My name is William and I live in Califon, which is located in Hunterdon County, New Jersey. I was not born here, but my family has been living here for as long as I can remember. I have grown very fond of this sleepy little town. I love the river running through it, and the Island Park where the kids can safely play.

The history of Califon, which was originally called “California”, goes back to the time of the American Revolution. In 1760 one of the oldest houses was built by Mr. Sutton. Califon Historical Society’s brochure states that the house was actually built by Mr. Sutton’s father-in-law who later gave it to his daughter and her husband. I pass by this house on my way to and from school every day. It is standing on a small hill overlooking the river. I cannot even imagine that there were not other buildings in sight. But the houses did not stay alone for too long. Other buildings began to grow and the town was spreading out. Nowadays, the names of early prominent families like “Apgar”, “Beaty”, “Neigbor”, “Tiger” … are carved on wooden plaques that are placed on numerous houses to remind us of the history.

It is difficult for me to choose the most historic place. Having read so much about Califon by now, I feel there is an interesting piece of history behind every building. I do not want to do injustice to any of them. That is why I decided to tell you about my favorite historical place.

It is located on the intersection of Main Street and Philhower Avenue. At that time Philhower Avenue was called Frog Hollow. It is actually the street I live on.

Yes, I am talking about the former Califon Leading Store. It was built sometime around 1850 and was operated by Mr. Peter Philhower for almost 40 years. Then his only son, William, took over. William died young of a heart attack in 1935. The store changed hands again. William’s widowed wife, Mamie Philhower, had the courage to carry the business until it became too much for her to handle. Just when Europe was being thrown into the Second World War, she closed the doors forever. It has been deserted ever since.
The house looks very ordinary. Brown paint is chipping off, but I assume it must have been repainted several times. The oversized windows freeze over during the winter months. In the summer they get so dirty, you can hardly see inside, but I do like to come on the porch and peek through the glass. I can see the counters left as they were, the shelves on both sides. Some are still filled with jars and merchandise. I feel like a trespasser, kind of guilty but also kind of anxious to find out what was it like to live back then.

Could the house tell me? My Grandfather used to say, “All houses can tell stories, you just have to learn to listen to them.”

So I listen. I close my eyes while I stand on the rusty porch, leaning against the railing. What do I hear? What do I see?

I see a dirt road. It is almost springtime. Some snow is still on the ground. The roads are muddy due to freezing and thawing. Under the still-winter trees there are children. Girls in bonnets tied on with shawls, boys in square little lamb’s wool caps with attached earmuffs. The girls have shaggy fur coats. They are running and falling in the snow. Soon they will be able to bring out their dollies with china heads and painted hair made from rags. But the girls are gone now. They had to rush home to do some small tasks around the house.

Mr. Philhower’s Leading Store is not very big, but it is thriving. It makes me feel great to see that he is doing so well. He is not in the business of selling dry goods and general merchandise alone. There are three other stores in the area that carry about the same assortment as Mr. Philhower. Which means shoes, men’s and boys’ hats, threads, needles, yarn, cans, cigars, and tobacco. Now that I am standing here, I have to admit that Mr. Philhower chose a very convenient location for his store. He has a very nice view of the neighborhood and his competitors, Mr. George W. Beaty and Mr. J. Beavers.

I turn around, still daydreaming. The Main Street hill seems so much steeper. Mr. Philhower, who opened promptly at 6 a.m., is standing behind the large window. He is a short, heavyset man, always wearing a white apron and stiff collar around his neck. He is rubbing a small stain off his shirt.

The butcher wagon of Joe Pill is having some kind of trouble with one of the steel wheels. It gets stuck in front of the store. Peter waves friendly at Joe, pointing towards
the blacksmith shop next door. He mimics something again, but Joe cannot hear him.

Mr. Philhower just throws his hand back and returns behind the counter.

Right now there are two customers inside. One of them is a woman. The other is just a child who came to buy some knitting needles for his mama. The young lady is about 30 years old. She is looking at the rings and necklaces on a display. She is a newcomer. She must either be visiting or going through town. She is definitely of higher class. Her hair is wound into a soft coil piled on her head and she wears a marvelous dress of purple velvet. The skirt is gathered up at the front in a series of scallops. She sure is pleasing to the eye.

Mr. Philhower glances at her several times. It does cross his mind that she could be staying at the Union Hotel situated at the fork of the two roads leading into town (where the town triangle is now located). If that is so, he sure took a customer away from G.W. Beaty since the hotel is almost across from Beaty’s store.

Look who is coming over now to do some “bartering”? Ben Cole, the owner of two mills in town. Good for Ben, who could purchase the mill built by Jacob Neigbor. Too bad for Jacob, such a legend in town, and he goes bankrupt. Ben is a regular who always brings a couple of bags of flour to “barter”.

What did it mean to barter?

It meant to exchange something for something else of the same value. But lately Peter Philhower has been writing him a credit slip since Ben secretly told him he wanted to buy one of those nice felt hats for his wife. A hat that was lying flat in a shallow box in the corner of the store. Nice, velvety green color. Mrs. Ben Cole will sure be surprised. “It is starting to snow out there,” Ben says. “It sure got cold over the last hour.”

“I would not know, Ben I would not know,” Mr. Philhower replies. “Nice and warm here, don’t you say?”

Ben cups his hands and breathes warm air into them. “Right. Peter. Cozy here, cold outside. Looks like we will not put the snow shovels away yet.”

There is a smile on Peter’s face. Perhaps a happy grin. “Good,” he thinks, “we will reduce the prices of the shovels so that G.W. Beaty cannot get us.” He does not know that the whole town will be remembering the story of a friendly competition that
ended with a sign in Peter’s window: “Twenty five cents paid to anyone who will take home a shovel.”

Oh, what a businessman Peter was! Funny, friendly, nice and hardworking. From 6 a.m. to 10 a.m., almost everyday. Never sick, never complaining.

The house chattering is turning into a whisper. Everything around is getting foggy. It feels like I am traveling through time much faster than I would like to. I see William Philhower and the beautiful ad which ran in the Methodist Church fair souvenir bulletin. I myself like it so much that I will give you the pleasure of reading it, too. It said:

“We may not have the biggest store on earth, but write it down, in bargains we will give you more than any store in town.

Our stock is fine and large and new in every line complete.

It is just the stock, my friend, if you want goods that “can’t be beat.”

Doesn’t this ad just say it all?

I see the store weeping when Mamie Philhower decides to close it down. It will never open for customers again. It will have two apartments in the back, but the front part will always stay gray and lonely.

The house is silent now. My visit comes to an end. The children are gone; the lady pushing a baby carriage with tall wooden-spoke wheels is gone too. Peter is resting in the cemetery just like his son William. I press my nose against the glass. I do wish I could come in and breathe the smell of the old days. I wish I could touch the shelves and lean over the counter and buy a can of homemade jelly.

But I am back in 2005. Califon is more than a hundred years older. I look around. Cars and trucks and regular traffic jam around lumber store. The cracked shop window of an empty Califon Leading Store is behind me.
I have to go home now. I have homework to do. I think I just got an idea for my historical essay. I will put down in words what the house has shown me in its mysterious ways.

So I rush. Before, walking Philhower Avenue meant very little but now it is exciting. I pass the “blacksmith” shop, and the house where the first telephone exchange was installed in 1903. Maybe next time, I will listen to its story. As I have said before, every house has a story to tell. You just have to know how to listen.

Literature

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