



Story and photos by
Michelle Blake

VERMONT GENERAL STORES

As Seen in VERMONT MAGAZINE
WWW.VERMONTMAGAZINE.COM

The Putney General Store

When tragedy struck not once but twice, Vermont townsfolk were galvanized into action to rebuild their community store.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PUTNEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



PHOTO COURTESY OF PUTNEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Built sometime between 1796 and 1799, the original store building was owned and operated by Adelbert and Minnie Corser at the time the black-and-white photo (top) was taken, circa 1890. The photo above was taken in the same spot, shortly after the May 2008 fire.



The weather was picture perfect as the day for the store's grand opening, December 10, 2011, dawned. Radio station W TSA set up to broadcast live from the front porch and a crowd soon gathered in the spot where the parking lot was cordoned off. Shortly after opening at 10:00 a.m., the store was alive with the sounds of music, happy conversation, and ringing cash registers.

ON A SNOWY FRIDAY morning in December 2011, the Putney General Store is jumping. A customer orders a freshly grilled breakfast sandwich from the deli; the wine guy stocks shelves; and in the big bay window on the second floor, the Viagra Club holds its weekly meeting.

For residents of the community, this everyday scene is a dream they have worked hard to realize. The story goes back a long way.

In 1796, two Vermonters built a general merchandising store in the center of Putney. That store served the community for more than 200 years, changing hands

and size and shape many times. In 1840, a second storey was added to the building, and in the late 1890s, the Corser family built a large bay window and second-floor porch. In 1974, the Fairchild family doubled the size and created a seating area where customers could congregate and catch up on town news. Then in 2006, Erhan Oge and Tugce Okamus, who own and run Putney Pizza, became the 18th owners.

Over the years, the store became a vital center of the town's life, offering an eclectic mix of services. Mr. Fairchild, who was a tailor, once rented a tuxedo to a visitor who had arrived for a wedding

with no appropriate duds. The Viagra Club, an informal group of residents, has been meeting there in the morning for decades, drinking coffee and exchanging news of politics, gardens, and neighbors.

One Putney-ite remembers a day when she was moving into a new apartment and needed a couple of metal shelf supports. She asked the manager if the store carried them and he said, no, but wait a second. He went upstairs, took all the merchandise off a shelf, removed the shelf, removed the metal supports from the wall, and came downstairs and sold them to her at a discount, since they were used.



Upstairs in the new store building, there is ample space to sit down and enjoy a great meal in pleasant surroundings. Downstairs, on opening day, the store was filled to capacity with some very happy, and excited, shoppers. Out on the front porch, the store's new operator/business owner Ming Chou was all smiles as he greeted customers.



But in May 2008, a fire started in some old wires in the attic. A brand-new sprinkler system had just been installed on the first two floors but not on the third floor, so the blaze destroyed the roof and caused extensive water damage throughout the building. Putney lost its general store.

The community immediately stepped forward with offers of money, supplies, and skills. Local businesses needed the store to anchor the downtown shopping area, and residents needed the store as a place to see friends and to buy used shelf supports.

Putney wanted its store back.

At this point the town got lucky. An architectural historian and member of the board of the Historical Society, Lyssa Papazian, began helping Erhan Oge search out sources for funding. Lyssa discovered that it might work best if a nonprofit organization bought the store, thus making the project eligible for grant

money as well as state and federal tax credits.

“We thought we’d probably have to raise a couple hundred thousand dollars,” says Lyssa, seated at a shiny table on the second floor of the new building. “If someone had told us back then how much work we had to do and money we had to raise, we never would have believed it.”

So in November 2008, the Putney Historical Society became the 19th owners of the building and Lyssa became the project manager for the effort to rebuild the Putney General Store. Meanwhile, town residents and neighbors from around the state continued contributing to the effort. Over lunch at the popular Front Porch Cafe, just across the way from the burned-out store structure, Lyssa talked Jeff Shumlin into heading up the fundraising effort.

Lyssa and Jeff began their funding search in the early days of the eco-

nomic downturn, but they met with slow success. A group of Putney families signed on to guarantee a bank loan of \$100,000, in order to get restoration underway. Senator Patrick Leahy delivered \$100,000 to the project from a grant administered by Paul Bruhn and the Preservation Trust of Vermont. Other Vermont community organizations chipped in as well, and Jeff and his crew raised \$70,000 in individual donations. By mid-2009, work had progressed on the building and they had a solid shell, with a roof and a refurbished foundation.

The Historical Society hoped to schedule the grand opening for May 3, 2010, the second anniversary of the fire. But on the night of Sunday, November 1, 2009, all those plans once again went up in smoke, in a brutal four-alarm blaze.

