

"I love antiques. That's one of the things that made us want it." *AS C 4/17/83, #1*



Photos by JOHN SPINK / Staff

The Villanow store was called "The Brick" in the last century because a rural general store rarely was built of red brick.

150-year-old store built to last

No relic: The thriving Walker County business is the oldest country store still in operation.

By Jack Warner
STAFF WRITER

Villanow, Ga. — Ebeth Edwards loves antiques so much she has devoted her life to one — a fortress-like, 150-year-old building that historians say is the oldest continuously operated country store in Georgia.

Mrs. Edwards and her husband, Rodney, run their store exactly the way its half-dozen or so previous owners have: They sell a little bit of everything their customers might need, and the store remains a center of activity in this little community.

The red brick building — so unusual in the last century that it often was called simply "the Brick" — sits nearly three-stories high over the intersection of Georgia 201 and 136. The broad porch where court was held a hundred years ago is gone, and a short flight of concrete stairs takes a customer up to the door, which can still be locked with a 6-inch-long key that folds up like a pocketknife.

The Edwardses — she has a



Shopkeeper Ebeth Edwards (left) rings up Linda Cordle and her daughter, Hannah, 3. "Some people come in here four, five times a day," Mrs. Edwards says.

degree in dental hygienics and he is a brick mason and farmer — had no experience in shopkeeping. They learned in a hurry; the Edwards Country Store is a thriving business, not a mere relic.

"We open every morning at 6, and we try to close at 8 p.m.," she said.

Largely as a result of the Edwardses' spade-work, the store was placed on the National Register of Historic Sites last year, and the Historic Preservation Center at the state Department of Natural Resources in Atlanta has been unable to find an older country store still in operation.



STAFF

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Exactly who built the store and when it was done was never recorded. However, records show that a man named Roland Kinsey was postmaster in the hamlet of Sunset — later called East Armuchee — and finally Villanow — from 1840 until 1843. Other records establish the store as the village's post office somewhat later, and historians deduced the store was built in 1840.

No one knows for sure why it was built so massively, either. State records call it a "great example of the very rare use of brick for a rural general store in Georgia . . . and that is obviously one of the reasons it has survived."

A well was dug in the base-

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JOHN SPINK / Staff

Lunchtime visitor: Ebeth Edwards (right) hands a turkey and cheese sandwich to Gerald Harper, who comes in the country store every day for his midday meal.

Store: Country tradition stands out like a fortress

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ment. The walls are 18 inches thick. Wooden shutters on the windows still close tightly and lock securely. "The store is very well-built, like a fortress — defensible," said state Historian Kenneth Thomas. "Who knows from what?"

Mrs. Edwards likes to point out the heavy steel rods that encircle the building just below the first-floor ceiling. They are, she said, earthquake rods, intended to help maintain structural integrity in a major temblor. "There was a big earthquake in 1812 all up and down the East Coast," she said.

Steady stream of customers

A visitor entering the store for the first time can be forgiven for thinking "the place looks like a dump," Mrs. Edwards said. Indeed, the presence of relatively

high cabinet of nuts and bolts, a big metal carousel of nails and a good selection of PVC plumbing fixtures. In a corner under a shelf full of ammunition are sewing needles, pins and some pink thread.

Fresh honey — a feature of the store in all remaining records — is temporarily out of stock. "The blizzard was awfully hard on the bees," Mrs. Edwards said.

You can buy disposable diapers here, although the needs of the far end of the life span are no longer sold. In 1899 the store advertised that it could "supply you with a coffin or casket when in need of one."

Reddish pine floors gleam

The coffins were stored upstairs, an area which the Edwardses have transformed into a living space that would leave any urban loft dweller drooling.

It is one huge room — sitting