

2004 Frank Jacobs Award Winner

Irvine General Store – February 2, 2004

The Irvine General Store is closed. A community institution in this small prairie town since the early days; it now stands dark and empty. The high ornate ceiling that looked down on generations of busy townspeople, laughing teenagers, and chinwagging ranchers now sees only the scarred wooden floor. Shelves that over the years stocked everything from kerosene lanterns, tins of Prem, and Burdizzos to videos and croissants are bare. The doors through which generations of farm and ranch families passed are now locked, and the community is the poorer.

A rural community is like a tree. There is a strong central trunk comprised of a core of institutions- businesses, schools, municipal government- that pump the lifeblood of the community. From this core, energy flows to the branches- the churches, Chamber of Commerce and the Ag Society that drive the community's business and social affairs. The leaves of the tree are the clubs and groups that provide a recreational, cultural and social haven for individual community members. When a large part of the trunk dies, you see the leaves and branches slowly wither.

In Irvine, like many other Canadian prairie towns, the core of the once-vigorous community tree is waning. In 1998, grim-faced old-timers watched as Irvine's wooden grain elevators shuddered, slowly crumpled and disappeared into a cloud of decades-old grain dust and dried-out prairie memories. Today, the business community continues to shrink, leaving only a hardy handful of entrepreneurs. Irvine still has a modern and attractive school, but the number of students from the town and the rural community is rapidly declining.

The Irvine Town Council disappeared when the need for more tax revenue overwhelmed the community desire for local autonomy. Now town residents drive to Cypress County Council meetings in Dunmore, with bittersweet memories of the days when Irvine had its own mayor and council.

The loss of the Irvine General Store cuts deeply, for it is more than just the loss of a business. Few businesses are ever rooted as deeply into the history, culture and psyche

of a community as the Irvine General Store. It was deeply rooted because of the integrity and business skill of the generations of the Wiedemann family who owned and operated the store. It was a business that reflected the values of its owners and its customers.

Sooner or later, all family dynasties come to an end. When Herman Wiedemann passed away, the family line of store operators ended. The store was sold.

By now, many of the farm and ranch families who for generations had shopped in the hulking brick building were gone, casualties of what some folks call “progress in agriculture”. The town population slowly withered like tansy mustard at the tail end of a hot, dry summer

The new owners operated the store with all the business skill and energy that they could muster. They found that it’s hard to run a successful business when you are running out of customers. The store was closed.

It would have required some sort of business miracle for the store to survive. In a world dominated by the Wal-Marts and Superstores, there is not a lot of room for an Irvine General Store.

So why am I feeling such a sense of loss? After all, business is business, and don’t only the large and powerful survive? Why does it matter if we run out of small-town businesses?

It matters if we value our historical sense of community. It matters if we celebrate the community rituals and acts of compassion that occurred so regularly within the walls of the Irvine General Store: the conversations about calf prices that occurred beside the potato bin or the times that families got through the hard times because of Herman Wiedemann’s charge book, and the times that the store was opened up late at night for the potions necessary for the well-being of man or beast.

The Irvine General Store is closed, and it will take a minor miracle for it to re-open. Ghosts of the past are the only customers in the emptiness of a store stocked with memories. I honor the memories within that locked-up store. All of us who value the heritage of rural western Canada are the poorer for it’s closing. That’s why I’m waiting for that miracle.