

A VITAL COMMUNITY CONNECTION

...the authentic charm of our rural general stores



BY SHELLEY CAMERON-MCCARRON

One of Atlantic Canada's quintessential old general stores that has been serving the local community for nearly 150 years is found along a winding road in picturesque, rural Inverness County, Cape Breton. It's a two-storey white wooden structure that's a fixture in the little community of Brook Village, located halfway between the villages of Mabou and Whycomagh, at the junction of Route 252 and Hays River Road.

Pull open the door to Brook Village Grocery (BVG) and you will see hand-made—and slightly crooked—wooden shelves lining the walls, and barnboard-clad fridges taking up the centre of the main room. A top shelf display space is filled with curios from an antique wooden sock stretcher to an old bottle capper. Wander around and you will find Brook Village Grocery carries everything from animal feed and rubber boots to Asian food staples and Italian charcuterie.

You may soon find yourself leaving with a fine selection of Gunn's Hill Artisan Cheese, gourmet salt from France, candy

carefully chosen from mason jars, and most likely, a spring in your step—happy for the experience of it all.

Karen Allen, owner and general manager of BVG, describes the pastoral scene. "There is a small sheep farm next door, and across the road sits a Catholic church. In the middle of the village on a grassy patch of land sits the glebe house and the flagpole. Just across the bridge is the parish hall, home to the liveliest summer square dances in the county. Trees and fields surround the village, and two brooks run through, one to the right of Brook Village Grocery, and one between the church and the parish hall."

STEP BACK IN TIME

"Many customers who come into BVG for the first time comment that it's like stepping back in time. This store has been in operation for 146 years, changing ownership multiple times, but never closing in all those years," says Allen.

The ceiling is covered in the original copper tiles, painted white long ago, she says. An old oil stove, where for years

neighbours have warmed their hands on cold mornings, sits in the middle of the room, and up at the back is where you find the automotive care products section housed in an old double fridge, and an assortment of hardware and household necessities.

"We boast the best selection of fine cheese on the island and prioritize stocking local products whenever possible," Allen says. "Shelves are stocked with an eclectic assortment of products, organic tahini sits beside Compliments brand strawberry jam, and Avon canned peas sit beside Speerville red lentils. We also have one of the few humidors on the island, with an assortment of fine cigars and pipe tobacco.

"Everyone's surprised by how many different items we carry in such a small space."

COMMUNITY SIGNIFICANCE

BVG is one of a select number of small, old-style general stores scattered across Atlantic Canada, places of cultural and community significance that have in many cases stood for generations, where owners know customers by name—and likely their kids' names, too.

Brook Village is a tight-knit community and many families run accounts—and have for years. Allen says, "I can think of a handful of customers whose families have been coming to this store for three generations. In the summertime, all the local kids come in for freezies and ice cream cones or are sent to pick up milk or eggs for their parents. The store truly is a community hub."

That's part of the allure. Beyond its rustic, rural charm, the bustling store is a place for interaction, where people stop to catch up with one another.

It's gotten new fans, too. "Maybe it's a millennial thing, but it seems like in the last five or 10 years, people have been really drawn to the old ways of life, to history and authenticity. It also seems to go hand-in-hand with the buy-local movement," Allen says.

Allen admits owning a rural general store was never something she envisioned for herself, yet she found herself doing just that in Brook Village. "I like how it is really diverse. I like to have a variety of tasks. It's a creative outlet in a lot of ways, arranging and making things look nice, decorating and building on that rustic charm."

With small business ownership, you're always problem solving, she says, and it can be stressful—including working with a century-old septic system—but there's also the feel of satisfaction you get when you successfully solve a problem.

WHERE EVERYONE GATHERS

Located on Main Street in Havelock, NB, Charlie's General Store, a two-storey building with cedar shingles on front, has been part of the town since 1963, when Charlie and Margorie Ryder opened their doors. They later sold the business to their son Peter and his wife Trina.



