supermarkets during the Depression.

## Conclusion

The Great Depression definitively accelerated the development of the supermarket. The economic conditions made Americans desperate for food security and opened opportunities for shifting consumer behavior patterns. These circumstances also help explain why stores succeeded on the “cheapy” model during the Depression’s early years. Willing to forgo a sleeker store layout and design for cheaper prices, consumers flocked to supermarkets. The Depression also deeply influenced advertisements, making low prices a pervasive theme, as demonstrated by King Kullen and Big Bear’s advertisements emphasizing low prices to attract more customers. By highlighting deals on prices, early supermarkets escalated their development during the Depression. By adapting to the Great Depression, supermarkets became extraordinarily popular

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<sup>101</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 15.

<sup>102</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 2.

<sup>103</sup> Grandclément, “Wheeling Food Products around the Store,” 237.

<sup>104</sup> Increases in packaged goods eventually led to a systemic problem of waste. This issue originates with the industrialization of food production in the early twentieth century and persists today. In our supermarkets, it is difficult and often impossible to purchase many goods without packaging that will generate waste. While recycling is becoming more available and realistic, the system remains unsustainable. Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 15.

and newspapers wrote wrote about the thousands of customers they attracted.<sup>105</sup> However, other historical factors impacted the development of stores during the 1930s as well. Specifically, suburbanization affected the structure, layout, and design of early supermarkets.

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<sup>105</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, V.

### **Chapter 3: Suburban Invasion:** *How the Changing American Landscape Enabled Supermarkets' Development*

#### **Introduction**

In addition to the changing business elements discussed in Chapter One, supermarkets differed from grocery stores in their location, structure, layout, and design. This is because the supermarket also fits into the story of twentieth-century American suburbanization. Therefore, when more people moved to the outskirts of cities, they traveled and shopped differently because of technological innovations such as the automobile and Americans' flight to the suburbs. These changes enabled the supermarket to become the modern American method of food retail distribution within the first five years of King Kullen's opening in 1930. The significant developments in external structure, layout, and design all occurred in these first five years, demonstrating how consumer behavior rapidly and permanently shifted. This chapter contends that suburbanization helped precipitate the 1930s transition to supermarkets.

#### **Suburbia in the 1930s**

In the 1910s, Americans started moving to suburbs – outlying residential areas of cities—and the phenomenon drastically increased during the 1920s. Americans built more homes between 1922-29 than in any other seven-year period.<sup>106</sup> Between 1920 and 1930, the percentage of Americans who lived in suburbs increased from around 9 percent to about 14 percent (Fig. 3.1). Interestingly, suburbs continued growing even in the 1930s, during the height of the Great Depression.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 175.

<sup>107</sup> Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, "Demographic Trends in the 20th Century: Census 2000 Special Reports" (U.S. Census Bureau, November 2002), <https://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf>, 33.

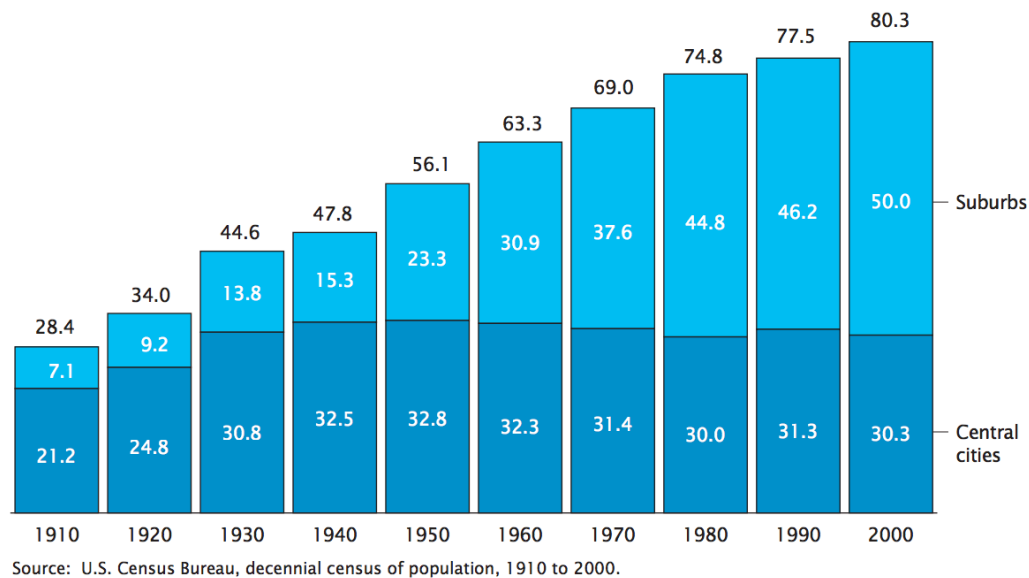


Figure 3.1: This graph shows the number of Americans living in cities and suburbs throughout the twentieth century. From 1920-1930, the population in suburbia increases significantly by about five percent as shown by the increase in the light blue section of the bar.<sup>108</sup>

When people moved outside of city centers, the way that they shopped and interacted with food retail had to change. In cities, people walked to corner grocery stores, butchers, and dairy vendors, often in expeditious trips and on their ways home from work. In these dense neighborhoods, stores and apartments sat side by side, which made this system effective. In suburbia, people had to dedicate an entire, separate trip just to go to a grocery establishment because people did not live in walking distance from retail areas. Thus, the quick trip method did not work.

Enter the automobile: instead of walking, people drove to purchase items they needed. Thus, suburbanization inherently connects to the increasing presence of automobiles in American life. When people resided in suburbs, they lacked the public transportation networks that helped

<sup>108</sup> Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, "Deographic Trends in the 20th Century," 33.

them travel travel in urban environments. As such, they needed new methods of transportation and the car served that purpose. Automobiles quickly grew more popular in the 1920s because the assembly line method of production popularized by Henry Ford cheapened the cost of cars. The number of registered cars tripled in the 1920s, grew to 23 million by 1930, and continued increasing to 27.5 million by 1940. Just like suburbs, the automobile industry grew during the 1930s despite the Great Depression.<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, America expanded, widened, and even built new highways throughout the Depression decade. The federal government supported construction of new highways as a source of work during the Depression. Indeed, road and highway projects accounted for over one third of all New Deal jobs and the program authorized another \$5 billion for automobile projects. As a result, highway miles increased by 21 percent in the U.S. during the thirties.<sup>110</sup>

Together, suburbs and automobiles significantly impacted many aspects of American life including consumer culture. The expansion of suburbs and the increasing availability of the automobile in the 1930s influenced the location and spatial design of supermarkets. These phenomena all developed during the same time period, and supermarkets proliferated because of their interactions.

