



VERMONT GENERAL STORES

As Seen in VERMONT MAGAZINE

Guns and Politics

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That's what's happening at the Snowsville General Store.

YOU WON'T FIND a copy of *The New York Times* at the Snowsville General Store. You won't find a grilled panini or a bottle of Beaujolais. And forget cappuccino, micro-brewed beers, and anything resembling designer clothing.

You will, however, find a T-shirt that defines "vegetarian" as "an old Indian word for poor hunter." You will also find a Round Oak stove that has been kicking out heat since before the First World War. You will also find perhaps the finest selection of muzzle-loaders in Vermont.

"You remember that book *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats?*" says owner

Gene Booska. "Well, real Vermont general stores don't sell *The New York Times*."

"Real" is the word that comes to mind as you survey the area that's officially East Braintree, but known locally as Snowsville. The name derives from Jeremiah Snow, who established a grist- and sawmill on the banks of Ayers Brook in the early 1800s. The store was established in 1830.

Several of the surrounding houses date from the same era, as does the Congregational Church of Christ, a white clapboard structure with a spire that defines Yankee inspiration. Its small but dedicated congregation meets seasonally from June to September, but the building provides

stark inspiration year-round. The houses, about a dozen, are clustered tightly around an S-curve where Route 12 intersects Ayers Brook. On the day I visit, the houses are battened down for winter. Some are swathed in plastic to keep out the north wind. Others are protected by tarpaper or hay bales. It's not the Vermont you will see on a calendar.

Booska is a Vermonter who hails from the Champlain Valley. He worked, mostly construction, in the family business until he was ready for a change. He was immediately attracted to Snowsville because it dovetailed so well with his love of hunting. That was more than twenty years ago.



Proprietor Gene Booska holds court behind the counter at the Snowsville General Store in East Braintree. A seat across from the counter is reserved for one of the regulars.



The Snowville Store stocks one of the finest collections of guns in the state, and plenty of caps, too.

Booska, 61, is quiet and burly, a combination that can appear menacing, until you realize that the look is a foil for the dry, Yankee humor that is a storewide hallmark. John O'Donnell, a resident of nearby West Brookfield, tells of going down one Sunday morning to buy a quart of milk. As Booska was ringing him up, a nearby customer, motioning to the backdrop of guns, asked deadpan, "Would you like a shotgun with that?"

Where opinions are in no short supply

As you enter the store, the cash register is immediately to the left. Straight ahead is the Round Oak stove that appears to have been burned continuously for the past half-century or so. Booska holds court at the register. A seat across the counter is reserved for one of the regulars. It's a setting that suggests a television talk show, but one with a hardscrabble twist. Opinions are in no short supply.

Today's "guest" is East Braintree resident Ron Widen, who answers the perfunctory "How are you?" with the pronouncement "I'm pissed off!" He has just made the 15-mile round-trip drive into Randolph to fill a prescription at the Rite-Aid in vain. The store was open, but its pharmacy closed. (The store's difficulty in finding qualified pharmacists was front-page news until the problem was resolved.)

"If a store's opening hour is 8 a.m., seems to me they should be open at 8 a.m.," says Widen. Booska, who "mans" the store with his partner Kris Day from 8 a.m. to

6 p.m., six days a week and seven during hunting season and the holidays, nods his agreement.

Political candidates in Vermont should be required to spend a day at the Snowville General Store, not talking, but listening. They might not like what they hear. Booska states flatly that politics "makes my blood pressure go out of sight," a statement that draws murmurs of assent from those within earshot. The consensus seems to be that politicians exist to raise taxes, send jobs overseas, and generally make it difficult for the average person to get by.

Getting by isn't easy in East Braintree, even if you own the general store. Unlike the gleaming new Cumberland Farms in Randolph, there's no steady stream of cars needing gas, no packs of teenagers heading to and from the high school, no constant demand for soda, beer, milk, cigarettes, and lottery tickets. The gas pumps at Snowville were removed nearly 20 years ago. Once the interstate was built, there was no longer any through traffic on Route 12.

The only other commercial businesses in town are also testaments to stubborn Yankee independence. The Acme Carriage Works builds and restores horse-drawn carriages. The company owner, Fred Merriam, also operates the Vermont Bell Company, one of the few manufacturers of sleigh bells in the country. In keeping with the Snowville tradition of independence, he also mills his own lumber. The scraps are sold for \$2 a bag at the general store.

Booska, too, has had to diversify, but unlike many general stores in Vermont, it has not been to cater to the needs of the state's upscale second-home community. He stays focused on the needs of East Braintree residents. He sells firewood. In the fall, Booska spends as much time outside as possible, wearing a hardhat and ear protection as he tries to get as much bucked up as possible before the snow arrives.

In addition to wood, he sells used cars, from a small selection lined up on the opposite side of the store as the logs. You won't find anything low-slung or with leather seats. These are East Braintree cars: some rust, runs good. He also has a small tractor and will hire out for any number of earth movement or snow removal jobs.

