



The **Thomas Brothers Country Store** in Biglerville, Adams County, is literally filled to the ceiling on three floors with what used to be called dry goods. The stock ranges from lye soap to designer gowns. The truly unique item at the Country Store is not for sale and that is **Marion Thomas Harbaugh**, who along with her sister Jean Thomas, inherited the store from their parents.

The Thomas Brothers Country Store

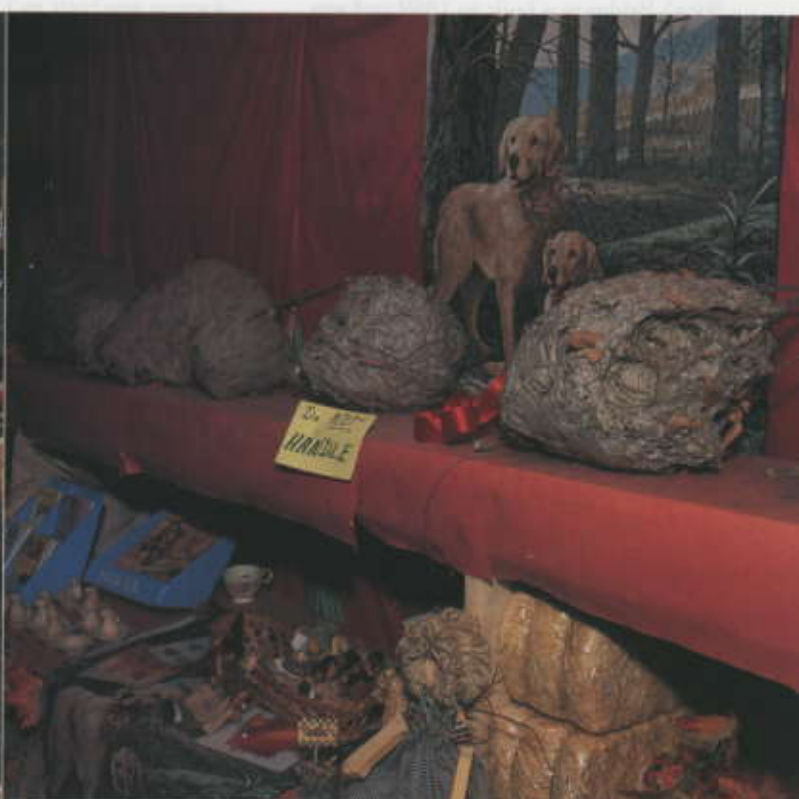
story and photos by Farron D. Brouger

According to the first – and so far only – edition of *The Country Store News*, a seven-page tabloid published for the Thomas Brothers Country Store's 75th anniversary in 1984, Thomas Brothers was at that time "one of the few

remaining country general stores in the nation." The business survived the Depression, and it thrives today, perhaps because of co-owner Marion Thomas Harbaugh's marketing philosophy. "I buy what I like to sell. I don't like junk. I like quality, unique, unusual things," she says.

A career that spanned more than 50 years

Biglerville was a rural town of about 500 in 1909 when two schoolteachers, Ner C. Thomas and his wife Nettie, opened their first general store in a small



building opposite the present location. Three years later, urged on by a relative who had "glorified ideas," says Harbaugh, the Thomases erected a three-story brick structure that even today looks imposing, if a little out of place, on Biglerville's short Main Street. Six pairs of white-framed double-hung windows set in a stout brick façade suggest a small hotel rather than a retail shop.

The Thomases brought two firsts to Biglerville in their new store: indoor plumbing and electricity. A generation before rural electrification, Ner Thomas installed a gasoline-powered Delco-Light Plant. These self-contained miniature power plants were common on farms in the early 1900s, but Harbaugh recalls an unusual feature that came with their machine. "When something didn't work, they'd send a big redheaded woman to fix it," she says.

Although she didn't intend to become a storekeeper in Adams County, Harbaugh was well prepared for a career that has spanned more than 50 years. After graduating from Chambersburg's Wilson College, one of the first women's colleges in the United States, Harbaugh earned a master's in merchandising at New York University while working at Lord & Taylor department store. Nettie Thomas died of complications of rheumatic fever during Harbaugh's freshman year at NYU and eventually she returned to Biglerville to help her father and sister Jean run the store.

