HIGH-LOW FOODS

In 1968 and 1969 -- during my junior and senior years in high school -- I worked as a stock clerk and grocery bagger at High-Low Foods ("High Quality, Low Prices"), a Chicago-based supermarket chain owned by the Roney family. My job was at the 71st and Paxton store, about twenty blocks from my house on 81st and Muskegon. I would usually ride my bicycle there and back, or catch a car ride with one of my co-workers, or take the Illinois Central commuter train from the 83rd Street station to the 71st Street Station and walk a few blocks.

Working with me were several friends from high school, most notably Don Dobie and Chuck Koney. We were required to join a worker's union, and our starting pay was $1.25/hr. I recall getting regular pay raises, but for amounts such as 12 and a half cents/hr. I believe I made $2.50/hr. after my two years there, which was a lot of money for a teenager in those days. We got paid every Friday night with cash (currency and coins) in a narrow brown paper envelope, and signed that we received it.

The store manager was Pat Kelly, a diminutive Irishman with jug ears and thinning, oiled hair. He was a somewhat nervous type, and chain-smoked. He used to regularly send me across the street to a restaurant to get him "a large Boston coffee," which was just another term for coffee with lots of cream and sugar. He was a good manager to his employees, and he was one of the best bosses I would ever have. He had a friendly manner and a good sense of humor. We worked hard for him, and trusted his judgment. We secretly referred to him as The Leprechaun behind his back, but in a nice way. The only times he would get frazzled was when the Roney family would come by for an annual inspection (just the widow and her son, because the founder had passed away), and everything had to be perfect! He was so relieved when his store passed muster and they left. I also remember that the Roneys had their own ice cream store brand, which was both tasty and cheap.

Our assistant store manager was named George. He was tall and thin, with black hair and large, black-framed eyeglasses. He was more strict than Pat, but fair and understanding most of the time. He used to say, if we made a mistake which frustrated him, "You boys are giving me gray hairs on my balls!" But we were loyal to George too.

The produce manager was a short Greek man who naturally everyone called "The Greek." He was kind of a jerk to work for, hence he was not very popular with the employees, especially the dozen or so women cashiers. The only time we liked him was if he sliced open free watermelons for us on hot days working in the back room unloading the regular fruit and vegetable trucks.

Speaking of freebies, the butchers would give us free lunch meat on the sly, and the daily bread delivery man would give us a free loaf of bread (popping a hole with his finger through the plastic wrapper, saying, "Oops, looks like this one got damaged in shipment...we can't sell it, and I would just have to throw it away...so do you boys want it?) -- hence we could make sandwiches. Same with the daily milk delivery man, who would 'damage' a gallon of milk, or a quart of eggnog during the holidays, or a carton of chocolate milk and then give it to us with a wink. As payback for their generosities, we boys would work hard and help them out if they needed loading and unloading their wares. We also put quart bottles of soda pop from the store shelves into freezers to get them cold fast -- but you had to remember to retrieve them before the pop froze and the glass burst!

As growing teen-aged boys, we were always hungry and thirsty. We worked very hard. Sometimes, I would even work a 40-hour week while still attending school. The typical schedule was: Fridays, 5-midnight; Saturdays, 8 a.m.-10 p.m.; Sundays, noon-6; and some weekdays 5-10. On Friday nights after work, my friends and I would be starving, so we would head over to White Castle on 79th and Essex for their 12-cent hamburgers, nicknamed 'sliders.' With an occasional newspaper coupon good for "10 sliders for a dollar", each guy could and would eat all ten! When the first McDonald's opened a few blocks down on 79th and Philips, we would alternatively show up there just as they were closing for the night. They were required by law to throw any unused food items away, so we asked for it before it went into the dumpster. They gave us bags full of hamburgers, french fries, cheeseburgers and milkshakes for free! We would gorge ourselves, go home and sleep for a few hours, and then return again for work on Saturday mornings by 8 a.m.

We always wore a clean white shirt at High-Low, and put on a fresh white apron which tied at the waist and went around the neck as it covered one's chest. Of course, by the end of the shift, we were usually covered with grime, sweat, and blue stamping ink. In those days before bar codes and computers, every item sold had to be hand stamped with its price. The stampers had an ink pad which you needed to keep regularly inked, and moveable rubber number wheels that could set the price. We boys carried our stampers in our back hip pockets, like a gun in a holster. We had races to see who was the fastest! Boxes of stock were stacked in each aisle (usually when the customers were gone for the day and the store was closed), and we would use razorblade box cutters to open them. 12 or 24 or 36 items to a box or package -- each was stamped and put on the shelf. At the very end of the day before we left, each aisle had to be 'leveled', which meant all stock was arranged to the front of its shelf so as to attractively appear flush and full. Any perishable stock with expiration dates had to be 'rotated', so that the older items were put in front for the shopper grab first, while the fresher, newer items were put towards the back of the shelf. Our other main job was bagging groceries in the checkout lanes, usually on our busiest day, Saturday. It was back-breaking work, standing and bending and bagging a seemingly endless avalanche of food items from hundreds of customers. You quickly learned to put eggs and bread and other crushables at the top of the large brown grocery bags, never on the bottom! You would always offer to help the customer take their purchases out to their car in the parking lots. Sometimes, you even got a quarter tip.

