

Town & Country

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An American Classic

For generations, Milton Christy's family has been a presence in Stafford County. The Nature's Best owner (below, with wife Evelyn) switched from a career in music to farming and draws a dedicated following to his country market.

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Dog Paddle, Anyone?

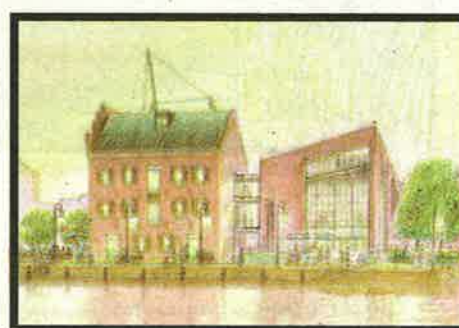
Pets know how to have fun in the summer, but it's up to their owners to protect them from potential dangers, says dog columnist Sarah A. Ferrell.



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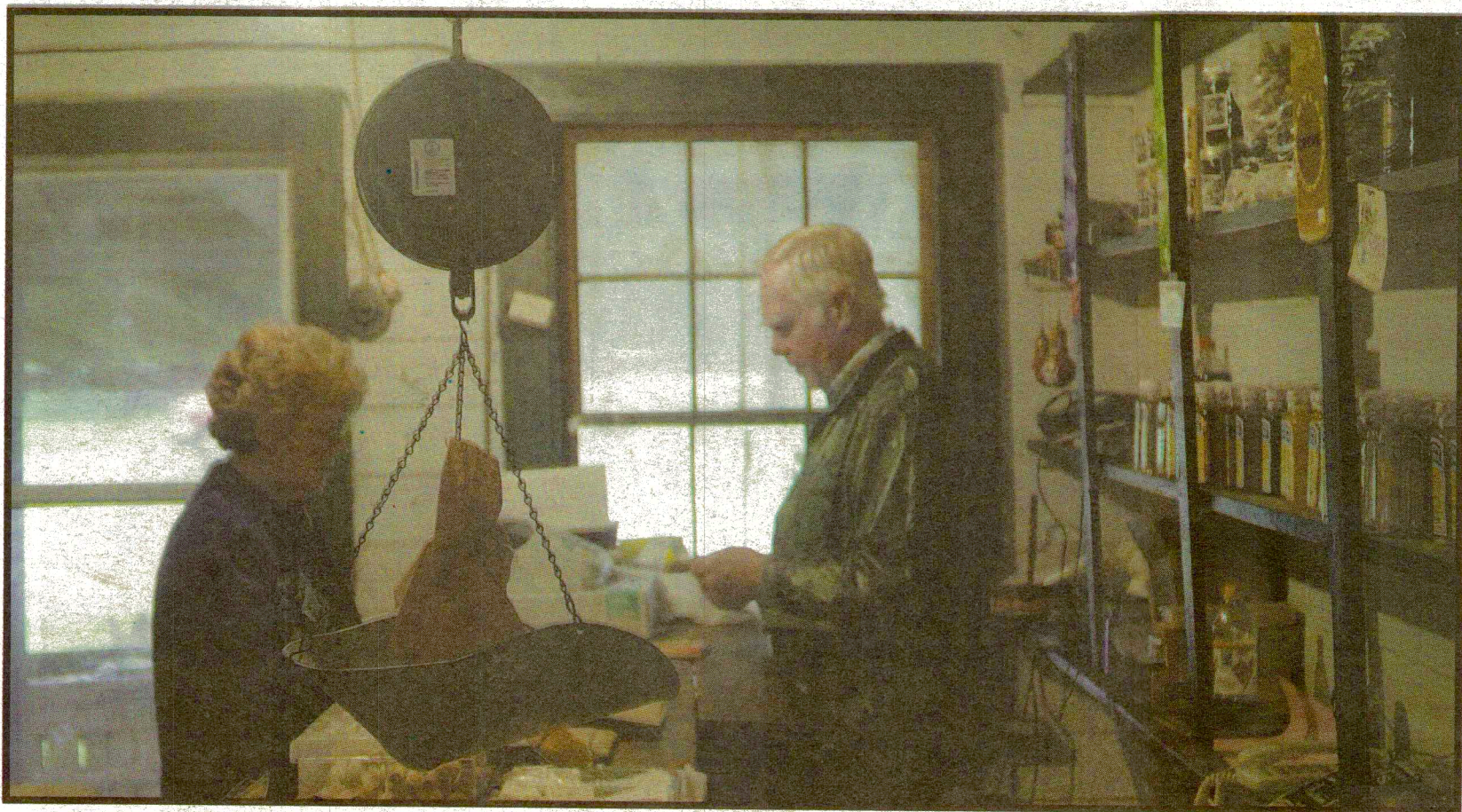
Maritime Heritage

