



VERMONT GENERAL STORES

Story by C.J. King  
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# Just Over the Hill

*Follow the sign to the Benson Village Store,  
under new ownership and on the upswing since 2006.*



**Not everyone was thrilled when Dennis and Loretta Clark painted the store yellow in 2006. The building had been white for as long as anyone could remember. But locals warmed up to the Clarks, and the proof is in the coffee: the first pot of the day used to sit on the burner all day; now they sell 30 pots by closing time.**

**T**RAVELING ON ROUTE 22A, near the southern end of Lake Champlain, you'll come to a sign that says, "Benson—Just Over the Hill." Hidden half a mile from the highway, you could miss the Benson Village Store without this clue. The store doesn't thrive on tourists. As one customer puts it, "It's not a gifty kind of store. It's a real store where people come to buy things."

A short list of things for sale gives some clues about the varied clientele: animal food, auto supplies, bait and

buck knives, cappuccino, doughnuts, fish nets, goat cheese, goggles, hose clamps, lard, lobster tails, maple syrup, New York strip steak, office supplies, postage stamps, potholders, *saki*, snow shovels, t-shirts, toilet bowl cleaner, used tires, videos, worms and wine.

For locals, country stores are essential to daily life. This is particularly true in Benson, where the store is also the post office, the big game reporting station, and the place to buy dump stickers, hardware, lunch and gasoline. And

it may be the only post office in America that's open seven days a week.

Benson developed during the 1800s at the intersection of a busy stage road and a road to the lake. Proximity to Lake Champlain has always been important to this community. As the last stop before Benson's Landing—a bustling port and shipyard in the mid-1800s, and now a popular stop for recreational boaters—the Benson Village Store is a handy place to buy beer, ice, fish hooks and groceries.



**Above:** Loretta Clark sorts mail in the Benson Village Store, which doubles as the town post office. She and her husband Dennis (at left) managed stores of all sizes, including ten years with the Winhall Market, before buying the Benson store in 2006. “This grocery thing is so gratifying,” says Dennis.



According to a Vermont Division of Historic Preservation catalogue that describes the town’s historic district, Benson today looks much like it did before the Civil War. There is one notable exception—the Benson Village Store is now painted yellow. For people who once considered it news when the buildings got a fresh coat of white, this took some getting used to. Eighty-four-year-old Francis Munger, born in Benson and once the owner of the store, says the town’s buildings “have been white as long as I can remember.”

Who are the revolutionaries who brought such dramatic change to Benson? Dennis and Loretta Clark, owners of the store since 2006, are unlikely candidates for stirring up trouble. They are polite and earnest, hard working, open hearted and tolerant. In fact, Dennis was almost fired once for being too shy. He was 16 and had been bagging groceries for several years when his boss said, “Dennis, if you can’t speak with our customers, I don’t think we’ll need you anymore.” Dennis rose to the challenge and began running the cash register. At 19, he was assistant manager.

Thirty-five years later, after managing stores of all sizes in a variety of locations, including ten years with the Winhall Market near Stratton Mountain, he and Loretta decided it was time for a store of their own. Loretta had her own claim to fame as a baker of desserts and wedding cakes for local inns and restaurants. “We decided there was no getting out...This grocery thing is so gratifying,” Dennis says.

**In 2005, the grand old building was shabby and nearly empty of inventory. Today, it's once again the commercial and social hub of Benson and a popular stop for Lake Champlain boaters.**

They wanted a small store, away from the bustle of ski resorts and second homeowners, “something with character, in the center of a small town that truly needed a neighborhood grocery,” says Dennis.

During their two-year search, they took a look at the Benson Village Store. The business had potential, but they feared it would take too much work. In 2005, this grand old building was down on its luck: It was shabby, nearly empty of inventory, and had very few customers. Six months later, still intrigued, they returned for the Benson Burdock Festival, a tongue-in-cheek celebration of the prolific weed. “We met a lot of people that day and heard how much they would like their corner store back,” Dennis says. That was the hook that got them.

