

## **Big Box, They're Not**

*Renovated country stores revive a rural tradition*

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Call it the curse of The Coveseville Store.

Three previous owners, before couple Rick and Sarah Ovenshire bought it, went bankrupt. One, in desperation, shot himself, Rick Ovenshire said.

Despite the country store's somber history, the Ovenshires happily bought it, hoping to be the ones to revive the roadside business—just 15 miles south of Charlottesville off U.S. 29—once famous for its smoked hams and known as one of the first racially integrated workplaces in the county.

“The last owner spent five years restoring the building,” Rick Ovenshire said. “She died before she could open it as an antique store.”

The Coveseville Store is one of roughly 50 historic country stores still standing in Albemarle County—at least half of which are vacant or poised to join the more than 20 stores already lost during the past several decades. Only a few dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century survive, according to the 2003 report by the Albemarle County Historic Preservation Committee. Some have been transformed into homes, while others are being reused as wood shops and veterinary clinics.

Country stores were the center of commerce in rural communities throughout the nation before shopping malls, fast-food chains and 24-hour grocery stores existed. The stores often were not only a source of food staples, but also served as dance hall, hardware store and gossip mill.

“The stores had such a captive clientele in the past—a trip to the city was once a big deal,” said Supervisor Sally H. Thomas. “Today, no one has to shop at their country store.”

While many of the stores have been razed or have fallen into disrepair, a handful of local entrepreneurs are breathing life back into these businesses.

### **'Mid-life crisis'**

Nancy Kallander calls it her “mid-life crisis.”

No longer enjoying her career as an engineering consultant, she handed her business card to the previous owner of Hunt Country Market last year and told her: “If you are ever interested in selling, I would love to buy this place.”

In June, she and her business partner, Tracy Bright, purchased the store, built at the corner of Garth and Free Union roads around 1910.

“I felt the store had so much potential,” she said, calling its previous condition “grungy.”

Kallander and Bright, along with their husbands, renovated the store—expanding the parking lot, creating an outdoor patio and improving its deli.

The store, dubbed a “mini-Bel Air Market” by a local weekly newspaper, is stocked with \$6 upscale sandwiches, homemade cheesecake and wine.

“Before it was Mad Dog 20-20,” Kallendar said. The store relies, in large part, on supplying customers with local goods. Eggs come from area farms, Albemarle Baking Co. supplies the store’s bread and pies come from her business partner’s kitchen.

The attention to local wares, new country store proprietors believe, will set them apart from the 7-Elevens and Wal-Marts.

### **Local produce and products**

Norm Jenkins, an Albemarle Realtor who plans to reopen Page’s Store in March, also intends to make local produce and wins a significant part of his selection.

Jenkins, who grows blackberries and plums, plans to sell his fruit at the Batesville store and sell a neighbor’s farm-raised chicken eggs. He plans to sell Greenberry’s Coffee and has a chef lined up to make prepared dishes.

“If I don’t sell my plums, I’ll give them away,” he said. “Better that, than them hitting the ground.”

Page’s Store closed after its previous operator suffered health problems and the Page family, who retired from running the store more than a decade ago, struggled to find someone to run it as a country store.

Jenkins, the store’s real estate agent, said he and Craig Page, whose family owns the store, often heard what potential buyers wanted to do with the store—such as transforming it into a recording studio or a dance studio.

“Nobody was talking about opening it as a store, and we thought ‘this doesn’t help the community,’” Jenkins said as contractors worked around him to install a new kitchen range and fluorescent light fixtures lay on the floor.

“I thought ‘why don’t I just buy it,’” he said.

Convenience, of course, also is a major factor in drawing customers to country stores.

### **Good things in small packages**

“We are four miles from Barracks Road, but you get people who say I don’t want to have to deal with Kroger’s parking lot,” Kallendar said.

Jenkins adds that he believes the allure of buying in bulk is fading as “empty nesters,” parents whose children have grown and left home, purchase smaller amounts.

“I think people got punch-drunk over going to Sam’s Club to buy a case of soda,” he said. “They start to realize that ‘I have 48 cans of soda that are about to expire so I better have a big party or they are going to go to waste.’”

While upscale sandwiches and high-test coffee might bring in the more affluent residents of Albemarle in Ivy and Batesville, Overshire notes that in Coveseville, which has a more blue-collar customer base, the costs to compete with big-box stores has kept him and his wife from, as they originally planned, offering traditional groceries when they open in spring or summer of this year.

Rather, they’ll stick to sell what they know—antiques. The couple sold \$1 million worth of antiques on e-bay during the past five years and recently sold a bed owned by Confederate leader Jefferson Davis for \$9,000.

“You know what really killed country stores,” Ovenshire said. “Big distributors don’t want to deal with you. Coke wanted to charge us \$10 a case, when you buy one for \$6 at Sam’s Club.” The couple, however, is seeking someone to operate a small country store at the site.

Sarah Ovenshire, standing amidst an old Mobil gas sign and decorative mantle pieces in the first floor of The Coveseville Store, said she and her husband hope the store will again become a community center.

“We had the local churches do a bake sale for our first sale in November,” Sarah said. “It forced people in Coveseville to meet each other.”

Jenkins, who was raised in Washington, Va., a village best known for its world-famous Inn at Little Washington, said he has fond memories of the local cash-and-carry there.

“I could climb on the shelves and spend my quarter to buy 25 pieces of penny candy,” he said. “If I was mischievous, they would call my parents. If I did that in Wal-Mart, they might call the police instead.”