



LOST IN TIME

By Joe Martelle

They are a piece of history that the winds of modern culture have eroded from the landscape. At one point in time our nation was populated with a mass of corner stores, small “Mom & Pop” operations servicing local neighbourhoods or countryside hamlets. Fifty years ago, smaller rural communities each had their own country store. Many of them boasted several. Almost any crossroads, planted with a gathering of homes, would include that familiar square structure, complete with big glass windows and a trademark cola sign hanging out front.

The decline of the rural stores began in the latter part of the last century. From the 1960’s to the 1980’s, their numbers slowly and steadily dropped. Those within the retail industry, point towards a number of causes for the demise of smaller outlets. The largest factor affecting rural store health was the expansion of the larger chain stores in more urban areas. With the power to buy in mega-quantity at discounted prices, national corporations could often offer retail prices very close to the wholesale cost for the smaller buyers.

Combined with a shift in working habits, where most households now had more than one vehicle and often husband and wife both involved in the workplace, a journey to the neighbourhood store was replaced with a quick trip to the big box stores and malls on the way home.

Government regulations have also been a contributing factor. Environmental issues have made gas pumps a non-viable option, reducing traffic all the more. Tighter restraints in other sales areas, increased utility costs and higher insurance premiums, all added to the downfall. Costs persisted to rise, while the customer base continued to fall.

By the time the millennium rolled around, the majority of country stores had hung the “closed” sign out for the final time. Today they are predominantly empty lots or new structures barren of any remnants of what used to be. For the most part, any of the buildings that survived, have been converted to residential use. They stand along the roadsides, vague shapes from the past, camouflaged by time.

Still they are not all gone; a few have endured the test of time.

Top: Finucan shelves, Above: Exterior Myles



The Village Pantry in Spencerville is a successful model of the new “old fashioned” country store. Family owned for the last several decades, the Pantry is a unique hybrid of modern convenience and traditional service. For the Kirby family, survival comes with hard work and a wide range of service. Along with simple shelving, stocked with the expected sundries, the bustling enterprise offers movie rentals, ice cream, and a deli-counter, stocked with fresh baked cinnamon buns, handmade breakfast sandwiches and pizza, renowned by the local residents.

Down the street a few steps, at Myles Discount Grocery, owner Myles Lassenba has a different approach to keeping the doors open. Myles keeps overhead low by working 12 hour shifts. Working 7:00 am until 7:00 pm most days of the week, his is the face customers see when they visit. In his thirty years of business in the retail industry, Lassenba has seen many changes. The trend he is seeing in the last few years is not encouraging. “My biggest challenge is the service from the bigger companies. It seems like everyone is trying to cut down on costs. I used to get milk and bread delivery at least three times a week. Then it was reduced to twice, but now a lot of my suppliers are only around once a week.”

Perhaps the store most untouched by time is another 10 minutes to the

west. The Finucan’s General Store & Supply Ltd. has been part of the North Augusta community for almost 100 years. Sisters Irene and Catherine are the 3rd generation to work the register. Their parents Jim and Betty Finucan have managed the store for 49 years. Irene is stocking the exact same shelves, except for the occasional coat of paint, which Jim stocked for almost half a century. The only major change that comes to mind is the deletion of an area that once served as a lunch counter. “Dad is not big on change” she offers with a chuckle.

Jim Finucan’s reluctance to change is evident from the moment one steps past the front door. Visitors are visually transported back in time. Finucan’s General Store still resides in an era when general stores lived up to their name. Old wooden shelves, loaded down with everything from canned peas to canned paint, whisper with memories of days gone by, when “one stop shopping” was a neighbourhood norm. Endless pairs of rubber boots hang from the rafters. A row of plumbing supplies dangle on a wall opposite a massive wooden table, hedged with boxes of bulk nails and screws. A wooden walk-in-cooler, packed with refrigerated foods, hums in one corner. Its outer wall is decorated with a sizable collection of fan-belts. They sell tanks full of gas to passing motorists and bags of grain to local farmers. It is hard to think of any household need that is not

*Top: Irene Vandervelde from Finucan’s serves up some bacon to Brian Pickens
Bottom: Myles Lassenba rings up an order*

obtainable inside the old wooden store in North Augusta.

And even here, time is about to take its toll. With Jim and Betty feeling the strains of age, the family has decided to put their little piece of preserved history up for sale. After almost a 100 years’ service, the Finucan family store will have new owners. Yet another page will be turned in the great history book of Eastern Ontario. **LH**

EDITOR’S NOTE

We have not touched on all the remaining general stores in our area just a few for this article. You can visit in Lansdowne the Lucky Dollar store, in Brockville Cowan’s Dairy on Park St. or Mrs. B’s Variety Store on King St. E. In Athens there is Swan’s Variety & Gift Shop and Laine’s Coffee & Collectables. For many people passing through Greenbush they remember the old general store but that now is gone by the changing times. In Gananoque there is White’s Groceria on Stone St N. These are just a few remaining stores of a by-gone era.