### **The Location Upheaval**

Before the rise of suburbs, food stores mostly existed in taxpayer strips, in more urban and walkable city areas.<sup>111</sup> In these stores, window advertisements abounded because most

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<sup>109</sup> Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 20.

<sup>110</sup> Owen D. Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape*, Oxford University Press (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29-30.

<sup>111</sup> Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 14.



customers walked by their local stores regularly, and saw window displays every time. For example, the stores in Figures 3.2 and 3.3 publicize displays of cans in the windows to attract street traffic.



Figure 3.2: These pre-supermarket exteriors of I.G.A Stores and A&P in Dresden, Ohio during the 1930s show how stores existed in urban environments. Notice how the store exists among other stores on the same block. Supermarkets eventually occupied much more space and included parking lots, unlike these stores. The window displays in these stores serve as advertisements, a practice that became obsolete in suburbs because supermarkets were destinations, not stops along the way.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 125.





Figure 3.3: This is an A&P storefront on 246 Third Avenue on 20<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City in 1936. While supermarkets boomed suburbs. Urban stores retained traditional features, such as this window display. The displays and price advertisements are clearly aimed at shoppers walking past the store.<sup>113</sup>

Many stores appeared similar to the A&P store in Figure 3.3, advertising many items in its window displays. When stores moved to more suburban neighborhoods, window displays became archaic because people drove specifically to shopping. People could not read advertisements while driving, which points to another reason why stores halted window

<sup>113</sup> "A&P, 246 Third Avenue, Manhattan," The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1936, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-335e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>; William I. Walsh, *The Rise and Decline of the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company* (Secaucus, N.J: L. Stuart, 1986), 49.

promotions. For both reasons, stores did not need to advertise as much in the windows because people who saw those displays had already decided to shop at the store.

Clearly, supermarkets' locations in suburbia contrasted corner store predecessors and their urban locations. Indeed, Michael Cullen and other supermarket entrepreneurs recognized rising suburbanization early and aimed to build stores that would succeed outside city centers. Cullen wrote to Kroger in 1930 that his store would be "two or three blocks from the business center," but ultimately built the first King Kullen in Jamaica, Queens, well away from the financial district of Manhattan (Fig. 3.4).<sup>114</sup> Robert M. Otis and Roy O. Dawson opened their first store in Elizabeth, N.J., a suburb of New York.<sup>115</sup> All three businessmen took advantage of cheap property in these outlying locations, which enabled stores lower their prices altogether. Relying on people's needs for low prices during the Great Depression, Cullen reasoned that people would travel farther because his store would be cheaper.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Cullen, "The Letter to Kroger."

<sup>115</sup> Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, 125.

<sup>116</sup> Cullen, "The Letter to Kroger."

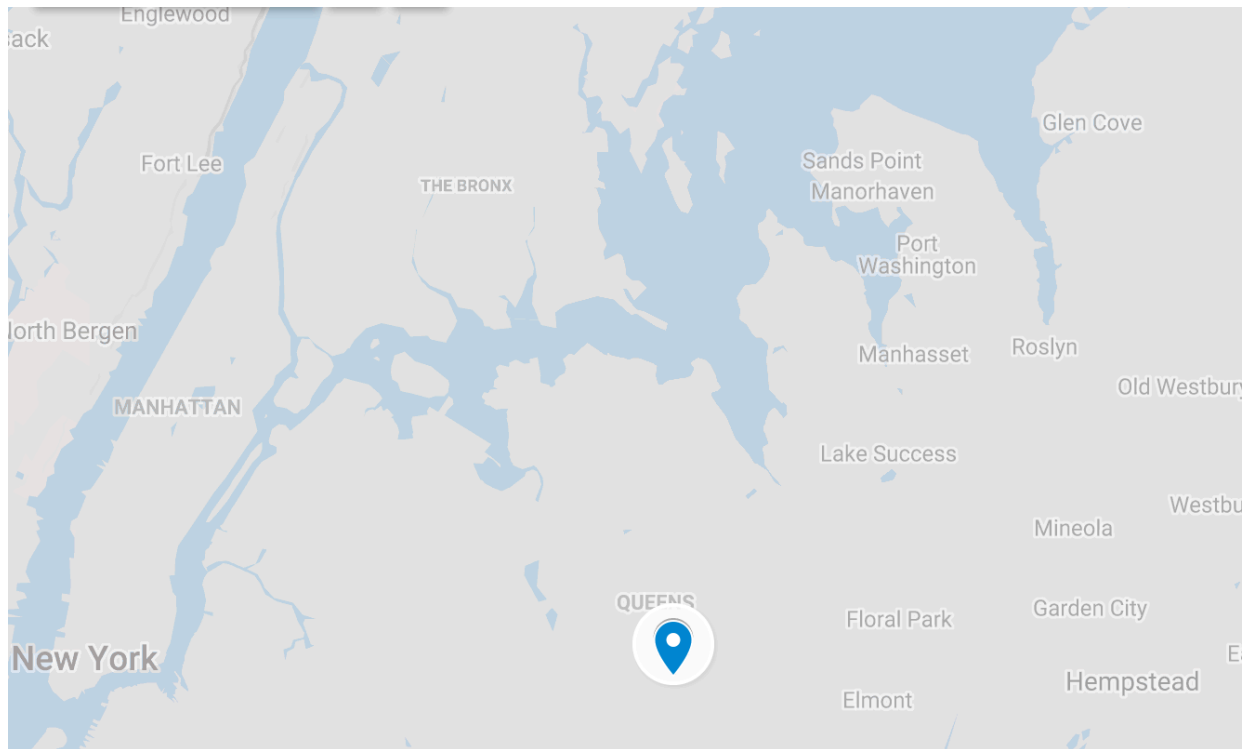


Figure 3.4: This map shows the location of the first King Kullen, at the corner of 171<sup>st</sup> and Jamaica Avenue in Queens. Clearly, King Kullen existed outside of New York City's center in downtown Manhattan, just as Michael Cullen wanted.

Cullen knew customers could access his stores with automobiles and he relied on this increasingly common form of transportation to encourage people to flock to his store. Indeed, he argued that a store out of the city center would allow for ample street parking.<sup>117</sup> However, the first King Kullen store did not actually have parking in the front (Fig. 3.5). Even though Cullen wrote about prioritizing parking, he relied on previous store models by assuming some customers would stop while walking or park their cars on the street. He did not design his store presuming that most shoppers would drive to it; he just saw parking space as an added benefit.

