

Dan & Whit's feels pinch from big box stores

By Kyle Wesson
Contributing Writer

NORWICH — Despite Gov. Jim Douglas' announcement that September is Vermont's first Independent Country Store Month, many stores, such as Dan and Whit's general store in Norwich, are feeling the competition from large chain stores such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot.

The stores are trying to find new ways to get buyers, but a rising sales tax (going up to 6 percent this October), coupled with new restrictions and permit fees, sends most buyers to New Hampshire to do their shopping, said Dan and Whit's owner Jack Fraser.

"With all of the big stores going in we are feeling the pinch," Fraser said, while declining to divulge specific numbers. "For little stores who cannot buy in large quantities, we are starting to struggle. Stores like Home Depot have become more and

more of a competitor to us because they buy in such large quantities. Because of this, the growth rate of stores in Vermont is about half that in New Hampshire."

Fraser said that the Vermont Association of Independent Country Stores has made the effort to provide whatever support they can to the country stores. We try to do the best we can," Fraser believes the problem lies within Vermont. "Some sections of the state are definitely trying to help (us out)," he said, "and other sections of the state (the legislature) drive the laws against us."

In September, country stores around the state are planning to host picnics, free cheese tastings, milk mustache contests and gatherings to celebrate their long history. According to Fraser, September's events are trying to emphasize local Vermont products.

Dan and Whit's General Store in Norwich, with a motto of "If

September is Independent Country Store Month

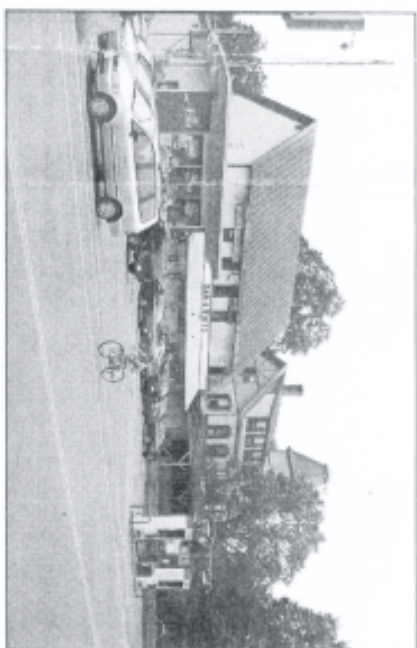
we don't have it, you don't need it," is one of the stores connected to September's events. Dan and Whit's has been a member of the VAICS for three years now. Fraser has represented the store at the VAICS meetings, which he said have "been helpful" to the welfare of the store.

VAICS started three years ago as a branch of the Vermont Grocers Association when some store owners wanted to help country stores deal with the problems they faced while promoting the idea country stores are "historical, family owned, and town oriented," said Dennis Barterkis, executive director of VAICS. "They needed to remind people that country stores are not charities, and that country stores are a essential part of village culture."

VAICS now consists of over 60 stores that meet historical and business standards along with high standards of service. One of the requirements to qualify, said Barterkis, is that the stores must "be able to support the town if they are cut off from the rest of the world."

Barterkis said stores need to "find other expansions into the needs of the community, that the bigger stores cannot (support)." For example, most country stores now sell wine, which is not available at a place like Wal-Mart.

Thanks to VAICS, the country stores are starting to get revived. VAICS has been awarded the Vermont Seal of Quality and has also started its own food label, *Vermont Village Foods*, which will only be sold at member stores. VAICS will start selling



Dan and Whit's in Norwich

salsa, beans and barbecue glaze this month, and will eventually sell soups and sodas.

Jim Harrison, president of the Vermont Grocers Association, said, "Many of them (the country stores) are very rich in history, and I think it is important (for them) to ban together and market themselves. (September) will be a good way to start promoting and supporting local village

stores."

Also during September, VAICS's Web site will get updated with virtual maps, a product and services database, and historical and promotional videos. For more information on participating in Independent Country Store Month call Jayne Nold-Laurendeau at 802-485-8044, e-mail falls@vvaics.org, or visit the Alliance Web site at vvaics.org.