High-Low had a feature called the 'dime rack' or the ten-cent rack. Everything there cost just a dime. Located in the front of the store opposite the checkout lanes, it consisted of over 100 metal bins loaded with items such as Hi-C fruit-flavored drinks, Jiffy Corn Muffin Mix, Contadina Tomato Paste, Libby's canned vegetables, Wyler's Lemonade Mix, and Libby's Vienna canned tiny sausages. Because the checker-cashier women knew these familiar items, we stock boys didn't need to stamp each one as ten cents. We just easily dumped new stock into the bins right out of their larger packaging, saving us both time and effort. 'Potted meat,' as the tiny Vienna sausages were dubbed by the local neighborhood customers, was always a big seller.

One annual chore was to do a complete store inventory, with every single item tallied. We had extra High-Low employees come for the day to help us, and we used clipboards and hand-calculators to total everything up.

Once a week, we had a huge delivery truck bring 'the load,' which was a shipment of all the non-perishable canned foods and other items, such as paper products. Often the load would be huge, sometimes hundreds of boxes, crates, and other packages. We would set up huge metal roller tracks, then unload and stack the delivery in the store's large back storage room. I recall once on a blazing summer day unloading an entire truck dressed only in my underwear briefs, work boots, and apron. The truck interior was like a furnace! I kept drinking water and ice-cold soda pop while dripping sweat as if I was in a sauna. It was rough, but you could say it really toughened me up. I did it without quitting or complaining.

I only got hurt once on the job in the two years I was there. I was working in one aisle, crouching and looking down, when a co-worker unexpectedly yelled, "Hey, catch!"and tossed a can over from the adjacent aisle. Well I looked up just as the can hit me in the head. It split my scalp and my head began bleeding profusely. George and the other boys heard my cry of pain and surprise and came running. I was quickly driven to the ER at nearby South Shore hospital and received some badly needed stitches. I was OK, but the boy who tossed the can so casually at me without thinking was very, very apologetic. I forgave him and we put the matter behind us.

On a lighter note, I recall trying to grow a man's moustache with downy, emerging hairs on my upper lip. Because I wanted it thick and dark quickly, I actually took a charcoal briquette and darkened my upper lip with it and went to work! When manager Pat saw me, he smiled and tactfully pointed to my lip 'enhancement' and said under his breath, "Nice moustache. Did you get a little dirt on it?" I must have resembled Groucho Marx and his trademark facial greasepaint. I quickly washed off the charcoal in the staff men's room, and the somewhat embarrassing event was never mentioned again.

Now, one needs to know that Chicago was a racially polarized city at that time, as it still is today. North of 71st Street had a large Black population, slowly displacing its former largely Jewish neighborhoods, which was still centered around 75th Street. Blacks were frankly not welcomed south of 79th Street. Hence, our High-Low customers were a mixture of mostly Blacks and Jews. My area around 81st Street was mostly Polish and Irish, with some Mexicans slowly coming in further south. My parents and neighbors had many crude slang terms in those days for the different ethnic and racial groups. Irish were called Micks, Poles were called Dumb Pollocks. Mexicans were called Spics or Greasers. Jews were called Yids, Kikes, or Sheenies. But the worst slurs were reserved for the Blacks, who were called niggers, spades, spooks, jigaboos, or sambos. I never had any actual interactions with Black people at this point in my life. All I knew was what my neighborhood said: Blacks were dangerous, lazy, stupid, and nothing but trouble. In my Catholic high school, for example, there was just one Black student. And he was quiet and a nice person and kept to himself, to nobody's surprise. Wouldn't you, in his place?

Well, one day, our High-Low store hired its first five Black teen-aged stock clerks. The whites like myself were cautious and suspicious. How was this integration going to work out?

Surprisingly, fear and hesitation quickly dissolved into camaraderie. My friends and I discovered that skin color was no big deal. Our new Black coworkers did just as good of a job as us. We found out in conversation that we liked the same things as all teen-aged boys: girls, sports, cars, parties, popular (especially Motown) music. We bitched about school work and our parents. We worried about being accepted in our peer group, and what we would do with our lives as adults. We debated whether to go to college or wait to be drafted and possibly be sent to Vietnam.

When civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968, Chicago and other major U.S. cities erupted into Black racial rioting, arson, and looting. The following night, a Friday, I rode my bicycle alone to work at High-Low Foods. Everyone was talking about the tragedy, and what it meant for both races being able to survive together in the future.

When we got out around midnight, we heard police sirens and heard small explosions -- possibly gunshots -- and smelled smoke from burning buildings to the north. My Black co-workers, seeing that I was attempting to bike home alone through this dangerous situation, actually walked me several blocks for my safety and told me which street areas to avoid that night. I made it home without incident, and will never forget their help and concern during that frightening time.

High-Low Foods, with all its 56 stores, went out of business in 1976. Mrs. Roney died in 1978 at the age of 89.

I will always remember working there, and I now realize too the many important life lessons I learned there as a young man...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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