From penny candy to made-to-measure suits

Being a storekeeper nearly 60 years ago meant more than stocking shelves and running a cash register. The packaged goods and self-service that we take for granted didn't exist before World War II. Staples such as lard and peanut butter were sold by the pound from bulk tins. There really was a cracker barrel, and it was close enough to the peanut butter for sneaking a quick snack, recalls Harbaugh.

The Thomases' inventory ranged from

continued on page 43

Thomas Brothers Country Store looks much as it did when it opened in 1912.

(bottom right) Marion Thomas Harbaugh has greeted generations of visitors to the Country Store. (photo by Ron Brongher)



Thomas Brothers Country Store

continued from page 33

penny candy to the finest made-to-measure suits from Royal Tailors of Chicago. Harbaugh recalls the swatch books of Royal's woolen fabrics that women coveted so much "they would play up to Daddy and beg him to save them one to use in making a comforter." At least one customer took his blue pinstripe Royal suit on his last journey; he was buried in it after wearing it only on Sundays for 40 years.

"We had yard goods stacked to the ceiling. Everybody made everything, from sheets and pillowcases to underwear," says Harbaugh. One item of clothing that wasn't homemade was a woman's hat, which was until the 1960s an essential fashion accessory.

"Mamma and Jean would go to Baltimore, where there was a milliner's school, and they'd buy all the supplies and choose their milliner. Can you imagine a milliner in a town of 500 people? My parents had nerve and guts," Harbaugh says. By the 1960s, though, the Thomases saw the rise of the bouffant and the end of the hat trade.

The Country Store survived changing fashions and even landed Biglerville on the front page of the Sunday New York Times in May 1960, when President Dwight Eisenhower drove up from his farm near Gettysburg and spent \$7.13.

"Ike's visit put us on the map," Harbaugh recalls. "People came and they didn't just look. They loved to buy things where Ike bought." But in spite of the attention that the president brought, Ner Thomas, then 80 and still active at the store, was not an Eisenhower man. Her father was a loyal Republican, as were all but two people in Biglerville, Harbaugh says. "Daddy wasn't for Ike because he never really belonged to any party."

It's hard to tell what's for sale

Visitors to the store will see their purchases rung up on the same mechanical cash register used during Eisenhower's visit. Antiques that have become fixtures



From the antique sled collection.

are mingled with new items, and at times it's hard to tell what's for sale. The inventory, said to number 50,000 items, is layered on shelves and on the floor, and hung on the walls. Browsing rewards the patient person who takes the time to shift and lift and open drawers. An octagonal wooden hardware cabinet – rare, and not for sale – holds skeins of yarn in triangular drawers that pull out just enough to fully reveal their contents without dropping into the customer's hand, risking an embarrassing spill.

Strolling through the aisles, you'll pause often to marvel at displays with a logic of their own. On the top shelf, a row of deep blue, rectangular glass bottles. The middle shelf holds a row of candle lanterns and canisters elaborately crafted in Mexico from discarded tin cans; below that, "Nodding Noggins" toys, with heads wobbling on springs sprouting from painted wood block bodies.

Not all of the stock is curios. Rooms on the third floor and the hallways in between are full of wedding gowns, prom dresses and other women's formal wear by top name designers. Customers come from southern Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia and Washington, D.C. Country Store gowns have made appearances among the cotillion set in Maryland's horse country.

Ambitions far beyond shop-keeping

Marion Harbaugh and her sister Jean Thomas have always extended their enthusiasm beyond the walls of their store. In the 1960s, the sisters schemed to move a covered bridge from a few miles outside of town to vacant space behind the store because an advertisement for their grandfather's store was still visible on an interior wall. Their father didn't voice his displeasure; he simply took to his bed and didn't get well again until the sisters dropped the idea.

Marion and Jean have ambitions far beyond shop keeping or even moving a bridge into town. They are planning the Harbaugh-Thomas Memorial Library, a structure that will include elements from the classical designs of Mt. Vernon and Franklin Roosevelt's Springwood estate in Hyde Park, New York. A public building will be a fitting legacy for a family that traces its roots in Biglerville to the sisters' great-great uncle Henry Hartzell, described by Gettysburg College's Professor Emeritus of History Charles H. Glatfelter as "one of the founders of Biglerville." ♦

Farron Brouger is a writer based in Anaheim, California, who grew up in northern York County.