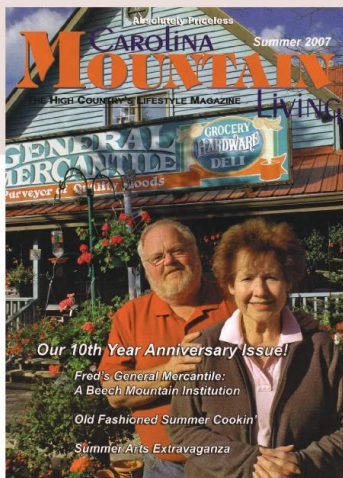




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Last February, a grateful town council issued an official proclamation celebrating the 40th year of Fred's General Mercantile in the Beech Mountain community. It was a touching accolade for Fred and Margie Pfohl, who joined forces in the aftermath of the resort's financial collapse way back in 1975. Their singular enterprise represents not just a rewarding life's work, but a devotion to community that proved the turning point in the resurrection of a once troubled resort town.

You'll travel far and wide before you find a commercial enterprise, and the folks who run it, that mean more to a community than Fred's General Mercantile on Beech Mountain. Now enjoying their 40th year in business, proprietors Fred and Margie Pfohl have seen it all in a four-season resort town rife with challenges for any 365-day a year enterprise.

And while other start-ups have failed trying to synchronize operating hours with the peaks and valleys of the seasons, the couple employed a novel business strategy—open the doors for business every day.

Fred's General Mercantile hasn't missed a day of operation in over four decades.

Located atop Eastern America's highest town at 5,506 feet, and a winding three-mile drive from the bigger lights of Banner Elk, Fred's is more than a general store. The rambling building and the myriad products it houses—from the whimsical to the essential—have evolved into the social and cultural center of this one-of-a-kind mountain community.

There's No Place Like Home

By Tom McAuliffe

How Fred's came to be is a tale as fanciful as the Land of Oz theme park, once signature to the Beech Mountain summers. For Fred Pfohl, a young Viet Nam vet just returning stateside intent on continuing his studies at Appalachian State University, Oz seemed an exciting place to work in the summer of 1970.

"I made sure all the Dorothys were in the right place at the right time," Fred recalled of his days at the theme park based on Judy Garland's role in the Wizard of Oz and located atop the ski lift serving the mountain peak. "We tried to make it look like Disney Land."

Pfohl (pronounced "foal") loved the mountain. When Oz closed each autumn, he signed on for the winter detail at the Beech Mountain Ski Resort while attending college classes. In 1974 he earned his degree in business with a minor in recreation.

But Fred was about to earn his "master's" degree in "Beech Mountain living" when the resort developer, Carolina Caribbean Corporation, collapsed under the scale of its ambitious plans involving over 6,000 acres of rugged mountain real estate.

People, dreams, and businesses had come and gone on Beech Mountain since its christening as the south's largest four-season resort in 1967, but the collapse in 1975 was symptomatic of the harsh realities of the mountain economy. Only a frantically assembled property owners association held the resort's facilities and infra-structure together.

In the aftermath of the resort's failure, the POA appointed Fred director of ski operations. In the summer he ran the recreation department where he met Margie, another self-described Beech Nut. They were married in 1977, both intent on making Beech Mountain home for the long haul.

The Beginnings of a Mountain Institution and the Rebirth of a Resort Town

With many properties still idling in bankruptcy court, the Pfohls eyed a peculiar parcel of land along the one road into town. "It was long but narrow," Margie said of the lot considered by others as a fine site for a billboard or perhaps a garden.

The Pfohls envisioned it a fine spot for a general store and they bought the odd parcel on the courthouse steps. It was a difficult drive off the mountain, particularly when the weather was bad, where Lecka's Grocery and the Banner Elk Hardware store served the local population.

"Everyone told us we were crazy, but that made us more determined," Fred recalled of their plan. "After eight years on Beech Mountain I had learned it was a long way to Banner Elk."