And he sells guns.

Snowville stocks more than 400 guns. The selection includes handguns and rifles, new and used, vintage and collectible, from a pink single shot .22 caliber designed for kids to a semi-automatic assault rifle. Asked about the ethics of selling firearms that are not for sporting purposes, Booska says simply: "My goal is to have the best selection possible." His thoughts on gun control? "Only honest people obey regulations." What he doesn't say is as important as what he does.

People come from great distances to check out the selection at Snowville. Fathers bring their sons to buy their first deer-hunting rifle. They come to talk guns with knowledgeable people like Gene and Ron (not an employee, but retired from the firearms business and always willing to contribute helpful advice). Snowville even sponsors a handgun safety class especially for women.

Widen says that the store's reputation is well deserved. "Gene has good knowledge of what people are buying in this area. For instance, there isn't much demand for shotguns around here, while in parts of New Hampshire, that's all people want. And it changes all the time."

He cites Winchester as an example of changing fashions in the gun trade. Both he and Booska agree that Winchester used to be hot, but are now slipping in popularity compared to firearms made by Martin or Savage. They also agree on the reason why.

"You can't even get a Winchester made in this country any more," says Widen. He takes off his John Deere cap and wipes his brow. He's not pleased with this fact. Pro-



Booska also sells firewood and used cars, and moves dirt and snow with his tractor for hire.

duction of the Winchester repeating rifles, known as “the gun that won the West,” was discontinued in 2006 when the manufacturing facility in New Haven, Connecticut was permanently closed.

Waiting on word of the local revolution

Gene Booska laughs when asked if either of his daughters would follow him into the business. “They’re too smart for that,” he says. One is a controller, and the other works at a local college, jobs that provide them with paid holidays, vacations, and health care—unimaginable luxuries for the self-employed. It’s hard to picture who, at 61, would want to be working long hours and spending days bucking up firewood, as Gene Booska does. And yet, since 1830 there has been a store proprietor willing to tend to the needs of the East Braintree community.

Vermont is in the midst of a “locavore” revolution, in which all things local are celebrated and supported. Word of the revolution, however, has been slow to reach East Braintree. Booska dropped many of his clothing lines when the manufacturers began shipping lower quality goods from

overseas, focusing now on quality products from the Johnson Woolen Mill. Quality can be a difficult sell, however, in a community where people don’t have a lot of extra money. “People can be penny-wise and dollar foolish,” says Booska. “They will buy a shirt for three dollars that lasts a month rather than one for six dollars that will last two years.”

To illustrate he tells about the customer who asked the price of a bag of popcorn: “I told him 99 cents, and he says ‘I can get it in Randolph for 69 cents.’” Booska pauses and makes a small shrug. “So he gets into his car and drives the 15 miles into town and comes back with his 69-cent popcorn.” Booska doesn’t even need the punch line—that a round trip into town costs several times the savings. Vermont humor.

Luckily, the concept of local can cut both ways. The store now has a Website that makes it convenient for gun enthusiasts from all over to see what’s in stock. The store enjoys a widespread cult status. “Just yesterday a woman called from Washington State and ordered a Snows-ville hooded sweatshirt to be sent to her son in Alaska,” says Booska. Also, Vermont’s

For more on the store

The Snowsville General Store, offering “general merchandise, firearms and accessories,” is located at 642 Route 12 in East Braintree. Call (802) 728-5252 or go to www.snowsville.com to search the firearms selection, shop for wool pants made by Vermont’s Johnson Woolen Mill, or buy a Snowsville hooded sweatshirt or T-shirt. •

biggest export, its youth, often return at holiday time for Christmas shopping. One former resident, now a musician in Manhattan, was recently pictured in a fashion pictorial in *The New York Times* wearing his red plaid hunting cap from Snowsville.

Every local resident has a story that underscores the store’s important role in the community. One tells of having car problems during a snowstorm. Not only did Booska offer refuge, but he also fixed her car. John O’Donnell inquired about the hunting season and went home with free venison. His wife, Tina, once went in



The stove has been kicking out heat since WWI.

for Parmesan cheese. The store was out, but Kris Day went upstairs and loaned her some from her own pantry.

“If you look past the Cheese Doodles,” says Nancy Reid, an elementary school teacher who has lived in the area since the late 1970s, “Snowsville seems to have the products that are essential to life.”

Booska’s success is his ability to bridge the gaps. “The community around here is sparse, but surprisingly diverse,” says O’Donnell, a physics professor at nearby Vermont Technical College. “I may not be a deer hunter, but I always feel welcome.”

This doesn’t happen at Wal-Mart, despite the greeting at the front door, but it happens every day in East Braintree, and it has been happening every day since 1830. When Wal-Mart opened its first store in 1962, Snowsville had been in business 132 years. The landscape changes quickly in business, not so quickly in East Braintree. If you have to bet which will be around a hundred years from now, Snowsville or Wal-Mart, bet on Snowsville. 🦌

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