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Service station doubles as town gossip center

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A liar's bench stands at one end, but is no longer in use. A Dixie cup holder is on the opposite wall near the water pump, even though the right size Dixie cup hasn't been manufactured for years. A gas heater supplanted the coal stove when a replacement piece could not be located, but nothing will put the small restroom — a one-hole affair located just outside — out of commission.

The service station measures approximately 10 by 13 feet. Built 41 years ago, the first station to be located on what was then the brand new Ind. 67, it was considered enormous for a gas station in 1937.

OWNER RAYMOND L. Gross, of Daleville, points out the station's two pumps saying they are not the hand-pumped variety that were there once. Other than that, there have been few changes in the operation of the station over the years, Gross admits, and that's the way customers like it.

They still come around to the mini station, even though a modern, full-sized variety and two or three others are located just a half mile up the road, where 67 intersects with Interstate 69.

Many stop by daily on their runs to or from work, often just for a cold bottle of pop, a bag of munchies, a candy bar or cigarettes. Gross stocks Diet-Rite Cola for one woman who stops in daily, even though no one else

ever buys it, and Chesterfield Kings for another dependable customer, saying, "NO ONE smokes them anymore."

MOST OF THOSE who stop are regular customers, although they may never buy gas. That doesn't phase Gross, who has one of the best-stocked candy counters in the area and sells some sandwiches, bread and milk on the side. Many just stop for the neighborliness of the small town small business.

"I call it the gossip center," Gross says, and he may be right. On a slow day, a stranger could learn all about the largest unincorporated town in Indiana and, rumor has it, in the U.S. He knows the ins and outs of town management — who runs what and where to go for which information — but on the subject of Daleville politics, he says, "I stay out of it. Out of both sides; you can't stay in business anywhere in this town otherwise."

And he relates stories of some local families split down the middle by affiliation with the Democrat or Republican parties. Some no longer speak to each other — a difficult maneuver when the town has one grocery, a post office and bank (all hubs of activity) located at the major traffic intersection. With a population of just 1,730, Daleville residents must have trouble NOT running into each other.

GROSS SEES many of them on a regular basis at his station, explaining, "I can't compete with

the big stations, so I just have to be nice."

The theory seems to work. The affable man attracts many of the locals with his old-time credit methods, easy smile and dependable storehouse of names and family history.

Credit at the service station consists of writing amounts of gasoline, cigarettes, milk or candy sold and keeping weekly totals on a small tablet. Gross may accept credit cards as well, but the neighborhood credit book and personal billing system seem to work just as well.

NEIGHBORHOOD kids, who use the gas station owner as counselor and sounding board, appreciate his credit policy. They congregate at the candy counter and help Gross pass the time at the small station. In spite of his "demanding father facade," the kids know Gross as a friend.

"I gripe at the kids," he says, laughing, "but I'd go nuts if they didn't come down."

Gross, who has no employees, spends 12 hours every day except Sunday there, opening at 5:30 each morning and closing at 5:30 each night. Before the gas crisis of 1972, he kept the station open on Sundays as well.

THOSE WEKE the days of the station liar's bench, which now remains empty. Old men, often farmers, would come in to Daleville on Sundays, according to Gross, and spend much of their time at the station telling stories of their youth.

"I learned a lot about Daleville

Service station

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through them," he says. The liar's bench was not named because the conversation of those sitting there was untrue, but because the old men's tales could not be proved true or false. There were no surviving witnesses.

Now, even the men who once warmed the bench are gone, and the station has remained closed on Sundays since the gas shortage directive to close all stations each Sunday.

EVEN AT THAT, Gross works 72 hours each week. He figures his earnings are roughly equal to what any factory worker makes, but he enjoys his 12-hour day more than the average eight-hour day.

"If I went anywhere else, I'd

have to WORK," he rationalizes.

Gross, 40, has started his own retirement policy, but has not given any thought to a specific retirement date. He knows if the old station ever requires any major financial investment, he will probably have to close it instead.

WITHOUT ANY unforeseen crisis, however, Gross says retirement will come "when the kids who first started hanging around out here (he bought the business in 1967) start bringing their grandkids in."

That gives the old station the promise of at least a few more years of service before it closes its doors permanently, making the tiny, old station of yesteryear a subject for future old men on liar's benches.