

John W. Ayers

The Mayor of Westover

BY WILLARD WEBB

Nearly everyone in Arlington is familiar with Ayers Hardware and Variety Store in Westover. It is a marvelous place where you can find almost anything you need. You can buy two screws rather than a prepackaged box of 25, leaving you with 23 screws that you can't use and will never need. You can find small trash bags that the supermarkets no longer carry. The knowledgeable staff know their stock, can answer your questions, and advise you on solving your particular problem.

John Wesley Ayers opened his Westover store in 1948 and operated it until his death in 1976. He quickly became active and involved in the affairs of the neighborhood. He distributed candy to the nearby public and parochial elementary schools just before Halloween, Christmas and Easter, becoming known to Arlington school children as "the Candy Man." But his involvement went beyond the distribution of candy. He supported the Reed School PTA, the local Boy Scout troop, the Westover Baptist Church, and Salvation Army fund drives. He served as president of the Westover Businessmen's Association and was named "Retailer of the Year" by the Virginia Retail Merchant Association in 1965. Along the way he acquired the nickname of the "Mayor" of Westover.

John Ayers' family lived in Marietta, Georgia, where he was born in 1902, one of thirteen children of the Baptist minister. He went into merchandizing and retailing at an early age. At seventeen, he became a stock clerk with F.W. Woolworth Company in Atlanta. He advanced rapidly and in 1924 he was chosen to manage a Woolworth store in Richmond. He became acquainted with Arlington when he managed the Woolworth store in nearby Alexandria during the 1930s. He left merchandizing in 1942 to join the Army. Commissioned an officer, he served in Hawaii and saw action in Okinawa. He remained in the reserves after the war and retired with the rank of major in 1953. Following the war, he took a managerial position with Woolworth's in Reading, Pennsylvania. Then he opened his own Westover store on Washington Boulevard in 1948.

Ayers never married and so had no family. Instead he adopted the community as his family. Not only did he give candy to the schools on holidays, but he was always available to assist the PTA of nearby Reed School when it needed help. He belonged to and supported all the local organizations, including the Kiwanis Club, the Westover Businessmen's Association, the American Legion, the Masonic temple, and the Westover Baptist Church. He actively

supported the Arlington Boy Scouts and helped to organize nine troops in the County. He chaired fund drives for both the March of Dimes and the Heart Fund, as well as a building fund campaign for the Salvation Army. He gave substantial donations to the Arlington Police School Patrol Camp and for the mentally handicapped in Arlington. He organized street dances on Washington Boulevard for “Westover Days” in July and at Halloween. He lobbied for sidewalks, street lights, and other improvements for Westover.



Courtesy Ayers Hardware and Variety Store
John Ayers giving lollipops to the children, 1972.

Ayers was also concerned with and interested in people in the community. He started a profit sharing plan for his employees and let them participate in the management of the store. He had a training program for high school students who worked from six to nine on week days and a half-day on Saturday. He was proud that eighty percent of these students went to college. He financed a higher education for “an untold number” of Westover young people. He well deserved the nickname “Mayor” of Westover.

Alva Robey grew up in Arlington and was working temporarily at the market next door to the Ayers’ store in 1961. She wanted a more permanent position and approached Mr. Ayers. He hired her on the spot and wanted her to begin the next day although she did not start until the following Monday. Now retired, Alva continues to work at Ayers on a part-time basis and is the last remaining link between John Ayers and the store.

Alva Robey remembers John Ayers as a kind and generous employer who was always ready to help his employees, as well as anyone in the neighborhood, in times of need. The cigar-smoking Ayers could also be an exacting and severe employer. He wanted things done in a particular way, telling the employees that he needed them to be able to run the store when he was away. Ayers always remained, Alva said, a private man who did not share his personal life with his employees. Ayers was always generous with his workers and, when anyone in the store got married, he had them take two shopping carts around the store and take whatever they needed. Alva especially recalls, when her eleven-year-old son had heart surgery at Children’s Hospital, Mr. Ayers came to see him and brought boxes of valentine candy for the nurses. That was the sort of person he was, she said.

Not all recollections of John Ayers are positive. Alvin Webster Kremer, a lifelong friend of the author, grew up in the nearby Tara neighborhood. He recalls running through the store with a pack of little friends looking for any mischief they could find and being chased out by Mr. Ayers.



Courtesy Alva Robey

Seven employees selected to participate in a profit sharing plan at Ayers' store, 1968.

John Ayers died of a heart attack in his store on the evening of August 30, 1976. Stories circulated that Ayers had left his business to his employees and that he had recently written a will making such a provision. But no such will was found. In fact, no will was found at all. Despite continuing rumors of a will with provision for the employees, John Ayers' estate of \$525,000 went to his next of kin, his four sisters, and the business was sold.

Ronald and Wilma Kaplan purchased the business from the Ayers estate. They have continued the Ayers tradition of service to the neighborhood and stocking the store with a wide variety of hard-to-find items. The Kaplans continue to own and operate the store today.

A plaque mounted on the wall outside the store pays tribute to Ayers. It reads:

**John Ayers
"Mayor" of Westover
1948 to 1976**

In Memory of a Man
whose dedication to Westover's
children was of paramount
importance. He used his
commercial establishment as a
platform for service to his
community. His love and
dedication to Westover will
radiate as long as he is
remembered - - -
and we won't forget.