After it was closed for several years, Dana and Shelley Hicks purchased Charlie's General Store in Havelock, NB, and kept its original name.

After being closed for three years, Charlie's was purchased by Dana and Shelley Hicks, locals to the community who wanted to keep the original name and feel of the store.

"While Charlie's was closed, Dana and Shelley felt that there should be a store in Havelock. It was needed. For the past 14 years, Dana has been a business partner with T&D Excavating and thought this would be something new and fun to work at as well," says Melanie Wilson, who manages the store.

Ever since Charlie's reopened on November 2, 2019 with a free BBQ, hayrides and colouring contest for the kids, Wilson says a common comment from customers was that the town had died a bit when Charlie's closed. "They had really missed it and felt that Havelock had a new life to it since the doors were opened again.

"Everyone who comes to Havelock knows about Charlie's. It's where people have come for years to gather and see someone you haven't seen in ages," she says "We have a little bit of everything. As the saying goes, 'if Charlie's doesn't have it, you don't really need it!'"

What they have is everything from groceries to hardware, tools and greeting cards to kitchenware and toilet seals. "We have such a range of items. We carry many items from locals as well, which include homemade pickles and jams to earrings and even homemade wooden canes. The favourite area of the store is definitely the candy shelf"

Wilson says people often stop in just to look and see what's new. Plus, they're drawn by the charm that comes from the friendly, warm staff and customers. "You may come here for just a carton of milk and stay for an hour talking to someone either inside or outside on our cedar bench."

The bench was something they made sure to include prior to reopening. "You could not drive by or stop in without seeing people gathered there. People would often meet and just chat about anything and everything for hours at time," Wilson says. The new bench is a sure fit for the new look on such a large part of the Havelock community. Charlie's has been one of the integral parts of keeping people connected and providing for our community and we're blessed to do so."

“We greet people by name if they’re a regular and with a warm hello if it’s their first visit. By the time they leave our doors, we usually know where they came from, who their parents might be and how they’re connected to the town. The feeling here at Charlie’s is that you’re among friends.

“As much as we think technology is helping us, in the end, we crave community connection and being social without it. Charlie’s allows people to do that. What we don’t typically see in our store is people on their phones. They instead are looking people in the eye, often laughing and having a conversation about anything under the sun, which is amazing and so important.”

Wilson says what excites the owners and employees about running a general store is knowing that what they’re doing is helping their community. “Seeing people who come here leave with a smile and what they need to feed their families is

“Beyond its rustic, rural charm, the bustling hub is a place for interaction, where people stop to catch up with one another”



a great feeling. There is always a new challenge and something to learn with each day which provides the growth that every person needs to feel complete.

“General stores in Atlantic Canada are staples in the community they serve and each one is unique in their own way,” she says. “By supporting them, you are supporting their entire community. You will also get a piece of history. All you have to do is ask. Sometimes you don’t even need to do that!”

SMALL BUT MIGHTY STORES

Along the north shore of Rustico, PEI, Gallant’s Clover Farm Market has been a family-run business since 1927—the year the store was built at the corner of Routes 6 and 242 by owner Keith Gallant’s grandfather, Amos Gallant.

“We have just about everything here, meat, groceries, a side bakery. It is a country store, you feel right at home,” says Gallant, who has worked at the store since he was a “wee one.” He did leave PEI for work around age 18, but eventually came home and said he would look after the store for a year. “That was 30 years ago,” says Gallant, whose parents, George and Frances (Fanny) Gallant ran the store before him. His sister, artist Karen Gallant, has a gallery on the building’s top floor.

A community staple, the store is also much loved by tourists and other visitors.

“It just makes them feel like they are coming home. We have a fantastic staff,” Gallant says of the business, which sports an inviting verandah out front with a couple of benches where people can sit and enjoy an ice cream, lots of flowers in summer, and a bright red roof. “When you think of a country store, this is what it is.

