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STILLWATER RUNS DEEP

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OWNERS OF RUSTIC GENERAL STORE WANT TO KEEP IT THAT WAY

You can't rent a video at Robbins' General Store. If it's lottery tickets you need, drive on.

But should you have a freshly shot buck in the back of your truck, come on in; Robbins' is an official deer checkpoint for the state.

Have only 25 cents left over from your allowance? That will buy 25 gummy fish, the Robbins' General Store's specialty.

And, if you just happen to blow a fuse while driving through the wilds of Stillwater Township - the verdant Sussex County home of Robbins' General Store - look behind the "licorice bites" and "caramel creams" (59 cents a package, two for a buck). There you'll be happy to find a cardboard display entitled "Li'l Auto Store," to which is magically affixed an assortment of fuses sure to satisfy your electromotive needs. Behind the cash register, across from the fishing lures, is likely to be Alyce Baker, who - with her husband, Louis, and son, Timothy - owns and operates this rustic little pit stop on Route 521 in the hamlet of **Middleville**.

If you want, the Bakers will whip up a hot dog or a Taylor ham and cheese sandwich. Step to the left for the always full coffeepot, and if you need to mail something, turn around and ask for Bob Miller, the postmaster.

Bob pops up, it seems, out of nowhere. Actually, he is hidden behind the tall bank of 189 post office boxes (every one of them in use), and he was probably trying to balance the books at the pint-sized home of zip code 07855.

Here come some Robbins' devotees: A pair of bespectacled young girls on bicycles.

Sure enough, they head straight for the rows of glass jars offering a sweet tooth nirvana of gummy fish, gummy bears, gummy coins and other gummy creations that stick to your fillings.

Each glass jar comes with its own white plastic tweezers so grubby little fingers don't gum up the gummies.

Alyce says the Bakers bought the store 3 1/2 years ago. They want to sell it, along with the adjacent barn and their house behind that, for \$375,000.

According to Alyce, there have been several offers, but none of the potential buyers fits the Bakers' idea of the type of people they want to buy the store.

Owning Robbins' General Store, it seems, is something of a responsibility. The place, built sometime in the early 1800s, has a soul, or as much of a spiritual presence as God bestows on mere buildings.

The evidence is in the air, in the aroma of the wooden floors and the green shelves. The dust on an ancient box of Rinso, high above reach, sends out tiny nasal reminders that this is more than just another convenience store.

Back before there was radio or television, people from Stillwater hung around the store to get the news, Alyce says. On election night, the place was buzzing 'til 11 p.m., she's heard.

Alyce says a couple of the people interested in buying the store envisioned making drastic changes. The Bakers, who want to sell the place and go traveling, would rather wait.

"Some of them want to drastically change it," says Alyce. "I don't think that's good. I don't want it to go downhill like it has before."

The Bakers made some changes to the store. For the first time in its long life, it has running water and a kitchen.

They also converted the barn into a hardware storage shed. There you can pick up a hacksaw blade or a quarter-inch bolt or have a key made.

Most of this stuff was shelved, stacked and stuffed into the store when the Bakers bought it, Alyce said. Now, there is a lot more room to walk around, but the store's nooks and crannies still yield surprises.

Over behind the milk and juice cooler, for instance, are jars of UGL Glazol elastic glazing compound, cardboard boxes stuffed with thumbtacks and little jars of ZAR wood stain.

Nearby rest the "handy assortment" packages of cotter pins, selling for 39 cents, featuring plated finishes and coming in popular sizes. Moving down the wall, you can find boxes of hooks and eyes, line tightener clamps, hinges, garden hose washers, wire connectors, a bell and buzzer transformer, and electric switches.

The magazine rack, featuring 43 titles, offers a range of topics from National Lampoon to Fly Fisherman.

Close inspection reveals that a couple of boxes of d-Con (KILLS RATS), and TAT (KILLS INSECTS) are stored secretively on a dark bottom shelf.

Much of this stuff has been with the store since long before the Bakers came along, but that does not mean people never buy it. What the Robbins' General Store offers, aside from the 170 types

of candy (not including gum and breath lozenges) is homeowner security.

The nearest bona fide hardware store is in Newton, about 10 miles away. So when a Stillwater resident needs some candles or perhaps a pickling crock, Robbins' serves its purpose.

Three-quarters of one wall is lined with brown pottery made by a company that is no longer in business. Alyce says "people from the city" are her best pottery customers.

Keeping track of all the store's items is not a matter of science. Alyce, a former interior decorator, says taking inventory consists of this system: "When we see something going down, we take notice of it and then we order it."

The Bakers refuse to stock videos, a practice that has become almost a requirement in other neighborhood stores. Alyce says they've also refused offers to sell lottery tickets because she doesn't favor gambling.

"I don't think it's the type of store for it," she said. "I don't think it goes."

Much more in keeping with Robbins' General Store is the large Sears, Roebuck coal stove set on a metal square in the middle of the floor near the cash register. Stoked with wood in the winter, the stove always gets surrounded by people with icy fingers hovering over its warmth.

That's the kind of place the Bakers hope their store will remain - the type of establishment that isn't too proud to feature wooden crafts made by "two girls from Stillwater," boxes of "Instant Miracle" shoeshine for \$1.59 and a vending machine selling live bait.

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