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<sup>117</sup> Cullen, "The Letter to Kroger."



Figure 3.5: This picture shows the first King Kullen in Jamaica, Queens. Interestingly, the store does not have a parking lot in front. Either Cullen designed a parking lot in the back, or ended up relying on street parking.<sup>118</sup>

Other stores took Cullen's ideas further. For example, a 1934 news article titled, "Unique Design Planned for Flushing Market," says that the store "will be set back thirty-five feet from the property to provide space for parking automobiles."<sup>119</sup> By 1934 – just four years after Cullen opened his first storefront – other entrepreneurs considered parking lots essential that they needed to be in front of stores. Cullen prophesied correctly that customers would willingly travel farther to save money. Consumers drove up to fifty miles to shop at stores like King Kullen and Big Bear during the 1930s.<sup>120</sup>

Parking lots became ubiquitous so quickly that when companies built supermarkets without parking lots, they failed to turn a profit.<sup>121</sup> Sidney Rabb opened two Stop & Shop stores

<sup>118</sup> Made available by King Kullen.

<sup>119</sup> "Unique Design Planned for Flushing Market," *Long Island Daily Star*, March 26, 1934. "Retail Trade," vertical files, Archives at Queens Library.

<sup>120</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 144.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.



and the one without a parking lot failed, while the other one proved very successful.<sup>122</sup> Further, in the first definition of a “Super Market” in 1930s, the grocery trade partly defined it as a store “with adequate parking space.”<sup>123</sup> This shift to parking lot dependency signified the connection between suburbanization and the development of supermarkets during the 1930s.

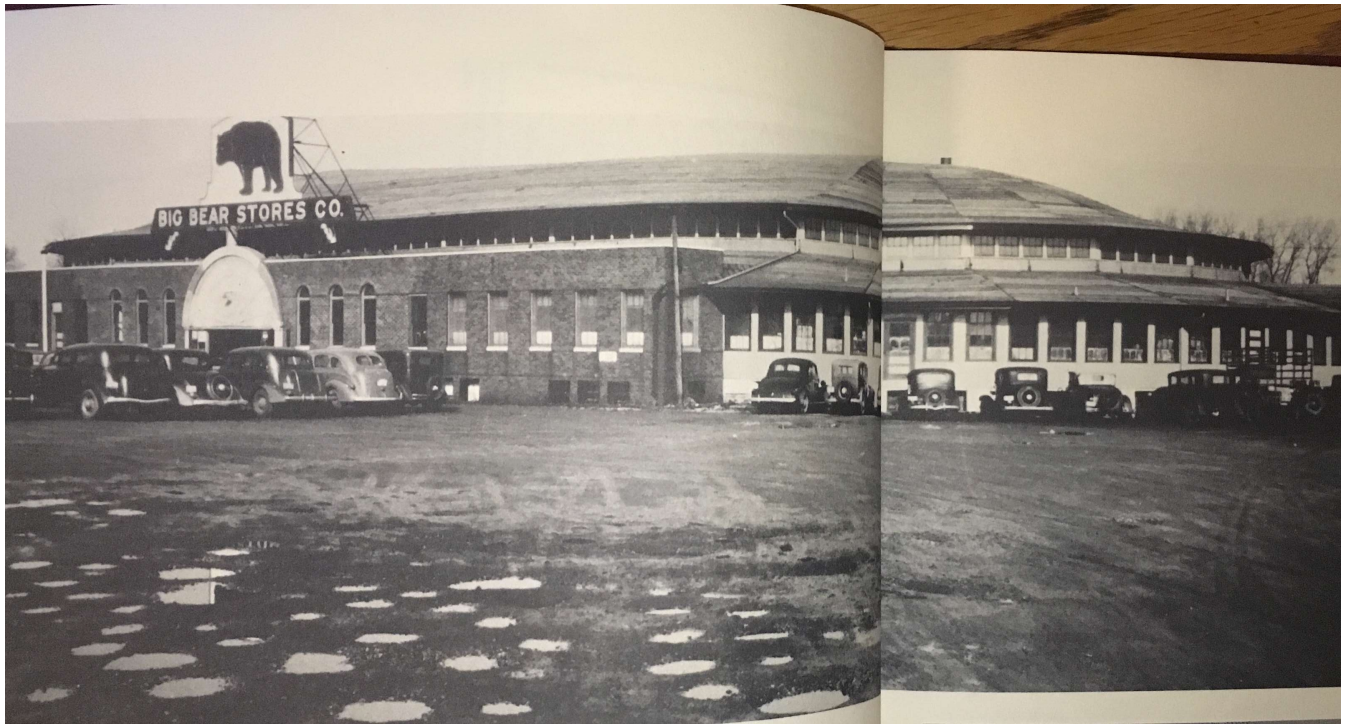


Figure 3.6: This image shows the first Big Bear supermarket that opened in 1932 in Elizabeth, N.J. This store opened in an old Buick factory, a very different building from the stores pictured in Figures 3.2 and 3.3, which were wedged into an urban setting. The most striking difference is this store’s vast parking lot, compared to the absence of any parking in the earlier images.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Greer, *America the Bountiful*, 155.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>124</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 18.

## New Location, New Building Structure

Along with changes in location, the buildings where supermarkets existed also changed. Stores in urban locations were often modest because taxpayer areas had small buildings. However, with the transition to the suburbs that corresponded with the first supermarkets, stores grew in size. Early proprietors like King Kullen (Fig. 3.5) and Big Bear (Fig. 3.6) rarely built their own buildings: they all relied on pre-existing structures like warehouses and factories. This demonstrates another impact of the Depression on the rise of supermarkets: entrepreneurs' lack of capital partially stemmed from the poor economic conditions. Thus, stores often opened in buildings whose previous occupants had bankrupt due to the Depression.<sup>125</sup> This tactic enabled stores to keep overhead costs extremely low.<sup>126</sup>

In these repurposed factories and warehouses, the buildings needed load-bearing walls – supports that hold structure's weight from ground to ceiling – throughout the store. However, after 1935, companies that had enough funding built stores for the purpose of using them for supermarkets instead of buying repurposed buildings. At this point, architects and engineers used steel columns and concrete instead of wood, which gave stores have more open space in the interior because these materials held more weight.

More changes occurred as the supermarket industry continued to establish itself. In the late 1930s, external structures started to conform to contemporary styles. Many stores fit into popular styles such as Art Deco and Streamline Moderne, as shown in Figures 3.7 and 3.8.<sup>127</sup> Compared to the garage and warehouse styles, these structures appear sleeker and modern.

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<sup>125</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, V.

<sup>126</sup> Supermarkets needed to focus on lowering costs as much as possible especially because the grocery industry famously has low margins. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 136.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

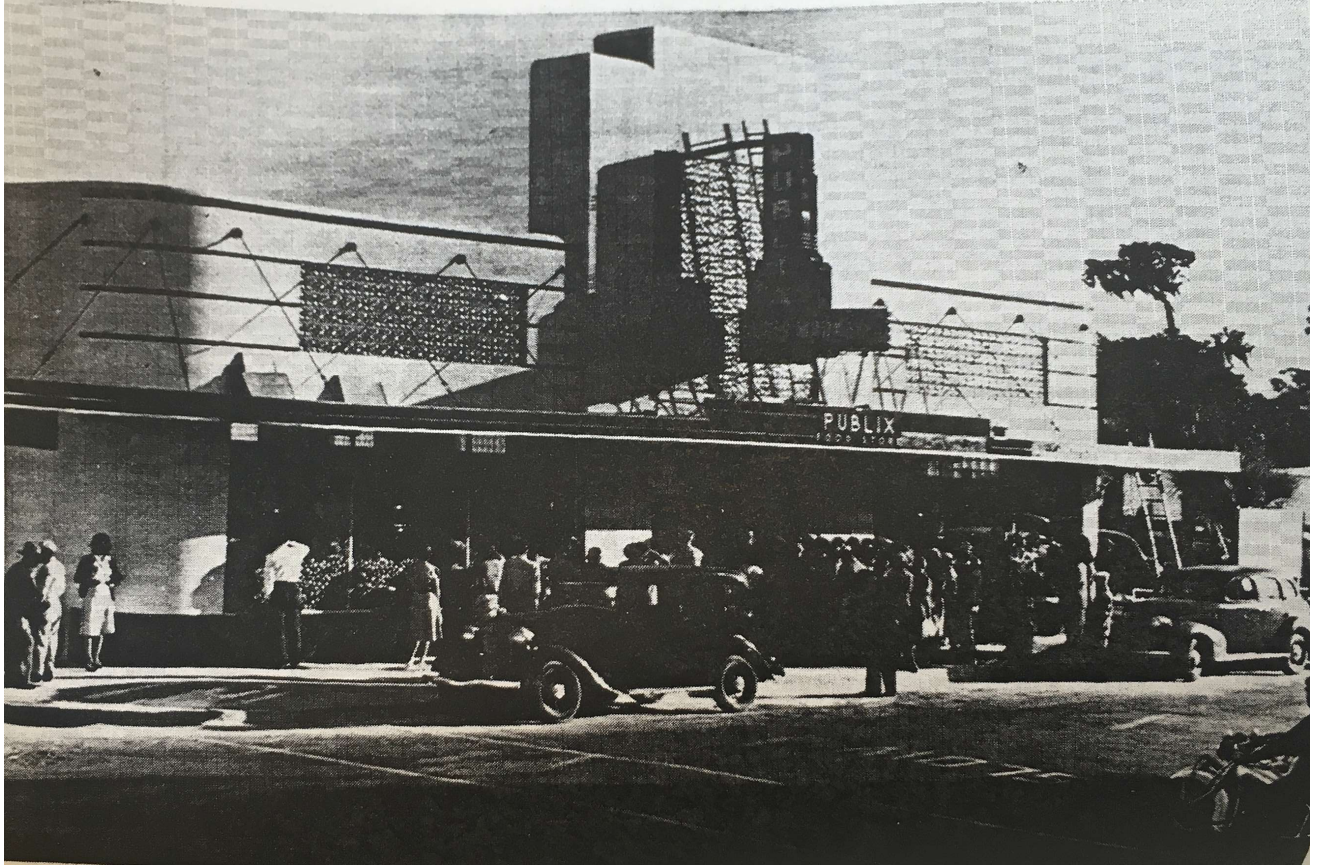


Figure 3.7: This Publix supermarket in Winter Haven, Florida, is from 1940. Here the Art Deco style, a common marker of modernism, reaches the supermarket.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 150.





Figure 3.8: This supermarket in the 1930s uses the Streamline Moderne style. Similar to the Art Deco style, this design connotes modernism, especially when noting the increased use of glass.<sup>129</sup>

Comparing Figures 3.7 and 3.8 to the original King Kullen (Fig. 3.5) and Big Bear (Fig. 3.6) buildings shows that supermarkets' external structure changed dramatically within their first decade. The warehouse model helped foster a connotation of supermarkets as “cheapies.”<sup>130</sup> However, by the late 1930s, supermarkets shifted to “modern” food retails as the external design changed to current styles like Art Deco and Streamline Moderne. The characterization of supermarkets as “modern” also fits into their story as part of suburban culture. This rapid change

<sup>129</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 150.

<sup>130</sup> Richard W. Longstreth, *The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space*, XVII.



shows how consumers quickly adapted to the supermarket. As suburbs became the new paragon of food retail.

### **From “Monstrous” to “Modern”**

The dramatic change in stores’ external structures affected their internal layouts as well. The bigger the store, the more space inside for merchandise – and when stores opened in suburbia, buildings had more physical space. Before supermarkets in the early twentieth century, a standard chain store measured around 20' X 30'.<sup>131</sup> In contrast, Cullen wrote that his store would be of “monstrous” size, 40' X 130'-160', with depth almost five times as much as standard grocery stores'. To demonstrate this contrast another way: typical chain stores had about 600 square feet of space and 100 feet of wall space in a freestanding store. Big Bear had 50 thousand square feet overall and 15 thousand square feet just for the grocery section.<sup>132</sup> Even looking at the contrast between Figures 3.2 and 3.6 demonstrates this extreme change: stores like the ones in Figure 3.2 are considerably smaller than the Big Bear in Figure 3.6. The trend of “monstrous” supermarkets characterizes stores in the 1930s.

The large size of these stores also caused issues. Indeed, many supermarkets originally had too much space. In the history of Marsh supermarkets, a smaller food retail chain that started in Indiana, Don Marsh writes about how their first grocery order could not fill the store of 6,430 square feet.<sup>133</sup> Without selling items in the entire building, Marsh worried the store could not make a profit. To compensate, they filled the extra space with house paint. This problem demonstrates how supermarket companies did not know how to design their space. Trial and

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<sup>131</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 140.

<sup>132</sup> Cullen, “The Letter to Kroger.”