“We were in shock,” says Lyssa. “It felt like we’d been kicked in the gut, as if the whole town had been kicked in the gut.”

No one knew what the future of the

project would be. At a meeting with the fire department, members of the Historical Society learned that an arsonist had started the fire on purpose, and a new resolve began to grow.

“In some ways the fact that it was set on purpose was galvanizing,” Lyssa continues. “We couldn’t let that be the final word on this project.”

The town was simply not ready to give up.

Only a couple of weeks after the fire, a group of Putney and Westminster West musicians, students, writers, and longtime residents came together to offer a night of music, poems, and stories—many of them tales set in the general store. The event not only raised money but also infused the reeling community with hope and energy for the efforts ahead.

They would need it. Whereas the first fire had gutted the structure, this second one burned it to the ground. This time they had to start from scratch.



Lyssa Papazian (top), as project manager, was instrumental in the effort to rebuild the original store after fire struck in 2008, and again in garnering funds to build a new store after the second fire in 2009. Keeping the coffee percolating on opening day was Kate Rice (below) who manages the deli and bakery.

By February 2010, Lyssa, Jeff, and their hardworking colleagues had already amassed \$700,000 in grants and donations, much of it from earlier sources that agreed to proceed with funding. Senator Leahy reappeared with an additional \$60,000 in federal aid. Putney residents offered to donate oak and pine logs, cut from their own woods. A Putney family donated their labor and crafted the frame. Local artists and artisans who participate in the Putney Craft Tour every year organized a fundraising raffle. The Guilford Middle School printed the tickets and middle school students from The Putney Central School helped sell them. At the end of the day, the raffle raised \$6,504.51, which went toward efforts to meet a matching grant offer of \$20,000.

And throughout it all, weather permitting, the Viagra Club set up folding chairs in front of the building site and held their Friday morning meetings, drinking coffee out of thermoses.

Unfortunately, the married couple who had agreed to manage the store was no longer available. Meanwhile, a Massachusetts butcher and grocer, Ming Chou, had been trying to buy the building for many years. After the second fire, an itinerant logger visited Chou’s store in Sterling, Massachusetts, and mentioned the ongoing search for a new manager. Ming Chou contacted the Historical Society, came in for an interview, and eventually reached an agreement to lease the space from the Society and to run the brand-new version of the store.

On October 3, 2010, the official groundbreaking ceremony took place. Ming Chou was present and donated chicken for the barbecue to help Putney celebrate.

And after much hard work, sweat, and tears, on December 10, 2011, the brand-new Putney General Store held its official opening, with speeches on the new front porch, flags donated by Governor Shumlin and Senator Leahy, and a sandwich named “The Papazian.”

A couple of weeks later, as Lyssa Papazian relaxes with the Viagra Club in their new setting in the bay window on the second floor, the talk runs to the Republican presidential candidates and the price of the champagne on the nearby shelves.

In a quiet moment, Lyssa reflects on the past three years and the astonishing work accomplished by the Historical Society, various state organizations, a handful of local politicians, and the resi-

dents of Putney and neighboring towns. She admits that the project, from beginning to end, took a much larger chunk of time and energy out of her life than she had ever expected. Then she tells a story about an ESL class at The Putney School, just up the road from the store.

After the first fire, an ESL teacher asked her international students to do research projects on the history of the store, the first blaze, and the rebuilding, as a way of honing their English-speaking skills and getting to know their new community. After the second fire, she gave them the same assignment. At the end of the two-part project, the students put together their own version of the saga. Finally, they presented their work in an assembly at the school, which Lyssa attended.

The students showed PowerPoint presentations, with pictures of the store at every stage along the way. It was the first time Lyssa had taken in the whole tale at once.

“By the end, I was close to tears,” she says. “What made sense to these students from towns all over the world was that a place, a store, could mean so much to a community.”

On a snowy morning in December, as customers wander through the new building, admiring the well-stocked shelves and the bright, warm seating area, it’s clear that the place does indeed mean that much to this town. After three long years and much hard work, Putney has its general store. **F**

Michelle Blake lives in Westminster West. She is the author of the critically acclaimed Lily Connor mystery series, which includes *The Tentmaker* and *The Book of Light*, as well as a novel (her fourth) *Dream Museum*. To see more of her work, please visit michelleblakewriter.com.

Just the facts

Putney General Store

Kimball Hill Road & Route 5
Putney, VT 05346
Call (802) 387-4692
or visit
putneygeneralstore.com.

Store hours: 7:00
a.m.–9:00 p.m. daily.

