

# Palmer's Penny Candies Were Popular

by Valerie Green



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There are still many Saanich old-timers who recall Mrs. Palmer's convenience store which stood at 3970 Braefoot Road. In 1985 when it was set on fire as part of a three-day Saanich Fire Department exercise, a nostalgic 'corner store' came to an end. Since 1946, the store had been run by Mrs. Annie Palmer and was a popular landmark in that neighbourhood, especially with the children from nearby Braefoot School. The store fronted part of the Palmer house, but when their property was sold in 1984, the land was designated by the Palmers as a Saanich park. One year later the house and store disappeared in flames and plans were under way to extend the playing fields at Braefoot Park. Mrs. Palmer died in 1986 happy in the knowledge that although her home was gone, the acreage she and her husband had first purchased back in the 1930s, would become part of Braefoot Park and would be enjoyed by all. The Palmers always wanted their land to be a place where children could forever play. Today Braefoot Park is a living memorial to their wish.

While walking with the two Palmer daughters recently, I discovered that there was far more to the story than simply a corner store being demolished in the name of progress. Their father, Ernest William Palmer, immigrated to Canada from England around 1903 at the age of 18. He worked at many jobs in many places across Canada, including one in Toronto in 30 degrees below temperature.

Around 1905, after he passed through Victoria he dreamed of one day returning and settling here. His wife, Annie Elizabeth Palmer, also had an adventurous life prior to coming to Victoria with her husband in the 1930s. She was, for instance, living in Fernie at the time of the great fire of August 1908 and could recall how most of the townsfolk and their animals had to flee to the river to escape the flames.

In 1934, Ernest Palmer, his son, and a friend came back to Victoria from Calgary where the Palmers were living. They intended to look around the area. While out walking one day, they met Simon Fraser Tolmie (Premier of B.C. from 1928-1933), who offered them a bag of filbert nuts and asked if they would be interested in purchasing some of the land that was part of the Tolmie farm. Palmer agreed to purchase two acres (Lot 14) and two years later, the whole family moved to Victoria. By 1937, the Palmers had built their home on the Braefoot Road land (opposite today's Andrew Street). Ernest and Annie Palmer and their four children (Vera, Dorothy, Alfred and Roy) farmed the land initially as a 'hobby farm' with cows, chickens and rabbits. Ernest Palmer was an experienced 'homesteader' and their home was a happy one, always full of friends. The Palmers held bridge parties and enjoyed sessions around the piano and their house soon became the centre of community life in the area.

Ernest died in 1939 but Annie Palmer carried on as best as she could. During WWII, a section of the farm was planted in bulbs sent out from Holland, so tulips and daffodils became a familiar sight

alongside the Palmer property. Meanwhile, from August 1942 onwards, Annie's home became the center where neighborhood women gathered every Wednesday afternoon to prepare bandages and mend clothing for the Victoria Military Hospital at Mount Tolmie. They also made up the famous "Bundles for Britain," which were sent overseas during the war containing knitted or quilted goods for hospitals and families. Boxes of clothes would be left on Mrs. Palmer's porch and she and her ladies would wash them, sew on buttons where needed and mend them before they were sent on to those in need. Annie Palmer also opened up her house to Navy or Army young men who were away from home and in need of a place to stay.

Some stayed with the Palmers for quite a while, earning their keep by helping Annie and her family around the farm. In 1946, she decided to extend the front section of her house and turn it into a "convenience store." Palmer's Store became a favourite place in the neighbourhood selling all the essential staples as well as the famous 'penny candy' so popular with the local children. Mrs. Palmer would also serve tea in the back of the shop to her friends who sat on overturned apple boxes while they sipped their tea and discussed local affairs.

When the store was finally closed in 1978 after 32 years of service to the community, the children of Braefoot School presented Mrs. Palmer with a special plaque and an ornamental plate showing a scene, entitled "A Home in the Wilderness." Today a solitary bench can be found in Braefoot Park near where the Palmers' home and little store once stood. It was placed by the Palmer daughters in memory of their mother, Annie, and of Vera's daughter who passed away more recently and would have been delighted to know folks could sit and rest there and still enjoy the area. Two other benches were placed on McKenzie Avenue by the Palmers, thanks to the additional generosity of over 200 donations by friends and family in memory for the Palmers.

These benches are a symbol of the generosity of a family who left its mark on the community in many ways, and in particular, of a woman, Annie Palmer, who made it possible for so many children to enjoy sporting events and the many pleasures of Braefoot Park today.



*Braefoot Park*

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*Source: St. Luke's Prescription, Fall 2023*