<sup>133</sup> Marsh, *Marsh Supermarkets*, 10.

error mark the first few years of supermarkets: the stores had to be big, but not too large, otherwise they would face the problem of Marsh supermarkets.

Interestingly, because companies built early supermarkets in old warehouses, factories, and garages, stores often ran in chaos. When floor space increased, stores appeared as if they had exploded.<sup>134</sup> Zimmerman describes Big Bear as having a “bazaar-like appearance,” complete with “cheap pine tables” that employees loaded high with merchandise.<sup>135</sup> Big Bear also simply left items on shipping pallets in the middle of the store.<sup>136</sup> Frank J. Charvat describes Big Bear similarly to Zimmerman: “the interior had no partitions, crude floors, bare ceilings, unpainted fixtures, glaring lights, gaudy signs, and merchandise piled everywhere.”<sup>137</sup> These provisional features occurred in many stores because companies kept prices low by not investing in interior decorating or organization strategies. Cheap, rudimentary, and disorganized stores characterized the first five years of the supermarket industry.

Stores’ floor plans faced similar transitional moments. Examples from Dipman’s *Modern Food Stores* show how he thought floor plans should change to adapt to a self-service supermarket system. He includes two images of store layouts to contrast an “old” design with a “modern” one.<sup>138</sup> In the older model, customers could not walk browse and examine items. The new layout enabled and even forced customers to walk past as much merchandise as possible. This strategy connects back to how self-service and other business elements transferred more labor in supermarkets to customers. Dipman’s use of the word “modern” also signals that he assumes this method will become the standard layout in food retail.

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<sup>134</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 27-8.

<sup>135</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, VI.

<sup>136</sup> Walsh, *The Rise and Decline of the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company*, 47.

<sup>137</sup> Charvat, *Supermarketing*, 18.

<sup>138</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 12.

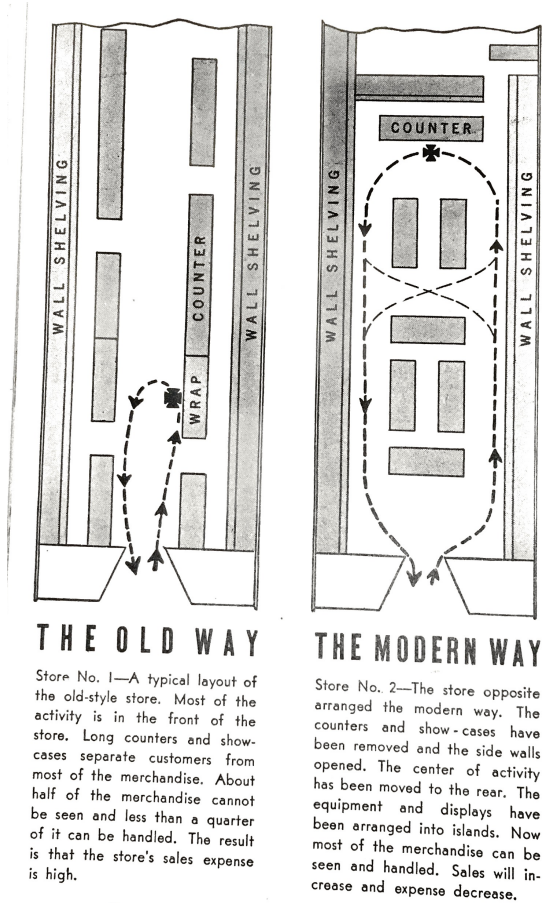


Figure: 3.9: In Carl Dipman's *Modern Food Stores*, he devotes much of the book to discussing store arrangements. Here, he writes about the requirements of a "modern" food store layout and how it differs from an "old" store.<sup>139</sup>

Interestingly, the way Dipman writes about the shopping process with the "modern" layout makes it seem like an experience rather than a chore. Perhaps Dipman thought that consumers did not enjoy food shopping. He writes that shoppers wanted a "lively" store where they could "leisurely" examine items by reading the labels before deciding which ones to buy. The way he describes the ideal supermarket seems more like a clothing store than a food retail establishment. Indeed, one archived news article from Flushing, Queens (year unknown) focuses

<sup>139</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 12.

on department stores, but the description sounds eerily similar to Dipman's. For example, it reads: "Shopping is made convenient in Abramson's new store. Modern fixtures and carefully laid out departments make it easy for the shopper...Much thought and care has gone into the arrangement of the new store to make the shopper's visit pleasant in every way."<sup>140</sup> Dipman's description of a shopping experience matches: "Now she can exercise that shopping instinct, browse about the merchandise, examine, handle, read, and scrutinize to her heart's content."<sup>141</sup> This description demonstrates how stores began designing layouts for customers' ease, directly contrasting the method of leaving shipping pallets strewn across a store.

The idea of employees arranging items seems simple now, but as shown the first years of the supermarket industry with King Kullen and Big Bear, this was not a given. Dipman wrote *Modern Food Stores* about supermarket layouts in 1935, only five years after King Kullen first opened. However, there is extreme contrast between the first supermarkets' crude layout, with merchandise haphazardly heaped on tables and pallets, and this description of all the items arranged thoughtfully by employees. This transition happened in just the first five years of the supermarket industry, demonstrating the rapid changes caused by locational changes enabled by suburbs and automobiles.

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<sup>140</sup> "Shopping Made Convenient in Modern Building," n.d., "Retail Trade," vertical files, Archives at Queens Library.

<sup>141</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 12; Dipman and many writers in the twentieth century consistently refer to shoppers as "housewives," and I will address this phenomenon later in the chapter. The role of gender in supermarkets is extremely important, especially in the context of how the institution upholds systems of oppression.

## Dynamic Displays

Similar to how supermarkets' layout changed after the phenomenon's "cheapy" phase, store displays adapted at a corresponding pace. But by the late 1930s, industry writers encouraged supermarkets to design attractive and enticing displays. Dipman wrote an entire chapter on "Modern Displays." He argues that displays must communicate "activity and movement" and feel accessible to customers.<sup>142</sup> Additionally, in Violet Davis Grubbs' book, *Effectiveness of selected canned food displays in supermarkets*, she conducts experiments in twelve supermarkets in the Boston area in 1959.<sup>143</sup> Strikingly, her conclusions almost mirror Dipman's, despite the twenty-year gap between their work.

Grubbs tried three ways of organizing displays of items such as grapefruit and tomato juice: pile-on, formal basket, and jumbled basket. She wanted to see which display yielded the most sales and profit. She concluded that the formal pile-on display was least effective, and that the formal and jumbled basket displays were equally effective (Fig. 3.10 and 3.11). Similarly, Dipman argued that fancy displays and pyramid formations suggest they exist for decoration, not for sale. Dipman also wrote that when stores place placards on the top of pyramids, customers have to then move the card to pick up the item.<sup>144</sup> From this, he concluded that displays conveying "balance and symmetry" made it hard for customers to collect merchandise because they had to exert more effort to gather the items, which disrupted satisfying display symmetry, just like Grubbs' argument.

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<sup>142</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 49.

<sup>143</sup> Despite the fact that Grubbs' study is done well after the 1930s, it reveals important themes about supermarket advertising.

<sup>144</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 49.



BN-8213-X

Method A



BN-8221-X

Method B



BN-8212-X

Method C



BN-8216-X

Method D

Figure 1.--Displays of grapefruit and tomato juice.

Figures 3.10 and 3.11: These examples show the three methods of display— pile-on, formal basket, and jumbled basket— that Grubbs tested in her experiment and a regular shelf display.

The similarities continued when Grubbs partially measured a display's effectiveness by determining how much labor employees needed to do to set up each option.<sup>145</sup> Grubbs wrote about the various tasks included in the process to show all that employees had to do:

<sup>145</sup> Violet Davis Grubbs, *Effectiveness of Selected Canned Food Displays in Supermarkets* (Washington, DC: Washington, D.C. : U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Marketing Research Division, Agricultural Marketing Service, 1959, 1959), 6.

“time to set up the display fixtures, get merchandise from back room storage, open the cases and price-mark the cans, haul the merchandise to the display location, put the merchandise on display, and clean up the empty cases.”

She also writes multiple times that a formal basket display requires appreciably labor more than a jumbled basket. In one instance, she noted that it took 11 seconds per case to set up a jumbled display compared to 55 seconds for a formal one because jumbled baskets only required “dumping” cans onto baskets.<sup>146</sup> She even calculated the labor costs by multiplying the “total direct man-hour requirements” by a wage of \$1.5/hour, which was above the \$1/hour minimum wage.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Dipman described displays as “silent salesmen” because he wanted the items to sell themselves instead of employees doing that work, contributing to supermarkets’ trend of decreasing employee labor. These parallels differ entirely from how Big Bear piled and arrayed merchandise anywhere. Using Dipman’s book to show the differences demonstrates the monumental shift between King Kullen’s 1930 debut and 1935.

Further, the lack of changes from 1935 to 1959, when Grubbs conducted her study, demonstrates the supermarket industry settling as a suburban business because display strategies changed due to new layouts, structures, and locations. These spatial and design changes were made possible by suburban growth and increasing accessibility and availability of automobiles.

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<sup>146</sup> Violet Davis Grubbs, *Effectiveness of Selected Canned Food Displays*, 19.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 7; “History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938 - 2009,” United States Department of Labor, n.d.

### **Accessible for the Few, Not the Many**

Altogether supermarket layouts and design changed dramatically in the 1930s, the consumer base seemed to stay the same. Advertisements and packaging consistently refer to food retail customers as women and housewives. Industry experts also relied on this gendered understanding of their customers when they tried to identify the best ways to design and advertise supermarkets. For example, in Dipman's *Self-Service Food Stores*, he writes about how store layouts should continuously change because "women like to browse attractive stocks and displays."<sup>148</sup> In another instance, he writes that stores should switch to self-service because "65-85%" of women prefer those establishments. He also argues that meal planning so much effort that women prefer to shop in "pleasant harmonious" spaces where they can make selections easily.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Dipman, Mueller, and Head, *Self-Service Food Stores*, 13.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 6.





Figure 3.12: In *Voluntary Chain Stores*, Craig Davidson writes about store layouts and includes this picture and captions it, “the best place for merchandise is on the shelf at eye-level of the average woman customer.”<sup>150</sup> Davidson refers to customers as women throughout his book, and this image exemplifies the grocery industry’s pattern of catering to female customers.

Zimmerman continues this assumption and argues in his 1937 book that customers – by definition, women – did not find legal battles between supermarkets and other food distributors interesting. Here, Zimmerman referred to lawsuits against chain stores from independent stores and local governments.<sup>151</sup> But according to him, reading about these issues simply “convinced her [the housewife] more than ever that Big Bear was the place where she could get more for her money.”<sup>152</sup> Zimmerman employs stereotype that women do not engage in political or intellectual

<sup>150</sup> Davidson, *Voluntary Chain Stores*, 89.

<sup>151</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 108.

<sup>152</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, 23.

discussions and only concern themselves with everyday matters to argue that supermarkets will succeed. By making these generalizations, he assumes that women think and act en masse. In another instance, Craig Davidson, who wrote about food retail for store owners in the 1930s, refers to customers consistently as women and with female pronouns as shown in Figure 3.12.<sup>153</sup> Similarly to Dipman, he writes that consumers prefer certain advertising setups: "...an open display of groceries so attracts a woman shopper that she almost automatically buys more than she would order over the 'phone or across the counter."<sup>154</sup> Both Dipman and Davidson advocate for self-service because of shoppers' gender. Perhaps they find this aspect of marketing predictable and stable in a time of drastic changes.

Stores also modernized to specifically attract women customers. Davidson postulates that women want change: "She changes her coffee; she changes the location of her waist line; she changes the position of the furniture in her home, simply because of this desire to be modern and free from monotony."<sup>155</sup> He even warns that if retailers do not modernize, they will grow obsolete. Despite Davidson's deeply sexist remarks, he also implies that women want more freedom. And, in fact, Tracy Deutsch argues that supermarkets and self-service actually did grant women much more freedom. Instead of clerks serving the shoppers, women could serve themselves, which meant they gained more opportunities for choice. Deutsch posits that this even contributed to supermarkets' rise in popularity.

However, women only had these opportunities because they could not enter the workforce. Often, the changing food retail structure meant that women had to take more

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<sup>153</sup> Zimmerman, *Supermarket: Spectacular Exponent of Mass Distribution*, 16; Davidson, *Voluntary Chain Stores and How to Run Them*, 1.

<sup>154</sup> Davidson, *Voluntary Chain Stores*, 85.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

responsibility as well. They needed to transport their items home on their own, given the decline of home delivery service.<sup>156</sup> As such, the supermarket continued enforcing the role of women as caretakers and shoppers and prevented them from occupying other roles.

