

Sittin' and talkin' at Merritt's

It's kind of like a little piece of Fuquay-Varina right in the middle of Chapel Hill.

Now make no mistake about it—E.G. Merritt's Esso Station is a right nice place—but it's just not quite what you would expect to find today in Chapel Hill.

You might have expected to find it in Chapel Hill 30 years ago, or find it right now down on State Road 1473 near Cross Level, but it really doesn't seem like proper company for gleaming hamburger stands, sprawling shopping centers and wandering street vendors.

That's because E.G. Merritt's Esso Station is really just an old country store.

Don't let those three new gas pumps out front fool you—they're just to make the place legitimate. The real fun is all inside where the good old boys from the neighborhood stop in every day to set a while and drink a little beer or maybe have a smoke or two while they talk over things.

"Now Mr. Merritt there, he's a good man. He's my friend," one of the regulars declared stoutly.

"It's always a pleasure to come down and talk with him."

The two other fellas visiting right now nodded they thought so too.

With its white painted bricks and red roof, the outside of Merritt's looks just like the outside of any local gas station, but that inside is a whole different world.

The big pot-bellied stove sits right out in the middle of the room, and the fact that it burns oil now instead of wood really doesn't make things a bit more modern.

A wooden bench stretches along the right side of the room, with an old strip of carpet on it for a cushion, and next to the bench is Mr. Merritt's chair.

Then there is the stove, a rack of AC Oil Filters against the wall and the men's room with a sign on the door asking that you "Flush twice—It's a long way to Washington."

The area in front of the bench is bare of course, so that you can grind out the butts of your unfiltered Pall Malls on the hardwood floor.

Along the length of the left wall runs a tall wooden counter stacked with food and drinks, and it is by checking the brand names that you start to realize the station's true character.

For instance, right recently Mr. Merritt has started stocking a little yogurt in the dairy case in the back, but right up there in the front window where people can get to it real quick he has the Randolph Corn Meal and the Dainty biscuit mix.

A huge box of toothpicks sits behind the counter, and you have your choice of five different brands of chewing tobacco.

The people are friendly in Merritt's, and city folks are plenty welcome, but it's the boys who still have a little country in them that call the place home.

Far more than the merchandise, it is this gang of regulars who stop by to visit that make the place what it is.

A painter working just up the road had stopped by for a beer and a little mid-morning rest. Sitting beside him was "John Robert Harris and I live down the road in Pittsboro and I just thought I'd come by to talk a while."



A couple of other folks were expected shortly, and old American Legionnaire, a retired professor that still has a little hayseed in his heart and a few more who generally drop in around noon.

The head of this whole outfit is Mr. Merritt himself, "E.G. Merritt that is, Eban Gordon."

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Born just south of Chapel Hill, he started the station in 1929 and moved to the present building in January of 1941. For 43 years he has been spending better than 100 hours a week pumping gas, selling groceries and visiting with the guys.

"This place was called Chapel Hill when I started back

in 1929 but now I guess it's Hippy Hill, isn't it?" he chuckled, but there wasn't even a trace of unpleasantness.

"It's a shame you can't know everybody anymore."

The gold fillings on his teeth show through when he smiles, and the red Esso hat bobs on top of his silver head.

Cigarettes and an array of pens fill the pocket of his brown work shirt. The dark blue pants come down just over the top of the black boots and almost completely hide the white socks.

But behind the weathered face is a business mind that would put even the biggest barons of Franklin Street to shame.

Growing a little timber here, raising a little cattle there and running an earth-moving crew over yonder, Mr. E.G. Merritt has done right well for himself.

But the real pleasure comes from sitting around with the boys, doing a little talking, maybe listening to a little baseball on the radio. No sense getting above your raising.