“People like the feeling when they come in,” he continues. “There’s always a hello and a smile and conversation.” If someone is having a bad day, staff make a moment to talk, he says, and that extra minute or two of caring means a lot. “It goes a long way.”

Inside, customers find a popular butcher shop—it’s been said to have the best meat around, and Gallant says, “I take pride in what I sell, and keep prices competitive. We make sure it is top-notch.” There’s also a dairy bar in summer, a bak-



It may have changed its appearance over the years, but Gallant’s Clover Farm Market near Rustico, PEI, still has a warm and welcoming vibe.



Above: The bakers at Fussy Judy’s Kitchen, part of Small Point General Store. Right: Wanda Crocker passes the keys (COVID-style) to new owner Jimmy Johnson, last April.



ery selling bread and other goodies (their lobster rolls fly out the door in summer), and a full line of groceries. They’ve also offered hot meals made by his wife Tammy, fresh sandwiches and salads including a homemade potato salad they couldn’t keep on the shelves.

“My motto is that we’re a small but mighty store.”

A COMMUNITY ANCHOR

What’s the appeal of an old-fashion general store?

“I think it’s an anchor. You have something in your community that’s been there, that’s stood the test of time,” says Gallant. “You can have that chat and feel good about yourself and you feel like it’s part of the community and part of you. I feel tons of pride running it, and I think the community feels tons of pride that they have it.

While some people may believe small general stores can’t compete, Gallant doesn’t see it that way at all. He says they have a lot to offer. “We’ve weathered the storms, we found our grooves, our niches. We’re able to maintain ourselves. A lot of people are surprised by what we have to offer.”

At his store, he says they are always trying to upgrade. “We’re not a super modern store, but we don’t pretend to be. People are always a little surprised what they find around the next turn. They’ll say ‘that wasn’t there yesterday.’ We’re always adding something a little extra.”

PASSING THE TORCH

At the Small Point General Store in Small Point, Conception Bay North in Newfoundland and Labrador, you might be looking for a tank of gas, rubber boots, a plaid shirt, a puzzle, an electric pot hauler for your lobster gear, something for your iPhone, olive oil, some groceries. “We’ve got it. We really have a bit of everything,” says longtime and now former proprietor Wanda Crocker, who sold the business to Jimmy and Heather Johnson in the spring of 2020.

“If the store doesn’t have it, Jimmy will get it,” says Crocker, a former social worker from St. John’s, who used to spend her

weekends in the area until one Sunday years back she knew she just couldn’t keep leaving anymore.

The Small Point General Store is about an hour and a half drive from St. John’s, and about 30 minutes to Carbonear, the area’s main town. It’s located between two beaches and has a summertime/weekend kind of feel, Crocker says.

“Because it’s local and small, people come in and have a chat, and then say, ‘oh gee, I never knew you had bingo blotters.’ It’s that kind of store, which becomes really a focal point of the community,” she continues.

“You still find that kind of small general store that’s going to have everything for you. It’s a beautiful thing; really part of the community.”

The sale of Small Point was an exercise in serendipity. Jimmy went to the shop one Sunday morning to get bread, and Wanda had just put the For Sale sign up in the window. He told her right then and there that he and Heather wanted it. Wanda was determined to sell to someone in the community, and Heather says, “Jimmy really wanted to do this, so we did it. Jimmy loves being there.” She adds, “We plan on renovating the store section by section.” The community was thrilled to have a young couple from the community taking over, she says. “We made the best decision ever!”

They also work within the community, hosting fundraisers, selling tickets, helping out where they can, and hosting an annual thank-you day with a band and food in the parking lot.

“Tourists and people from away are blown away. They’re amazed by how many things are stocked up in here, and in the middle of that you have a bakery pumping out the smell of homemade bread.”

The baking is legendary—Crocker, who comes in regularly, says they have people line up for it, and she’s seen a suitcase full of molasses raisin bread packed up and ready to be taken to the mainland.

So popular are the store’s tea biscuits that their bakery has made over 90,000 in the last five years and CBC came to do a segment on them! 🐾