It is essential to note that only men, such as Dipman, Davidson, and Zimmerman, wrote about supermarket customers and the industry during the 1930s.<sup>157</sup> Supermarket owners and managers were also overwhelmingly, if not entirely, men. These men made all the design choices for their female shoppers. With this dynamic, the supermarket business reinforced power roles between men and women. In this way as well, even as the industry experienced rapid and significant changes, stores assumed their customer base of women remained the same.

And yet, the only women who could afford to shop at supermarkets were women with financial security. Because supermarkets existed in suburban locations, they required shoppers to own or have access to a car. Cars did become more affordable by the mid- and late 1930s, but customers still needed some level of wealth to own them. According to Figure 3.13, cars in the late 1930s cost between \$1500 and \$2000. Meanwhile, the median income in 1940 was \$956.<sup>158</sup> Thus, many Americans could not afford automobiles. In general, suburbia also connoted wealth because people had to be able to afford to purchase houses instead of renting city apartments.

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<sup>156</sup> As discussed earlier, automobiles became essential to transporting items from supermarkets to homes. However, men traditionally drove cars, so even though women held the role of shopper that sometimes gave them more independence, they remained reliant on men for transportation. Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 44.

<sup>157</sup> If women did write about food retail, their materials have not been preserved or widely used by scholar.

<sup>158</sup> Weeks Linton, "The 1940 Census: 72-Year-Old Secrets Revealed," National Public Radio, April 2, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/04/02/149575704/the-1940-census-72-year-old-secrets-revealed>.

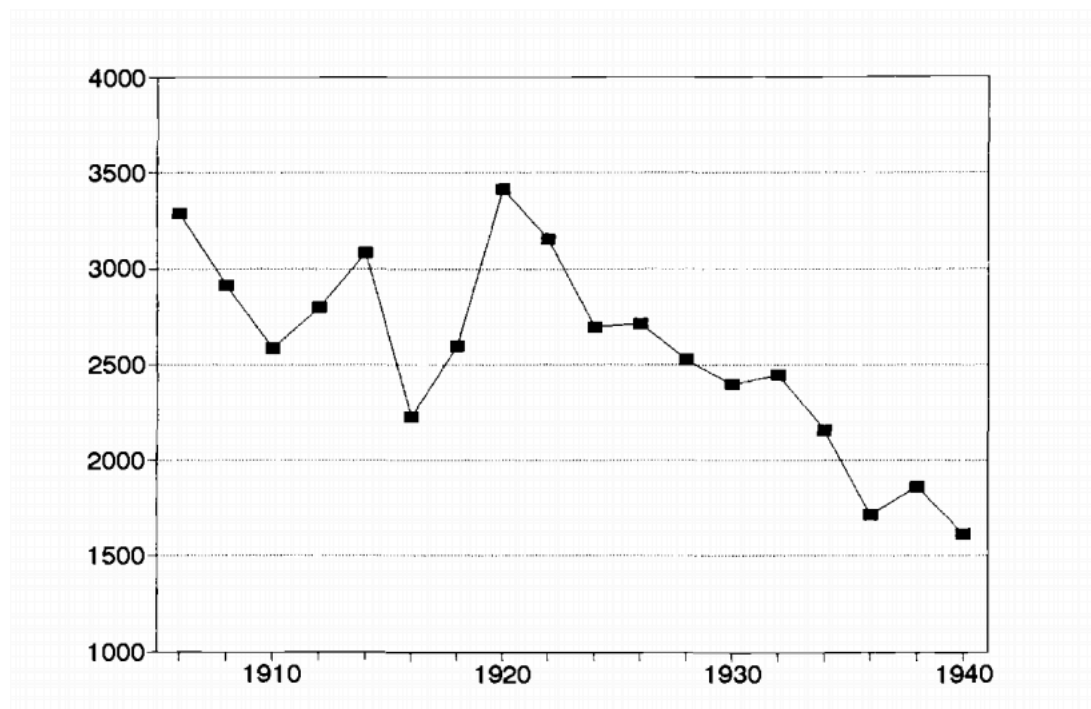


Figure 3.13: This graph shows how automobile prices fell during the first half of the twentieth century. The significant decline in the 1930s made cars more affordable, but even at their lowest price of over \$1500, they were still an expensive investment.<sup>159</sup>

The rise of refrigeration furthered this socioeconomic inequality. Refrigerators became essential to supermarkets in the 1940s because stores sold more goods in refrigeration.<sup>160</sup> Frozen foods became popular during World War II as a method of food preservation, but they entered food retail in America as well. Zimmerman even argues that supermarkets could not have existed without refrigeration in stores.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, refrigerated cases did enable self-service to conquer every department, even meat and dairy. These departments previously retained counter-service systems, while other sections transitioned to self-service. Mass refrigeration also highlighted supermarkets' modernity. Even today, human-made cooling devices such as air conditioning,

<sup>159</sup> Weeks Linton, "The 1940 Census: 72-Year-Old Secrets Revealed."

<sup>160</sup> Davidson, *Voluntary Chain Stores*, 86.

<sup>161</sup> Zimmerman, *The Super Market: A Revolution in Distribution*, 155.

freezers, and refrigerators connote industrialized ideals. So, too, refrigerators connoted a sense of wealth, perhaps because of this connection to modernity.<sup>162</sup> In addition, more refrigerated items in supermarkets forced customers to buy refrigerators, which marks another financial expense.<sup>163</sup> This technology created another barrier for families trying to shop at supermarkets: if a home did not have enough refrigeration, people could not buy many items at stores.

In these ways, “The Great Price Wrecker” and its fellow stores fit into American structural systems of inequality. Although supermarkets were a new method of food retail distribution in the 1930s, they quickly began to affect America’s social fabric. The self-service revolution discussed in chapter one, which transferred labor to customers, also helped create this system of food distribution that restricted access to classes that held more economic privilege. Through their packaging, locations, spatial design, and the products they sold, supermarkets enforced and maintained existing gender roles and class differences. Many historians have interpreted supermarkets’ trend of advertising low prices during the Great Depression to signify increased access to food. However, supermarkets actually created and perpetuated inaccessibility and inequality.

## **Conclusion**

With changes in external structure, internal design, and marketing displays, the supermarket launched aggressively into the food retail landscape alongside suburbia’s rise. While it took decades to develop the mechanisms and business practices that make supermarkets possible, it only took five years to change consumer behavior. Indeed, “cheapies” quickly transitioned from a warehouse model to a “modern” polished store inside and out. The

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<sup>162</sup> Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise*, 50.