After the Civil War, blacks moving to Baltimore became a major influence in the ship industry. A new maritime park will honor that history.



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In the front of the old storeroom at Nature's Best in Stafford County, Milton Christy makes a sale to one of many dedicated customers who stop by for fresh vegetables and pleasant conversation.



Working the Land with a Song

Milton Christy's life has had a certain rhythm

■ Text by PEGGY WESTON

■ Photos by REZA A. MARVASHTI

MILTON CHRISTY was born in his grandfather Courtney's house on Poplar Road in 1933, strengthening his family roots that were deeply planted in Stafford County generations ago.

Both of Christy's grandfathers ran country stores, J.S. Christy's and T.E. Courtney's, near Warrenton Road (U.S. 17 north).

Joseph Samuel Christy was married in 1902. He, his wife and their growing family of five boys lived in a house at the edge of Warrenton Road. There he ran his country general store and blacksmith business, J.S. Christy's, where Nature's Best market stands today.

Milton Christy fondly remembers the people coming through his grandfather Christy's store, the warmth of talk, laughter and music that surrounded the



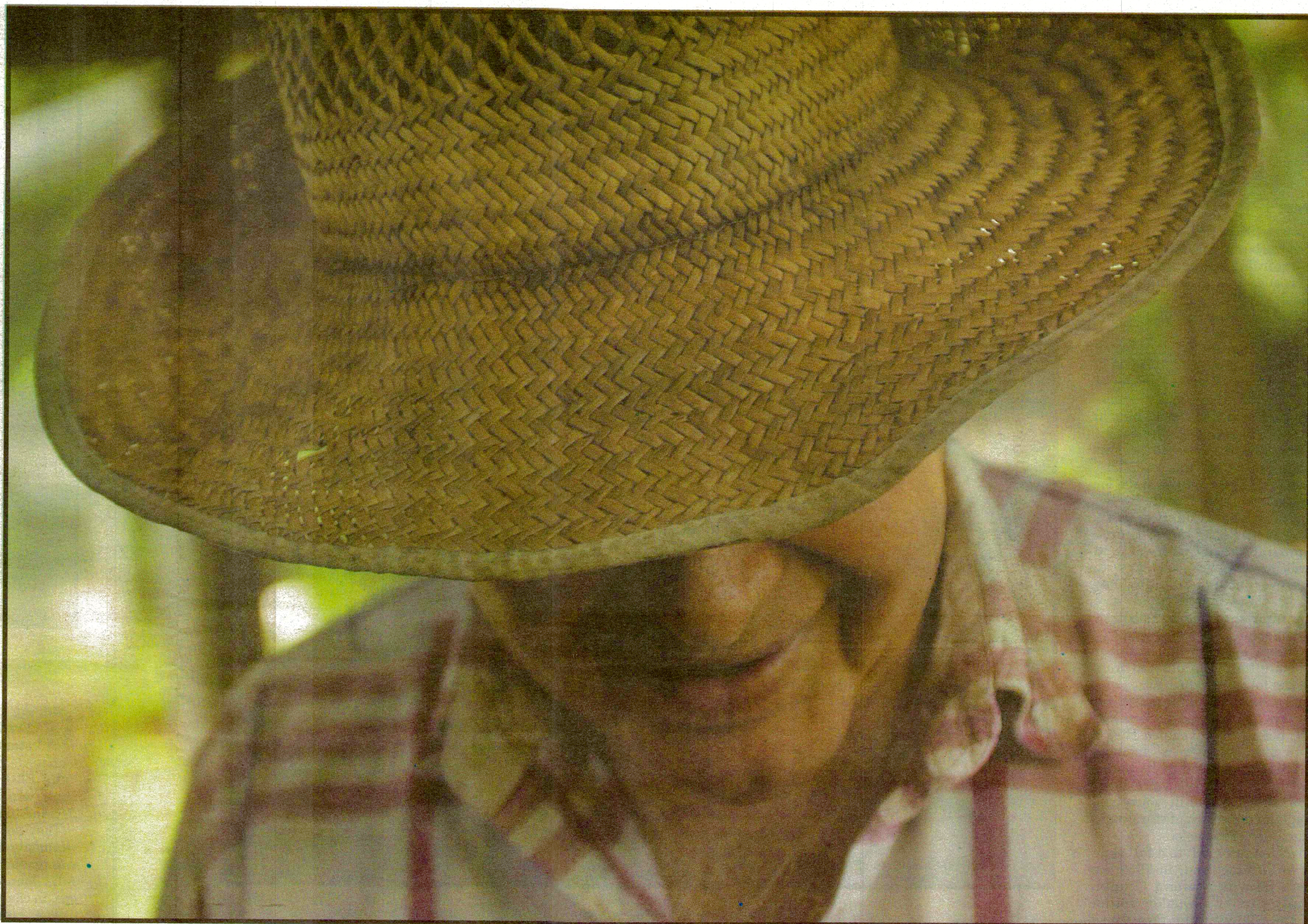
Besides the vegetables and soft-serve ice cream cones, Christy's market is popular for its fresh crabs, shrimp and lobster tails. Here, Christy stuns fresh blue crabs with a mallet before steaming them in his secret seasonings.

potbellied stove and the games of checkers.

Milton's father, Ashton, chose the sawmill business, while his Uncle Chester continued running the Christy store on Warrenton Road. The store eventually closed for 15 years until Milton Christy reopened it in 1987.

Milton Christy's memories growing up mark the development, too, of southwestern Stafford County. He recalls when U.S. 17 and U.S. 1 were the only paved roads in the county and notes the dramatic change in lifestyles when electricity and phone service came.

The Christy family's musical talent and love of singing brought them joy and a renewed voice in the growing community. The first time Milton Christy sang on



A man of many talents, Milton Christy often talks about his various adventures in life and the experiences that have made him the man he is today. From music to farming, Christy continues to prosper through hard work on the job and dedication to his family at home.

the radio he was 6 years old, standing on a chair to reach the microphone. He was performing at the early WFVA radio site, upstairs in the old Farmers Creamery Building, with his dad and uncles in the Christy Brothers Band. The band entertained during the 1930s and '40s.

Years later, in the 1980s, Christy joined his sisters, Ruth Ann and Millie, in the Christy Family Trio. The three had studied music at Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University), Milton earning a degree in music education in 1956. He performed principal parts in four operas and sang in the college's first madrigal group.

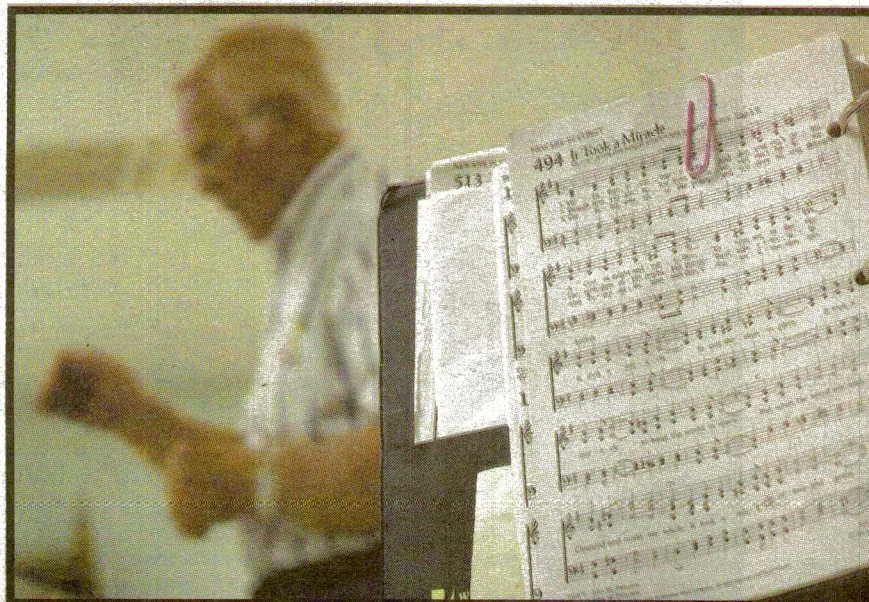
Upon graduating, Christy accepted the position as the first full-time music teacher in the then-combined Stafford

and King George school division, teaching choral and band music to grades seven through 12. Through his direction, the bands won trophies for music performance excellence. During his last three years of teaching in the late 1950s and early '60s, Christy's high school marching bands competed regionally and out of 23 competitions won first place 21 times and second place once.

While a junior in college, Christy served as a church choir director, thus launching what would be a major thread of music ministry woven throughout his life.

He was church music director at Two Rivers in King George County for two years and at Ramoth Baptist Church in Stafford for 25 years.

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After getting up at 5 a.m. for a trip to West Virginia for fresh peaches, Christy leads the Two Rivers Baptist Church choir during its weekly 7:15 p.m. practice in Fairview Beach. Christy signed on as temporary music director 2½ years ago and will step down in September.

Cover Story

Milton Christy fondly remembers the people coming through his grandfather's store, the warmth of talk, laughter and music around the potbellied stove.

WORKING THE LAND WITH A SONG . . .

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In the late 1960s, Christy creatively gathered the best voices locally. In his garage recording studio he began a gospel broadcast, "The Certain Sound Broadcast," sending gospel music as far as Alaska and the Philippines over a period of 14 years.

His versatile musical talents enabled him to travel to Kansas City in 1952 with the National Future Farmers of America Chorus. Music ministry mission trips with pastors sent him to Europe. In addition, he served in the 291st Army Band, stationed at Fort Jackson in North Carolina.

Music also helped set the stage for the union of Christy and Evelyn Leitch. Spotsylvania County resident Leitch was assisting at a church music program when Christy arrived to perform. Evelyn's job was to welcome everyone entering the Massaponax Baptist Church. "I made sure I greeted him!" she remarked enthusiastically, flashing her lovely grin.

They were married in December 1955, before Milton graduated from college the following spring.

Milton Christy taught music for many years and enjoyed performing, as well, before he developed throat trouble and through a medical examination discovered he had been born with an "infantile voice box," half the size of an adult voice box. This explained the lack of stamina in prolonged use of his voice.

He decided to switch to a full-time career in farming, and, in 1962, he bought a farm in Stafford County. Originally part of a Quaker settlement, the 300-year-old farmhouse has 18-inch-thick walls and sits on rolling farmland.

When Christy and his family reopened the family produce market on Warrenton Road 16 years ago, they added plants, greenhouses, supplies and a seafood shop. The Christys grow their own produce when the weather is accommodating, but, if necessary, buy wholesale from local farmers, so the produce they sell is "fresh off the vine."

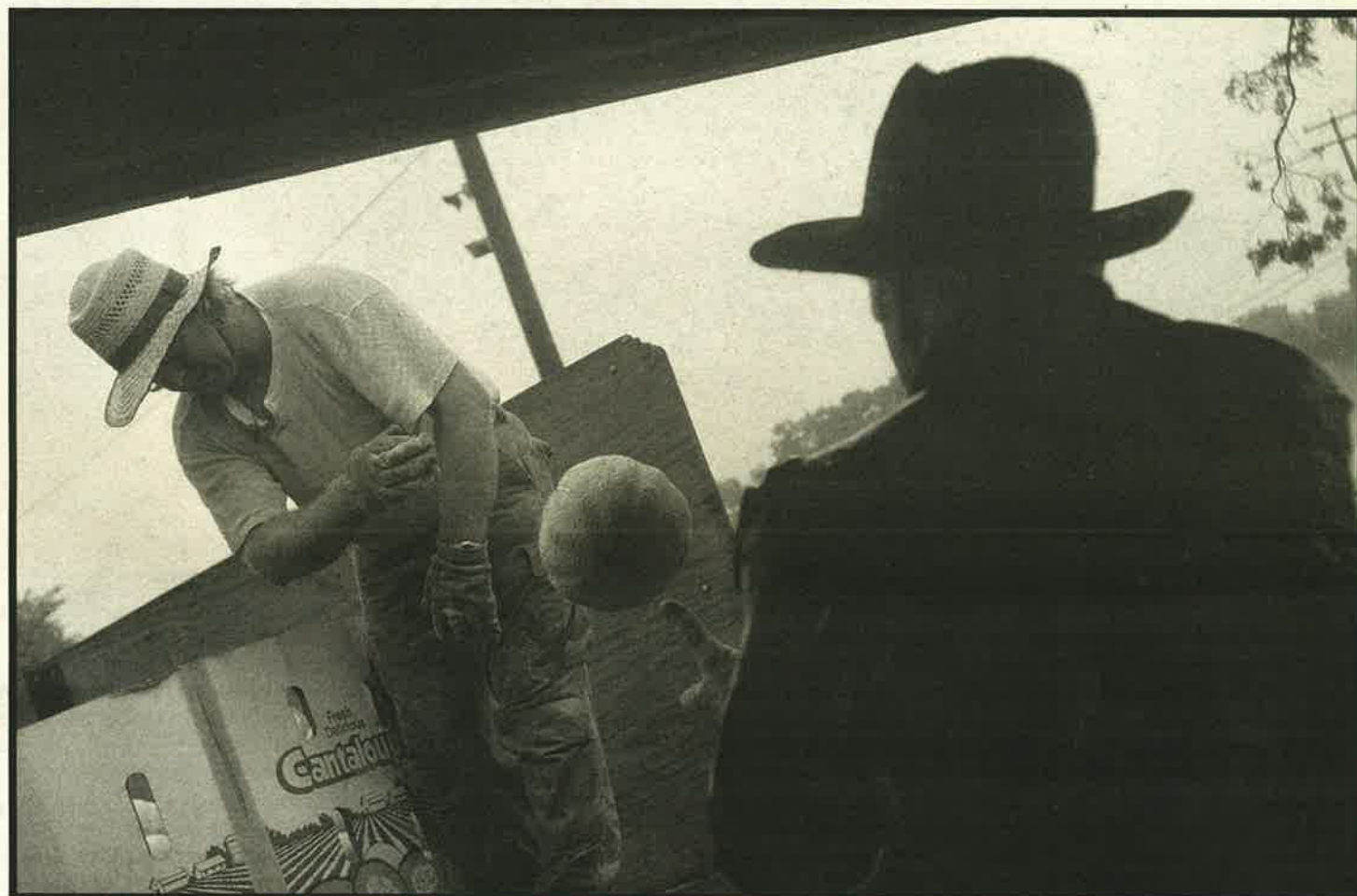
Today visiting the Nature's Best country store is a treat in discovering a bygone era. Inside the small, wooden structure are worn, darkened floors that attest to years of visitors. The scent from a kerosene stove cuts the air and lingers in the wood through the seasons into summer, when the fresh aroma of tomatoes, peaches and melons tease your nose to buy them. Shelves are lined with Virginia homemade jams and jellies. Christy's music cassettes sit on the counter amid honey and spices. And a delightfully pleasing,