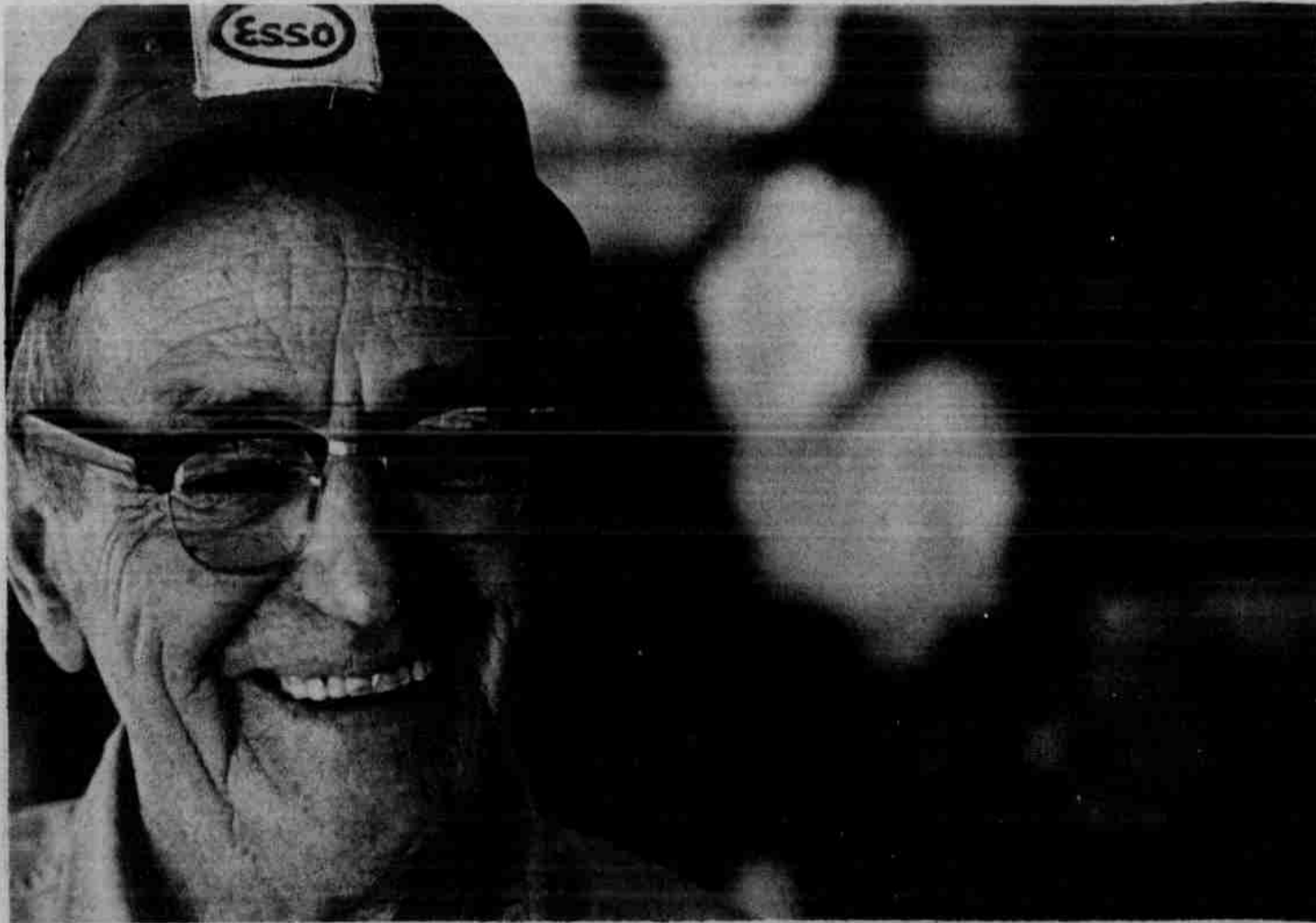
"Yes sir, this is really just an old country store," one of the regulars volunteered after a while.

"All we need now is a cracker barrel."

Nodding his head, Mr. Merritt agreed with his old friend.

"Yep, just an old country store. But if anybody wants crackers, you're gonna have to buy them over on the counter."

And everybody laughed. In 1972, the only thing that's still free is talk, even for the good old boys that come down to the store right regular.



Mr. Merritt enjoys a joke with the boys.



"Yep, 'bout all our hands are good for now is counting money and drinking beer."