The newlyweds sold two houses and everything else they owned. Jack Pentes, who had designed the Land of Oz theme park a decade earlier, prepared the blueprints for Fred and Margie's

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big adventure. Pentes' colorful building rendering ("you'll need one for the bank presentation," he reasoned) featured the banner "Fred's General Mercantile" and the store was born.

What followed, as the autumn of 1978 gave way to winter, "was as close to a miracle as anything ever seen on Beech Mountain," Pfohl marveled.

Mike Eggers cleared the lot. Bob Quinlan, who was starting Alpine Ski Center in the old Hub Pub Club at the entrance to Sugar Mountain, supervised construction. A week after the footings were poured it snowed. But with folks working six days a week, a sturdy, well-insulated building rose from the ground.

With a wood stove at the store's center being the primary source of heat, Fred's General Mercantile opened for business February 9, 1979, just four months after breaking ground.

"The night before we opened, our neighbors came to help us stock the shelves," Margie remembered.

Fred's has been opened every day since, an anomaly to a tourist economy where survival was regularly tied to closing between the winter and summer seasons. That proved the secret to success—that, along with a diverse inventory that led to Fred's witicism "if you don't see it, ask for it; if we don't have it, you don't need it."

"We've never closed in 40 years," Pfohl said. "I'd been to enough resorts to know you couldn't just close your doors on a certain day. People learned to count on you."

Raising five children in living quarters above the store made Fred easily accessible.

"People would knock on the door at 2:30 in the morning and say their child was sick and needed medicine," Margie said. "Then they'd get cigarettes or a six pack while they were at it."

"When you've been around this long you see a lot of neat things," Fred declared. "Working in the store is a lot of fun."

When Beech Mountain incorporated as a town in 1981, the merchant of the mountain was elected mayor. Subsequently elected to three more terms, civic discourse became a staple in the never locked living quarters above the family enterprise.

Grounded by the strength of the town's incorporation, the privately-owned ski resort and the private Beech Mountain Club with golf, tennis, and swimming flourished. Sixty miles of roads wove through the sprawling mountain community. And common to all stood Fred's General Mercantile, where in addition to groceries and hardware supplies, a deli, ski shop, clothing and toy

store, and a wild bird supply company evolved under one roof.

Today, sixteen full-time employees keep Fred's open. A like number of seasonal employees work in winter and summer positions.

"Work, work, work has been our deal," Fred explained. "It's extra hard to make a living on Beech Mountain and these folks work hard for us and it's our responsibility to provide them with what they need to live here. We provide a platform where younger folks, older folks, whatever, can rely on a job and live on Beech Mountain with a normal place to work—not that our place is normal—with health insurance and profit sharing. If we have a good year, we can share it with them."

The children are gone now, but not before leaving a personal imprint on the store's colorful tapestry. College educated and raising families of their own, none appear as heir apparent to the family business. "I guess they didn't want to work this hard," Margie once joked recalling the frenetic days in July and Christmas when all the family pitched in.

"I always thought we'd let the children worry about the store," Fred laughed. "We'll work here until the day we die and then it will be their problem, but they loved the store and had a great time growing up in the High Country; they've moved on and are happy with their careers and raising their own families."

After 40 years little has changed at what was once the most unlikely of enterprises. Every June there's a new roll call as Fred and Margie welcome back the summer crowd to Beech Mountain. Invariably a few old friends are gone, but now their children and grandchildren come by for coffee and a newspaper, further cementing Fred's General Mercantile as the heart and soul of the community.

"Our situation would not have worked just anywhere," Fred admitted, "but we were fortunate for our many friends and our community. And it still amazes me that so many great people worked with us and wanted to be a part of Beech Mountain. Without them we would never have been successful."

And if Fred and Margie Pfohl have their way nothing is going to change anytime soon.

"Margie and I never wanted to go anywhere else once we were together here," the ever and always mayor of Beech Mountain said. "Sure, we like to ride down the hill and see the bright lights and big city now and then, but it doesn't grab us enough to want to change. We just talk about how lucky we are to drive back up the mountain, come across the hill and see our store still standing, lights burning, and able to call this place home after all these years."

You've seen the movie. There's no place like home.