unexpected array of this and that dress the balance of the store and spell simplicity and country charm.

Outside, the Christy name, though weathered, is still recognizable on the side of the country store. In its

shadows, the shell of the home of J.S. Christy still stands. As the family's enterprising interests have developed through the years, so have the addition of buildings bordering the country store.

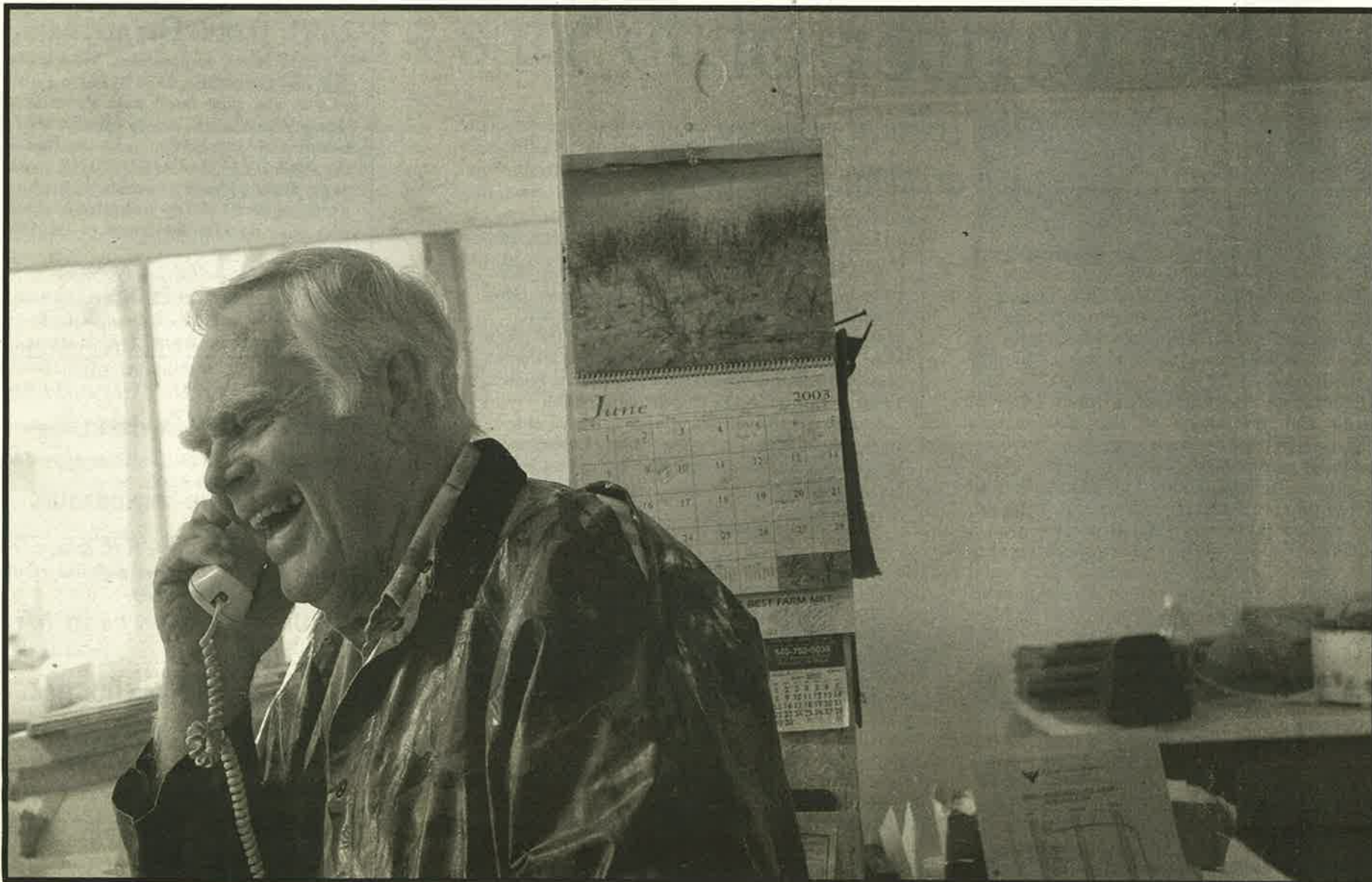
Throughout the grounds in all directions during the planting season are bright hanging plants, bedding plants and shrubs. Supplies of straw bales, animal food, and the like are available, while seasonal



