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Small town general stores are community tradition

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The Anti-Big Boxes...

BY BRADY DONNELLY

Fifteen miles outside of Harbor Springs, down a stretch of winding, tree-lined roadway, sits Good Hart General Store. The small, red structure, tucked beneath the shade of the surrounding greenery, stands as the village's only surviving business.

The store's immediate purpose is obvious. The shop, which sells groceries and distributes the mail, allows residents to gather necessities without having to make the long journey into neighboring towns. The importance of its survival, on the other hand, is intertwined with something much less tangible: the village's identity.

"If we go," said Carolyn Sutherland, the store's owner, standing in an office added after the store's opening in 1934, "the town would be gone. There would be no Good Hart."

The story of Sutherland's shop mirrors that of a number of the area's general stores, which subsist most often in places where nothing else does, in small enclaves like Good Hart, Bliss, and Horton Bay. Sutherland's sentiment echoes that of the owners and customers of these businesses, who fear that their disappearance marks the loss of local character and the feeling of times gone by.

"You come in here and you feel the history and the unique charm "You come in here and you feel the history and the unique charm

Symons, housed in the oldest brick building in downtown Petoskey, first opened its doors over 50 years ago.



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The store specializes in high-quality imports and locally-grown products, and the employees credit its survival to personal, reliable service – a rarity, they say, in larger, nationally-based chains.

"You get education, and you get interaction with the staff, and you get the wonderful ambience," said Peterson. "That's just part of living in northern Michigan – the fact that we care about our neighbors."

Symons, located in the center of a town with a large seasonal residency, has a customer base that is a mixture of both visitors and locals, most of whom pick up a few specialty products and continue their shopping at a larger grocer. Petoskey, being one of the larger cities in the area, is able to offer such an option, while some neighboring villages are not.

Horton Bay, located between Petoskey and Charlevoix, is such an area. Horton Bay General Store is the town's centerpiece, founded as a company store during the lumber boom. Much like Good Hart General Store, it is surrounded by trees and open land, acting as a convenience store for locals – only 36 of whom live in the area full time – and visitors passing through.

Now in its 132nd year, it has seen a number of owners, the most recent of whom – Claudia and Chip Lorenger – aim, at the request of town residents, to return it to its original form. The couple, who took control the store seven years ago, have since replaced the 1950s-style bar with a wooden substitute, and repainted the store white, as it has always been, seven times. The response, they say, has been positive.

Today, the walls of the store are decorated with photographs and paintings of Ernest Hemingway, who spent much of his youth in the store and the surrounding area. Behind the sales area, which features both souvenirs and groceries, is a restaurant offering an 1800s-style, three course service. Where fifteen-foot fluorescent lamps once hung, installed by a previous owner, dim chandeliers cast soft light on the stores wooden shelves and tables.

"We offer something totally different," said Claudia, leaning comfortably on the bar, where she had been sitting with a customer, "nostalgia." Bliss Store, a general store situated about an hour north of Horton Bay, in Bliss Township, makes an effort, much like Horton Bay General Store, to cater to everyone without sacrificing its local appeal. For the past 60 years, it has been under the control of a single family, passed from Theresa and Dan Reed to their daughter, Barbara Tracy, and her husband, Mike. When the Reeds took control decades ago, regular customers made one request: don't change a thing.

"We try to keep it as much a country story as possible," said Theresa. "There is a lot of stuff crammed into this little place."

"It's a two way street," she said. "You help the customer, the customer helps you."

Horton Bay General Store is open only from Memorial Day to Labor Day, while its counterparts – Symons, Bliss, and Good Hart – are open year-around, even as high gas prices and a flailing economy take blows at tourist season. These businesses, banking largely on loyalty, have gone mostly unaffected by the economic downturn, and fear of going out of businesses – something a number of local businesses have been unable to avoid – is almost non-existent.

"Anytime a well-loved thing goes away, it leaves a huge gap," said Peterson. "It's absolutely not going to happen."

"The thing that amazes me is what this business and network of businesses provides to the community," she said. "It will be here 50 years from now."

This is due, in part, said Sutherland, to a recognition of the need for preservation, an understanding of the benefits of a historic, locally-based general store that extend beyond mere convenience. Locals, she says, wish for these businesses to remain intact, and they will make a conscious effort to be sure they do.

"All these little towns that have these little stores struggling should do what they can do to support them," said Sutherland.

"It's like the old barn raising," she continued. "When you need your neighbors, your neighbors are there."

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News content published by Northern Michigan Life.
Internet Edition managed using First Day Story.
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