

This Day in History... September 6, 1916

First Modern Grocery Store

On September 6, 1916, the first self-service grocery store as we know it today opened in Memphis, Tennessee. The store was Piggly Wiggly, and it revolutionized the way people bought groceries.

Before 1916, grocery stores existed, but operated in a very different way. Customers entered the store and gave their grocery list to a clerk. These clerks went to the back room and filled the orders, weighing and packaging items from bulk bins. Running stores in this way was expensive, because they needed a large staff to fulfill all the customer orders.

Clarence Saunders, originally from Amherst County, Virginia, had worked in a grocery store since he was a young man. Having seen first-hand how they operated, he recognized the flaws with the current system and believed he could make it better, and cheaper, for everyone. So, in 1916, he purchased a property at 79 Jefferson Street in Memphis, Tennessee, to put his revolutionary ideas to the test. He redesigned the inside, removing the long counters and replacing them with shelves. Saunders's store, Piggly Wiggly, opened to the public on September 6, 1916.

In advertising the store's opening, Saunders announced he would hold a beauty contest. On opening day, children received flowers and balloons, and every woman that walked through the door received five or ten dollar gold coins. Once inside, a brass band provided entertainment while customers explored the new store. Many customers were initially confused by the new format. They found clerks stocking shelves and tried to give them their shopping lists. But they were politely informed that they could pick out the products for themselves.

Saunders's innovative idea proved popular and by the end of the year, he opened eight more stores around Memphis. As Saunders proclaimed, "One day Memphis shall be proud of Piggly Wiggly... And it shall be said by all men... That the Piggly Wiggly shall multiply and replenish the earth with more and cleaner things to eat."

In 1917, Saunders applied for a patent on his self-serving grocery store idea. It was officially patented in 1921. Piggly Wiggly is credited for many firsts over the years, including the first checkout stands and the first shopping carts. It was

The first Piggly Wiggly's were in Memphis, Tennessee.

also the first to put prices on every item in the store, carry a full line of national brands, keep produce fresh longer with refrigerated cases, and have employees in uniforms to ensure clean, sanitary food handling.

There's always been a bit of mystery surrounding the selection of the name Piggly Wiggly. According to one story, while Saunders was on a train one day, he looked out the window and saw several small pigs wiggling their way under a fence, inspiring the rhyme. And when Saunders was once asked why he chose the name, he replied, "So people will ask that very question."

Saunders franchised his stores and began issuing public stock in the company. Because of this, he lost control of the



Saunders introduced coolers to keep produce fresher longer.



Saunders may have been inspired to name his store after a group of pigs he saw wiggling under a fence.



Saunders's store allowed customers to pick out their own groceries.

17 states, mostly in the Southeast United States. Today, there are over 63,000 grocery stores in the US, including about 21,500 independent stores.

Piggly Wiggly continued to grow and there are now over 530 stores in

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company by the early 1920s. But he continued to work on improving the business, developing concepts he called Keedoozle and Foodelectric, which were fully automated grocery stores that didn't find the success of Piggly Wiggly.

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