

Potomac Scene

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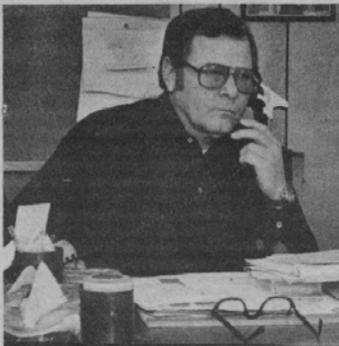
The Alvey General Store in Catharpin,
shown as it looked 100 years ago,
is still run by the Alvey family





Jack Alvey, Catharpin postmaster

'The Alvey name has been
synonymous with Catharpin
for more than 100 years ...'



Robert Alvey Sr.

Potomac News photos by Nancy Breeden



Robbie Alvey helping customers in general store

Alvey Store

Relaxed and homey

By NANCY BREEDEN

Although most of us live in a fast moving society, one can still find a bit of yesterday's more relaxed and homey atmosphere - and that is the general store in Catharpin.

If you shop in Catharpin, chances are you'll meet a friendly young man who would just love to chat and pass the time of day. He is Robert ("Robbie") Winfield Alvey Jr., the 27-year-old manager of Alvey's Community Store.

Or if you want to mail a letter, you'll meet another Alvey, Robbie's uncle James "Jack" Alvey.

The Alvey name has been synonymous with Catharpin for more than 100 years, ever since Robbie's great-grandfather started the store and was the first postmaster about 1875. Ever since then, the Alveys have owned and run the store and been postmaster.

The business was passed down through four generations and is presently owned by R.W. Alvey Sr. and his brother Jack. It has been run by Robbie for the last five years. Robbie sells groceries, hardware, livestock feed and the like, and recently added a new business, selling and sharpening chain saws. At Alvey's store there are several gasoline pumps that sometimes run out of gas because they only get a certain number of gallons per month. This year they've had

more customers than last year.

The post office was in the store when Robbie's great-grandfather ran the operation, but later was added on to the store as a separate facility.

Robbie's grandfather became acting postmaster until he was old enough to become postmaster. From there it was passed on to his mother, Mrs. R.W. Alvey, and then to his uncle Jack, who has been postmaster for 25 years.

R.W. Alvey Sr. ran the store for many years, including the eight years in the 1960s and early 1970s when he was on the Prince William Board of Supervisors.

Alvey Sr. said his father took him in as a partner when he was 21 years old, which was 32 years ago. He said at that time most of the customers were farmers. He had a sizable lime and fertilizer business, and also hauled cattle to Baltimore, where he bought supplies.

"In those days the store was a meeting place for people," Alvey said, adding he never made much money but the business "put bread on the table."

There were a "lot of times" Alvey thought about closing the store because business "was so poor," and because it took a lot of time to keep it open. While he was on the Board of Supervisors, he wasn't able to spend much time at the store, although he

felt there was a need for a store in the area.

The closest store now is in Westgate, which is five miles west of Catharpin. The Alveys Community Store serves a rural area between Westgate, the Bull Run mountains and Loudoun County.

By the time he got off the Board of Supervisors in 1971, the area, which is deep in western Prince William County, had grown, so Alvey remodeled the store. He decided if his son Robbie, or a member of Jack's family, didn't want to run it, he'd rent it.

Robbie said he'd always known he'd either end up in the store or in construction, working with his father, who is a developer. So when he got out of the armed services and found the store had been remodeled, he figured "there was a future in the business."

"It's an experience," grinned Robbie, his blue eyes twinkling. "It's a challenge every day, something new, different people, different gossip," he laughed.

Robbie said he loves to meet people and said the area is growing so rapidly he "sees a new person every day."

A lot of his customers have relatives overseas, Robbie said. When they visit the store he can talk about his overseas experiences and learn the latest goings on.

Many people stop on their way home from

work to pick up something, but in fact, the store is pretty busy in the middle of a weekday, with customers constantly coming and going.

The store "does a good business but takes a lot of time," Robbie said.

"I have to be here all the time when we're open, from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. six days a week and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday," Robbie said, although he has several long time employees he can really depend on he can't come to work.

Actually, when Robbie is at work, he can also say he's at home, because he built his home where he and his wife Pam, 6-year-old son R.W. III and 4-year-old daughter Lisa - only about 100 yards away from the back of the store.

So he can slip back and forth between home and store in a matter of a minute or two.

Although Robbie manages the store without any assistance, the Alvey store could be called a family affair operation. And with Robbie's enthusiasm in plans for the store, including expanding to sell fresh meat, Alvey's Community Store will probably still be there another 100 years from now. Perhaps with R.W. Alvey III the next manager and the fifth generation Alveys to carry on the tradition.