Lost tradition of grocery shopping

In an extract from her memoir, *My Ireland*, **Margaret O'Connor** recalls grocery shopping in the post-war years

My earliest recollection of grocery shopping dates back to the post-war years when rationing was in effect. Introduced by the Irish government under the Emergency Powers Act, the rationing of food, clothes and petrol was enacted. This was followed by restrictions on shoes, soap and tobacco among other goods. To administer the process, ration books were issued to each family member with rules for tracking product sales, dates and place of purchase.

I recall the image of my little ration book as I watched the shopkeeper, Mr McNamara, stamp it on his countertop. Mam had established his shop for her grocery needs at that time. Among the food items rationed on her list were tea, sugar, butter and flour. As substitutes for tea and butter, Mam bought bottles of Irel coffee for a hot beverage and tins of Lyles golden syrup and treacle as a spread for our bread. I clearly remember the branding and packaging of those products and continue to associate them with rationing.

Despite the restrictions, farming families around home considered themselves fortunate, since they could cultivate food on their lands. Mam continued to maintain her poultry and vegetable farms in those years, selling excess eggs and fowl to offset her grocery bill. However, the country man was at a loss without tobacco to fill his pipe and roll his cigarettes. As a poor substitute, he might try a puff or a pull on some dried leaves or even on a piece of turf.

BORROWING FROM NEIGHBOURS

In those days, shops in Ireland could only be found in towns and cities. They were mainly family-run small businesses, except for the Lipton chain that had stores across the country, specialising in high-end groceries. With limited access to shops, it was necessary for country folk to stock up on groceries in their homes. Should they run low, the custom of borrowing from neighbours was typical. This was especially true as unexpected visitors showed up, and it was customary to serve food to all guests.

Sneaking out through their back entrance, the neighbour went next door to borrow extra rations or foods that could be spared for the occasion. For such needs in my home, Mam had an established relationship with the Ruddy family that lived across the road from us. In particular, I recall going back and forth between our two houses with cups filled with sugar and tea and other borrowed essentials. This custom of neighbourhood borrowing also extended to other household items needed at a given time, such as tools or even bicycles. All were returned and replenished in good faith and order.

Alternatively, Mam might send me off on her bike to Ballina for a rushed order. As the messenger, I went to our customary shop, where the order was fulfilled and lodged for later settlement, allowing me to return home expeditiously with the goods. Sadly, both the family-run business and the Lipton chain are now history. They have been forced out of business, unable to compete with the supermarket chains.

HIGHLIGHT OF THE WEEK

For most rural women, grocery shopping in town was the highlight of their week. On such occasions, they dressed in their finest outfits complete with hat, gloves and high-heeled shoes. In the shop, they met up with friends and relatives. It was there where Mam frequently socialised with her relatives and friends while the shopkeeper, Myra O'Hora, compiled their grocery orders.

This approach to grocery shopping remained in effect in my Ireland. Meeting up with friends, chatting with the shopkeeper, sharing a drink in the snug or a cup of tea in the back kitchen of the shop are no longer the norm. The large, self-service market along with the automobile in the parking lot, allow for greater efficiencies, thus ushering Ireland into the modern age. CL