The Clarks decided the best way to announce their arrival was to drag the store fixtures out into the road and paint them where no one could miss it. After three days of that, they started on the outside. When folks saw the butter yellow paint, some were quick to disapprove. To emphasize their point, they would enter the store, state their opinion, and leave without buying anything.

The townspeople of Benson are no strangers to controversy: In 1995, they briefly held the national record for the number of times they voted down the school budget (12). But the Clarks hadn't anticipated this trouble. Yellow is Loretta's favorite color, and they just wanted the store to look nice. So they decided to leave the store half white, half yellow, and take a straw poll for a while.

In the beginning, customers were few and far between—the first pot of coffee would sit on the burner all day. But slowly, things began to change.



Barbara Hemmingway, owner of Ellie May's curio shop across the street, inquired about the name of the yellow paint and painted her trim that color. Someone else followed suit. People began buying coffee and sandwiches. The Clarks went ahead and finished painting the store. Now, three years later, they sell 30 pots of coffee a day.

In this village of hard-working farmers, loggers, carpenters and other

tradesmen, it wasn't their design sense, but their diligence that gained them acceptance. Loretta and Dennis each work an average of 80 hours a week. Their 16-year-old son Henry works every day, alongside employees Tabby Bowen and Gerri Patton, and the Clarks' 20-year-old son Jon, who works at Stratton, and 23-year-old daughter Leiha, who's in school in North Carolina, help out whenever they're home.



Benson native Francis Munger once owned the store. “Their biggest asset is their personalities,” he says of the Clarks.

## Just the facts

The Benson Village Store is located at the corner of Lake and Stage Roads in Benson, one mile west of Route 22A (and eight miles north of Fair Haven). The store is open every day at 6 a.m., until 9 p.m. in summer and 8 p.m. in winter. For information, call (802) 537-2041 or go to [vaics.org/vaics-benson.html](http://vaics.org/vaics-benson.html).



Who needs a big billboard when carved pumpkins will do? In abbreviated fashion, the gourds spell out the basics for the annual Halloween hay rides sponsored by the Benson VFD.

ON A WEEKDAY morning, construction workers start streaming in at 6 a.m.; homemade doughnuts and muffins await them. Before long, retired farmers arrive to sip coffee and to gossip at the table just inside the front door. It’s a great place to catch up on the news, and no one holds back on opinions. “Sometimes the conversation gets rather raucous,” says Dennis. The crowd ebbs and flows as people stop by to pick up the mail, order lunch and buy the daily home-cooked supper special (\$4.99 for a complete meal).

When the store closes at 8 or 9 p.m., don’t think the Clarks are done. Everyone knows they’re still in there, balancing the books, stocking the shelves and straightening up. Someone will knock

on the door, begging to buy just one item, so Dennis opens up, knowing full well what will happen. “After a few minutes, they’ll come to the register with a whole basket full of stuff.” It’s the same when the Clarks try to leave town on an errand. Someone invariably notices, and they end up back at the store.

“Their biggest asset is their personalities. I’ve never heard a bad word about them, and that makes a big difference in this business,” says Francis Munger. Here’s proof: One of the Kellogg brothers came to the store last December. While he was shopping, he kept testing his weight on the creaking floorboards. A few days later, he came back, this time with his brother. Ted and Chuck Kellogg are local builders, with a

great reputation for careful workmanship. Outside the store, they’d parked two trucks full of tools and supplies.

Like Santa’s elves, they set to their work. Ten hours later, the floors were solid with new support beams they’d installed in the basement. “Thanks for bringing our store back to life,” they said to the Clarks. “Merry Christmas.”

The Benson Village Store is once again the hub of this small rural community. Says Peter Gearwar, a born-and-bred Vermonter who’s lived in Benson for 15 years, “Dennis and Loretta do a good job. There’s no need to go anywhere else.”

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