



Story by Phil Jordan
Photos by Jack Rowell

VERMONT GENERAL STORES

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Parcels and Post

Taftsville Country Store, selling goods and sorting mail since 1840



Charlie Wilson (at left) moved to Vermont from California in the late 1980s and bought the Taftsville Country Store in 1991; his two dogs come to work with him every day and greet each customer at the door.

SPRINGTIME, like all changes, comes slowly to Vermont. The days grow gradually, almost imperceptibly longer and warmer; the snow lingering in hillside hollows begins a reluctant retreat up the wooded slopes; and one gives serious thought to the approach of mud season before driving the back roads. The rivers stir with the rumbling of ice moving downstream.

In tiny Taftsville, the waters of the Ottauquechee, swollen with ice

melt, cascade over a waterfall and pass beneath the hand-hewn arches of a rustic, twin-span covered bridge, one of Vermont's oldest. Opposite the bridge and across busy Route 4, this sound is faintly audible, whenever the traffic lulls, within the venerable brick walls of the Taftsville Country Store. During these quiet times, you can also hear the rustle of mail being sorted in the post office out back and the occasional plop of a letter getting dropped into a mailbox.

This is perhaps the oldest of Vermont's rural institutions: the country store with a full-service post office inside; a sole proprietor as storekeeper, clerk and general manager; and his two friendly dogs that greet each customer at the door.

The store's owner, Charlie Wilson—spry, energetic and seldom off his feet the entire day—wouldn't have it any other way. "I spent a year looking all over Vermont, everywhere from Grand Isle to Bennington, before I bought this



Clockwise from left: The Taftsville Country Store was built in 1840 and once served as a company facility for the D. Taft & Son foundry and tool manufactory; Lance Werner is one of three part-time employees; the shelves are stocked with all manner of Vermont-made products and more.



store in 1991,” he says. Wilson moved to Vermont in the late 1980s from Los Angeles after a 15-year career as a retail buyer and merchandise manager for a large department-store chain.

“I very quickly came to the conclusion that ‘mom and pop’ stores could survive because there wasn’t a big payroll drain. So, I made that choice... and now I’m here a lot. Even with three part-time employees, I only close three days a year: Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s Day.” He pauses to ring up a sale as a customer dressed in camos and

a John Deere cap brings his items to the counter. No cash changes hands. Charlie jots an entry in an old-fashioned journal kept nearby. “What’s my balance?” asks the customer. “About a hundred five” comes the answer from Charlie. Wait a minute—a tab for groceries, in 2010?

“That’s what country stores do,” he explains. “I had no idea this was going on when I bought the store...but I found out the best thing to do was to keep on doing it.” One reason for his decision: three convenience stores and a super-market within three miles, all competing

for Taftsville’s 100 full-time residents. “I don’t have a big captive audience,” Charlie says. “Plus, you’re not a country store if you’re not a local store. The post office, plus our private labels, make us different from the gas stations.” Indeed, the popularity of Taftsville Country Store’s own Pomfret Peach Jam, salsa and Bloody Mary mix, plus the convenience of mail pickup, serve to set Charlie’s establishment apart from what he calls “the cookie-cutter” chain store that’s proliferated across the country.

“The post office was a battle,” he

Right: Ian Cohen and Amy Berenson were recently engaged at the store and are planning a summer 2011 wedding in Woodstock. They have been visiting the nearby Applebutter Inn since they started dating four years ago.

Just the facts

Taftsville Country Store

404 Woodstock Road
(Route 4, three miles east of
Woodstock)

P.O. Box 2

Taftsville, VT 05073

(802) 457-1135

Outside Vermont: (800) 854-0013

www.taftsville.com

Hours: 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, 7 days
a week (winter 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.)

Vermont Alliance of Independent Country Stores

Vermont Grocers Association

135 N. Main Street, Suite 5

Rutland, VT 05701

(802) 775-5460

www.vaics.com

adds, recalling when authorities in 1996 released plans to build a new facility that spoke more about sprawl than convenience to townfolk. Eliminating one of Vermont's most historic postal stations was unthinkable to Taftsville residents, but after repeated pleas to officials went unanswered, it appeared there would be no choice. It was then that a local activist wrote a scathing letter to the editor of *The New York Times*.

"Within a matter of hours," says Charlie, a postal official from Connecticut was on the doorstep of the Taftsville Country Store to announce a change of heart; the post office could stay...with conditions. "I had to hire and pay an architect—stretch the building and move the post office to the carriage shed. The whole thing took close to two years," recalls Charlie. "I wanted to keep the brass mailboxes, but I lost that battle." However, Charlie and his customers had won the war.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN fascinated by history," says Charlie. This statement is borne out by his vast collection



of grocery store ephemera, plus an adze, a hatchet and other tools that bear the name of D. Taft & Son, a foundry established across the way by Daniel Taft, the son of Stephen Taft, for whom this town is named. ("Not one of our presidents!" he adds.) This business, begun as a dam and sawmill in the 1790s, grew in the 1800s into a manufactory; the store was built in 1840 and once served workers as a company facility. Eventually, Taft & Sons became known for high-quality scythes and hand tools, likely shipped out on the Woodstock Railway, whose station stood across the street. The crown jewel of Charlie's collection is the ticket stamp from that station, its date set to April 15, 1933, the day the last train chugged off into oblivion and the line was abandoned. The post office was summarily moved from its home in the station back into the Taftsville Country Store, where it has remained to this day.

History was made again in Taftsville last December 23 when native New Yorker Ian Cohen surprised Amy Berenson with a charming and carefully planned marriage proposal staged with music, flowers and photography in the Taftsville Country Store. "In my nineteen years here, this was a first," reflects Charlie. "They were guests at the Applebutter Inn next door, and just fell in love with this place." And it's plain the locals like it, too. "This is the first stop if somebody is looking for a lost dog, trying to find someone, or attempting to deliver a package," says Charlie.

Today, a brisk mail-order business

dealing in Vermont products supports the store's walk-in revenues. "Traditionally, it's been one-third local, one-third tourist and one-third mail-order," Charlie says. The mail-order continues a trade in Vermont cheese, maple goods and more that was started in 1957 by a previous owner, whose tenure as postmaster saw the addition of his wife as an assistant to handle all the mail shipments soon generated. "I think he was inspired by all the mail he saw going through for Sugarbush Farms," adds Charlie, "and decided he could get in on that type of business, too."

But what's the number-one selling item at the counter today? Wine, and the Taftsville Country Store has become well known for its quality and variety. Other beverages and ice cream follow closely in popularity. Various items in the mix are hand-made cigars (displayed in a humidor), hand-knitted caps and mittens, Vermont-made specialty foods and dog lover's items such as biscuits and collar bells, which are the perfect complement to Charlie's companions, the ever-present and mellow golden retrievers, Ruby and Annie.

What would Charlie Wilson like to do more? As busy as he is, he'd like to devote more time to VAICS, the Vermont Alliance of Independent Country Stores, of which he is a founding member and current chairman. "Our purpose is to promote and preserve country stores in Vermont, by strengthening each other... so we all survive," he says. A worthy goal indeed. 🍷