TOP: Even in a driving rain, the work carries on at Nature's Best as cantaloupes are unloaded from a truck to a dry spot under the overhang facing U.S. 17 in Stafford County.

LEFT: Finding a break in the wetness of the early summer months, Christy is finally able to cut down some hay that he had been waiting weeks to gather.

Cover Story



With a smile and a laugh, Christy jokes with a supplier while inquiring about a shipment of crabs he is expecting.

vegetables, a pumpkin patch, Christmas trees and wreaths keep Christy and family busy year-round.

In the fair-weathered months there might be a sign on the store's road front enticing passers-by with promises of "ice cream," "fresh shrimp and crabs," or "barbecue dinner tonight."

Milton Christy always greets you with a big, warm smile, a strong handshake or a hug. When he asks you how you are, you feel he sincerely means it.

Evelyn Christy, his wife of 47 years, says Milton is a real character, even-tempered with a wonderful sense of humor. Their faith has enabled them to meet life's challenges.

Christy shows great patience with his customers, even in pouring rain and bitter temperatures, when he has waited with families to pick out

their Christmas trees, providing good humor and a grandfatherly interest in their growing children.

Janet Simard, who came to the area four years ago, says, "The Christys are great. An asset to this part of the country. They are hospitable and helpful people." Evelyn Christy and Simard are now "buddies," says Simard. "She is a great friend."

The Christys' daughter, Lydia, who sports the same bright family smile, and her husband, Tony Vinson, recently moved into the family home on the Christy farm. The Christys chose to have an extension built onto the house for themselves. They tell tales of the fun they experience with their two grandchildren, Lindsay, 15, and Jordan 11, who "keep ya in stitches."

Music was always a part of the Christy household when Lydia was growing up. "We sang all the time," she says. "At home. On the way to church. The first thing I would hear in the morning was singing."

She says that customers comment they love her father's sense of humor and wisdom. "People come in just to talk. They like to stop by just to visit, to see how he is doing. They always feel welcomed, they say."

Christy is humble about his many musical accomplishments. His rich, beautiful voice can be heard on his



Outside of Nature's Best, Christy walks in the footsteps of his grandfather whose general store and blacksmith shop stood where Christy runs his business today.

Nature's Best

Nature's Best is located at 1270 Warrenton Road (U.S. 17 north), Falmouth. It is open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Phone: 752-5039.

gospel recordings and in live performances. He continues in giving his family's heritage of song to the community.

Acknowledging that music has been a major part of his life, Christy says it has been "a source of inspiration and enjoyment, a source of spreading the gospel."

What would he say to children about music in their lives? "Get involved in some way. Study an instrument or voice."

PEGGY WESTON is a freelance writer living in Stafford County. **REZA A. MARVASHTI** is The Free Lance-Star photo editor.