<sup>163</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years of Progress*, 10.

confluence of long and short transitions that characterized changing business elements shows how the supermarket's success in the 1930s depended on a combination of factors. The increasing population of suburbs and growing automobile sector were some of these key components. However, the transition to supermarkets had its losses because early supermarkets perpetuated socioeconomic inequality and restrictive gender roles for women. Still, supermarkets ultimately became the modern method of American food retail.

**Conclusion:**  
***The post-Depression Supermarket***

This thesis focuses on the birth and development of the American supermarket during the 1930s. The business changes that developed throughout the early twentieth century, including self-service, cash-and-carry, parking lots, shopping carts, and one-stop shopping, all characterize the initial supermarkets. Simultaneously, the Great Depression accelerated the supermarket's development. The economic need during this time drove people to alter their consumption habits.<sup>164</sup> Supermarkets themselves recognized this shift and consistently advertised their low prices. In addition, supermarkets began as suburban stores and succeeded in these environments. The change in location also enabled stores to open in larger locations, which led to different external structures, internal layouts, and different display designs.

The 1930s witnessed some effects of this transition to supermarkets. Companies, advertisements, and industry writers all consistently referred to shoppers as women and housewives – a trend impossible to miss, reinforcing gender roles that limited women's opportunities outside the home.<sup>165</sup> Early supermarkets also depended on consumers living in houses, and owning cars and expensive appliances like refrigerators. Without these assets, shoppers could not access supermarkets, which enabled socioeconomic stratification in food retail.

Further, instead of supermarkets as a postwar phenomenon, placing them when they actually started during the Depression changes broader conceptions of this period. Rather than halting economic development, the Great Depression brought significant economic changes.

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<sup>164</sup> James M. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 146.

<sup>165</sup> Dipman, *Modern Food Stores*, 5.

Supermarkets started and grew exponentially during the Depression's throes, as did suburbanization and the automobile industry. These trends emphasize that the Depression created an environment for businesses to restructure.

After the establishment of supermarkets in the 1930s, they dominated American food retail in the postwar period and the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1950, supermarkets held 35 percent of food sales and that increased to 70 percent by 1960.<sup>166</sup> Although early supermarkets relied mostly on self-service, they often had some counter service departments, particularly for meat and dairy. By the 1950s, over half of all stores had completely transitioned to self-service sections.<sup>167</sup> Similarly, household appliances like refrigerators, that started to become popular in the 1930s became pervasive and more affordable. In the 1950s, many suburban families invested in newly affordable technologies such as electric mixers and refrigerators because of the new products available to them in supermarkets. Indeed, refrigerator sales increased by 82 percent between 1946 and 1955.<sup>168</sup> At the same time, shopping centers and malls became an essential part of suburban culture, a trend into which supermarkets fit neatly. In these years of prosperity, abundance, and new technologies, supermarkets became ubiquitous in America.

Today, most Americans depend on supermarkets to buy their groceries. Supermarkets today also contribute to a number of health and environmental issues.<sup>169</sup> For one, stores create and encourage a culture of waste.<sup>170</sup> The system of purchasing food at supermarkets requires and

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<sup>166</sup> McAusland, *Supermarkets 50 Years*, 59.

<sup>167</sup> Mayo, *The American Grocery Store*, 177.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>169</sup> David Burch, Jane Dixon, and Geoffrey Lawrence, "Introduction to Symposium on the Changing Role of Supermarkets in Global Supply Chains: From Seedling to Supermarket: Agri-Food Supply Chains in Transition," *Agriculture and Human Values* 30, no. 2 (June 2013):216.

<sup>170</sup> Katharina Scholz, Mattias Eriksson, and Ingrid Strid, "Carbon Footprint of Supermarket Food Waste," *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 94 (January 2015): 57.



encourages consumption of packaging and paper and plastic bags. The structure of supermarkets encourages people to purchase packaged foods because those companies pay supermarkets for better shelf locations and displays in supermarkets today.<sup>171</sup> This practice stems from emerging customs of store layout and design in the 1930s.<sup>172</sup> Just like in the 1930s, supermarkets aim to achieve the highest revenue from the least labor and advertising via packaging aids that. In terms of health consequences, packaged food as well as other technological advances led to the rise of processed foods. Today, ultra-processed foods, such as French fries, ice cream, candy, and soda, contribute to America's obesity epidemic.<sup>173</sup>

Supermarkets' role in creating and perpetuating inequality began in the thirties and persists in modern times as well. Supermarkets primarily exist in wealthier and white neighborhoods. Low income communities and communities of color often lack supermarkets or other forms of food retail and scholars therefore term these neighborhoods "food deserts".<sup>174</sup> Because of America's dependence on the supermarket as a method of food distribution, scholars and policy-makers often assume adding supermarkets is the solution to food deserts. But adding supermarkets to food deserts just supports an institution that creates environmental and public health issues. Inserting a supermarket disrupts a community and shows little evidence of success

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<sup>171</sup> The U.S. government also subsidizes farmers growing crops often used in ultra-processed foods, such as corn, soy, and wheat. This provides incentives for more of these crops, while withholding any incentives for farmers growing vegetables. The Farm Bill, America's omnibus agriculture legislation, terms vegetables as "specialty crops" and designates around 20 billion dollars in subsidies to those farmers, while consistently granting over 100 billion dollars to non-specialty crops like corn and soy. "Federal Crop Insurance: Speciality Crops" (Congressional Report Service, January 14, 2019), <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45459.html>.

<sup>172</sup> S. F. Hamilton, "Slotting Allowances as a Facilitating Practice by Food Processors in Wholesale Grocery Markets: Profitability and Welfare Effects," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 85, no. 4 (November 1, 2003): 797.

<sup>173</sup> Renee E. Walker, Christopher R. Keane, and Jessica G. Burke, "Disparities and Access to Healthy Food in the United States: A Review of Food Deserts Literature," *Health & Place* 16, no. 5 (September 2010): 877.

<sup>174</sup> Walker, Keane, and Burke, "Disparities and Access to Healthy Food in the United States," 876.

in eliminating food deserts.<sup>175</sup> Instead, Americans should advocate and encourage different food distribution methods like farmers' markets, community supported agriculture programs, and independent grocers. Basing solutions on communities' needs can actually address and solve food insecurity. To fix these issues, America needs fundamental changes in food production, processing, and retail. Otherwise, Cullen's advertising slogan will prove more prescient than he intended, and supermarkets will wreck more than prices.

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<sup>175</sup> Amy Roost, "The Role of Ethnic Markets in Addressing Food Access," *The Fifty One*, n.d., <https://www.damemagazine.com/2018/09/12/the-role-of-ethnic-markets-in-addressing-food-access/>.

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