

The old general store



PHOTOS BY ROBERT SCIARRINO

Decisions, decisions . . . Meghan Dunn of Long Valley tries to get a better view of the candy display at the old general store.

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AROUND A POTBELLY STOVE, TIME STANDS STILL

By William Gordon
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

By most accounts, Schooley's Mountain General Store and Post Office was built in 1830, the year Sylvester Graham invented his famous cracker, when rough-and-tumble Andrew Jackson was president.

The graham cracker is still around, and so too, is the store on Schooley's Mountain Road, in southwestern Morris County, a clapboard building still in business and virtually unchanged after 163 years, the sleigh bells nailed to its front door jingling merrily as customers come and go, its potbelly stove still the focus of gratitude on wintry days.

"It can be zero out and with that stove going, you can leave the doors open," said Sally Vilardi, the store's proprietor.

Vilardi has a theory about what has helped preserve the store in its nearly seminal condition after more than a century and a half and six or seven owners.

"You don't make a lot of money operating a country store of this kind," she said. "There's never enough money to modernize, and you have to use your ingenuity repairing what

needs fixing, so things have a tendency to remain unchanged."

Vilardi would have it no other way. It was the old-fashioned rural charm of the store and its history that induced her and her husband, Angelo, to buy it five years ago from their friends, Peter and Janet Gartelmann, who had operated it for 20 years.

The Vilardis live in nearby Long Valley, which like Schooley's Mountain is a section of Washington Township. Angelo Vilardi is superintendent of the Morris County Educational Services Commission. Their daughter, Kate, 23, assists in the management of the store; their son, Jason, 20, is a college student.

Customers today patronize the old store for pretty much the same reasons their counterparts did in the 19th century: to post letters and packages, to pick up their mail and to buy the papers, greeting cards, behemoth sandwiches and sundry household staples.

And for the elders — an opportunity to gossip!

And for the kids — soda pop, penny candy, and a chance to gawk at strange-looking artifacts from yesteryear, antique tin biscuit



boxes, a lady's high-button shoes, ice skates that have to be clamped to shoes, and a mystery device that could be a primitive ice cream-on-a-stick maker.

The store's wood-framed candy case is the same one that has caught the reflections of

Sally Vilardi, right, proprietor of Schooley's Mountain General Store and Post Office, talks with a customer as Honorah Arbolino works the cash register.

VF - Washington Township - Historic Sites

Schooley's

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

The old general store

of bug-eyed children down through the ages.

"It's the original case, in the same place it has always been in," said Sally Vilardi. "It has a marble base and really can't be moved, but that's the charm. The service counter is also original, as is the shelving, and the pressed-tin ceiling. They add to the specialness of this place, which I love."

Vilardi knows of no written history of the store, just bits of information in old newspaper articles, and stories passed along by old-timers, some of whose ancestors dwelled on Schooley's Mountain when the last of the Lenape people still inhabited the area.

Vilardi delights in telling how the store's "Astor Gem No. 65" potbelly stove acquired a cobblestone that today can be seen in place of one of its original four iron legs.

"When Charlie Skinner ran the store years ago, his farmer friends would come over at night to play cards," she said. "One evening an argument broke out and turned into a



PHOTO BY ROBERT EBELER

Owner Sally Vilardi stands at the entrance to Schooley's Mountain General Store in Washington Township. "The store has changed little" since the 1870s, she says.

shoving match. One fellow knocked over the stove, breaking its leg, and Skinner told him he had to fix it. The culprit left and came back with a stone of the right height.

"You said fix it," the man said to Skinner. "You didn't say *how* to fix it."

Skinner inherited the store when his father, George, died in the early 1900s. He and his wife, Dot, ran the business for 50 years. When they acquired the store, they also acquired a

local character nicknamed Slim, who took charge of the stove every day, feeding it coal, adjusting its draft and clearing its ashes.

A vintage photo of the interior of the store shows a pants leg and white sock sticking out from behind the stove.

"That's Slim," she said.

At the front of the store is an enclosed niche that is the rented property of the United States government. It has a window behind which Post-

master John McGhee each day deposits the mail in 100 old-fashioned post office boxes and manages a full-service postal operation.

"We provide all the services of a regular big-city post office, but we're not automated," he says. "There's just no room. If we're dealing, say, with an overseas package, we have to check the manual to compute the rate. People like the personal service, and not having to wait in line or find a place to park, as they would in Hackensack or Long Valley."

The oldest photograph of the store, believed to have been taken in the 1870s, shows a man in a white butcher's coat standing on the porch talking to a man with a horse and buggy. In the distance is a woman in a long dress walking along the dirt road.

"The store has changed little since then," comments Sally Vilardi. "I love it. It brought us into this great neighborhood. I love the friendliness and warmth of it. People of all ages who come to the store share this feeling. The kids are amazing. They still come for the gummy penny candy, the fireballs, the Necco wafers, just as I remember as a kid."

Store hours

Schooley's Mountain General Store and Post Office is open weekdays from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.; 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays, and 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday.