

Era ends as Allenford general store closes

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ALLENFORD — When Harvey Plant closes the doors of his general store here at the end of the month it will be the end of a tradition that stretches back over a century in this village.

Plant, who bought his store here in 1945 after he was discharged from the Royal Canadian Air Force, is the last of the many people who have owned the building, constructed as a general store sometime in the 1860s or 70s.

He's put the store up for sale because he and his wife Dorothy are ready to retire. Their daughter, Audrey, works at the store, but isn't interested in taking the business over. So far there's no one ready to purchase the building to keep up the tradition.

The closing of the Plants' store signals more than a change in Allenford — it's an indication of a changing way of life in many rural communities.

At one time the Plants' store competed with two other general stores here, and a total of eight stretching across Highway 21 from Owen Sound to Southampton. With the closure of the store in Allenford there will be none left.

"I don't know why they all disappeared" said Plant, who thinks the general store, and its counterpart, the city corner store, are dying out throughout the country. "Definitely they'll go."

When Plant first came to Allenford there was a small broom factory and a grist mill as well as a few other stores. When he closes there will be only a hardware store left. Like so many other small towns and villages, a once self-sufficient community has become more of a bedroom town for people who work in a larger city.

"There used to be grain elevators at the train station," said Plant, describing the once-busy village. "Now there isn't even a train station."

While people used to depend on their village's general store for all their needs, they now go into the city for shopping trips, or pick up odds and ends during their lunch hours or after work.

But business is still good for the Plants. They still get motorists passing through on their way to Sauble Beach or Chesley Lake and village residents still drop in to pick up everything from rubber boots, to fresh produce, straw hats, appliances, sewing goods, clothing and the regular tinned goods and soft drinks.

Plant said some of the village's elderly residents, who are without cars or any means of transportation, do their weekly shopping at the store.

"It's more leisurely," he said.

Although they have what most people would consider a wide range of goods — the inventory once showed 3,200 items — Plant cautions that they don't really run a general store. General stores, he said, have "a little bit of everything". The Plants apparently don't have a wide enough product range to fill the strict definition.

General stores have also fallen prey to larger, chain-owned convenience stores, which large companies prefer to supply. Plant said some companies now have a policy of only supplying to stores that purchase large quantities, and a general store in a small village seldom meets the quota.

But general stores have something that larger businesses can't compete with, said Plant — storeowners know the first names of many of the people they do business with, and in 37 years in business Plant has served children and grandchildren of some of his store's first customers.

The inside of the store has changed little since the Plants bought it.

Some of the shelving that goes around the walls was taken down, and a counter that once ran the length of the room was shortened. A Coleman space heater was added several years after the purchase when Plant discovered the cost of putting a furnace in the late 19th Century building was prohibitive.

"It hasn't changed much, we try to keep it pretty much the same," he said.

But the products sold over the counter have changed a great deal since 1945.

"Stuff was hard to get then be-



Harvey Plant stands at the counter of his Allenford general store, which will close later this month. Sun Times photo by Willy Waterton

cause everything was rationed," remembers Plant of his first few years in business after the war. "When we bought it there wasn't that much stock in here."

Once the shortages of the post-war years ended, the Plants expanded their store to include more baked goods, dry goods and hardwares. Some of these things were dropped as customers started heading to Owen Sound to shop at larger stores that could offer specials.

Fresh produce that the store sells now in limited amounts, wasn't popular during the Plants' first years

of business because so many rural people kept their own gardens.

There's one other thing that hasn't changed since the Plants first bought the store. They still open at 8 a.m. and close at 6:30, hours originally set up to accommodate people putting in 10 hours a day during the war years.

"Don't ask me why we do it," laughed Plant.

Originally from Huron Township, Plant moved to Allenford when he bought the store. Before the war he worked in the city in jobs where he was inside all day.

"Here nobody could build a house so I couldn't see any green growing," he said, gesturing out his store's wide bay window that looks across the highway to the trees growing near the river.

He plans to take advantage of his rural location after he retires. Fishing, some travelling, and work on his extensive stamp collection are all part of his plans.

The Plants will shut the doors on 37 years of business August 31, and will hold a special going-out-of-business sale on Sept. 4.

Plant isn't optimistic that anyone will buy the store immediately to start a business.

"There's too much money involved," he said. "They'll have to be a vast change before you see individuals in the business world."

But given the rising price of gas, and the decision by some younger people to move into rural areas, Plant thinks, and hopes, that somewhere down the line general stores could be rejuvenated.

"With the right atmosphere they'll be back."