

# South Korean immigrant has built his life in Haldimand's hills

## Paul Kim's Grafton Variety Store is a community hub

by JOHN BARKER  
*The Independent*

Paul Kim knew a bit about greenhouses and farming from his teenage years growing up in South Korea, but little did he know when he immigrated to Canada 25 years ago he'd wind up building his life in the rural Haldimand hills of Grafton.

But that's exactly what's happened for Mr. Kim, who immigrated to Canada in 1980. Not right away; first he lived in Toronto for half a dozen years, running a convenience store in Etobicoke, but by 1986 he was looking for other opportunities in eastern Ontario.

"It was a Thursday. I drove from Trenton to look at convenience store that was for sale. On the way back, I stopped on Highway 2 in Grafton and noticed the Grafton Variety Store. It wasn't for sale but I went and talked to the owner. He had been running it for about 18 months but wanted out. Within three weeks it was mine."

When Mr. Kim, now 50, and his wife and young family moved to Grafton from in 1986 they were the first South Korean immigrants in the hamlet of 350 and one of the few Asian families anywhere in that rural area of east Northumberland County, he recalls. His children are now 21 and 16, both having pretty much grown up in Grafton.

"We're very settled here,"



John Barker photo

Paul Kim works in the beer cooler of his Grafton Variety Store on County Road 2. He has owned the store since 1986.

says Mr. Kim. One of the groups that made him feel welcome right away were a large group of customers who were Korean Conflict veterans, who had fought against North Korea and Chinese troops in South Korea from 1950 to 1954 in a United Nations police action. "I was surprised by the number of Korean war vets in this area," Mr. Kim says.

Soon he was being invited to house parties and made to feel part of the community. As welcome as that's been, Mr. Kim said a nice development over the last 20 years as been the growth of a small South Korean immigrant community down the road to the west a dozen or so kilometres in Cobourg.

He socializes with them regularly.

In January 2002, in an effort to improve customer service in underserved rural communities and tourist areas, the previous

provincial government expanded its list of potential "agency" stores to Anten Mills, Balm Beach, Bethany, Claremont, Craighurst, Donwood, Eagle Lake, Fenella, Hampton, Lefroy, Hawkestone, Sunderland, Thornton, Little Britain, West Guilford, Youngs Point — and Grafton.

The 17 possibles on this list, which joined about 150 existing agency LCBO outlets in the province, were then selected after considering several weighted factors, including proximity to other liquor services.

Also in December 2001, Brewers Retail Inc., created in 1927 and owned by Labatt, Molson and Sleeman breweries launched its retail partners program to let agents contract directly with beer suppliers for the sale, display, handling, marketing and supply of beer.

Historically agency stores purchased beer at a 10.7 per

cent discount from Brewers Retail; under the new program the discount has been increased to 11.5 per cent.

Selling beer and liquor has also been, as expected, Mr. Kim says, a boon for business at the Grafton Variety Store on County Road 2, although business wasn't too shabby before that.

"I'd expanded twice before the alcohol sales and once since, so we've been doing OK for a long time," says Mr. Kim, noting its still long hours and seven-day weeks.

As well as, the usual variety store sundry items, Mr. Kim also rents movies.

Asked about the biggest change he's seen in more than two decades in the variety store business, Mr. Kim thinks for a minute and laughs: "Probably bottled water," he says pointing to a display behind him. "We didn't have that when we opened and now look at it."