

# Mom-and-pop store barely hangs on

By **SETH SLABAUGH**  
The Star Press

DALEVILLE — In 4 years, Johnson's Store will celebrate its 50th anniversary, assuming the sole proprietor remains healthy enough — and the pink, downtown landmark doesn't run out of merchandise.

The inventory is shrinking because owner Ollene Johnson, 86, has quit stocking the store's shelves with new supplies of greeting cards, crayons, panty hose, hair nets, sunglasses, paper plates, model cars, jigsaw puzzles and other goods.

## Hometowns

“Whatever's here, I'm still selling,” Johnson said last week. “I'm not replacing anything.”

The cigarette rack and the nut case are empty, and the candy display is less than half full.

Based on dates on the remaining merchandise, it appears that some of it might be attractive to collectors, or at least a bargain.

For example, one shelf contains a box of 30 newborn Pampers diapers: “New Stay-Dry Gathers.” The price is marked \$3.59. At the Meijer superstore in nearby Anderson, newborn Pampers are now sold in plastic packages in quantities of 40 for \$8.63.

The date on a men's Schick Super II razor is 1974.



Kurt Hostetter / The Star Press

**OLD TIMES:** Carl Hollingsworth (left), Herschel Musick and other residents haven't forgotten Daleville's past. This 1930s gas station, which once had an outhouse, was re-located near the town hall and will house historical records.

Johnson said an apparent collector once came in and bought “a bunch of old salves that I had in flat tins. You don't even hear that term any more — salve.”

The toy section contains a game of Tid-dly Winks. “Kids don't even know what

that is any more,” Johnson said.

Customers don't seem to mind if something they buy is so out-of-date that it no longer works.

Daleville resident Ruby Maddox bought a laundry marker at Johnson's. It is a

## Daleville

Daleville is in southwestern Delaware County near the Madison County line.



**Population:** 1,681 (1990 census)  
**Local government:** Five-member town council; clerk-treasurer

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pen that makes an indelible mark on clothing, and it comes with a roll of tape that you tear off, press onto clothes and write on.

“The tape was stuck, and the marker was dried up,” said Maddox, who didn't ask for a refund. “That's kind of symbolic of her store at this point.”

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# Hometowns

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In spite of her dwindling inventory, Johnson doesn't plan to go out of business until "I can't come in anymore." She said, "My family doctor says go just as long as you can."

Johnson's also sells newspapers, lemonade, phosphates and sodas at the store's old-fashioned soda fountain. "Kids today don't even know what a soda is," Johnson said.

Asked how well the store's notebooks, crayons, compasses and other school supplies were selling, Johnson said: "The [Daleville] school now sells those supplies. And I pay taxes so they can be in business."

She said superstores like Wal-Mart also had hurt her business. "The big stores have put the little guy out of business," Johnson said.

Referring to the dusty bottles of model-car paint in the store, Johnson said suppliers nowadays wouldn't take orders for less than \$1,000. "They tell you how much you have to order, and you have to take what they send you," she said.

The store is dusty, Johnson said, because of the recently completed reconstruction of Walnut Street, which "wrecked business this summer."

State Rep. Bruce Munson, R-Muncie, recently stopped at the store — whose "h" is missing from the "Johnson's" Coca-Cola sign hanging out front — for a glass of lemonade.

But Johnson couldn't sell it to him because water-line construction elsewhere in town had interrupted her water supply.

A retired Daleville school teacher, Johnson has been running the store alone since her son, Mark, 47, died of a heart attack in 1993. Her husband, Julian, died in 1959.

If the laundry marker that Maddox bought is symbolic of the store's situation, the store itself symbolizes downtown Daleville, Maddox said.

**"I was drivin' to ole Daleville to shop until I drop, and behold it was so beautiful, my eyes about went pop."**

Daleville town song

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manufacturer, a lumber yard and other industry to Daleville.

According to local historians, Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916), who worked for the Anderson Democrat, frequently visited Daleville. He also painted the signs at a blacksmith business and a barber shop in Daleville. Another famous Hoosier native, John Dillinger (1903-1934), visited Daleville in July 1933, but only long enough to rob the bank.

After the gas boom ended, so did the new industry.

At the turn of the century, Daleville was the subject of a feature story published by The Chicago Tribune, which reported that federal Census officials didn't consider Daleville a town because it wasn't incorporated.

"The citizens point out that if there is never any money in the city treasury, it cannot be stolen, especially if there is nobody to steal it," the newspaper reported. "Without a mayor, a board of aldermen, a town hall and a deficit in the city treasury, they rejoice in the fact that they have never had or will have a defaulting city treasurer, or a boodling alderman, or a corrupt police department."

In the early 1980s, after several unsuccessful attempts, Daleville finally incorporated. But it did so then only because nearby Chesterfield had begun annexing territory considered to be in Daleville.

Although its downtown isn't thriving, today, as the town's song says, Daleville has become a shopping destination, thanks to its proximity to Interstate 69.

The interstate is what attracted the large, new Indiana Factory Shops outlet mall and other recent commercial development

Maddox said.  
"I'm worried about the downtown," said Maddox, 72, who lives in a century-old, two-story, red-brick farm house on Sixth Street. "I'm afraid we're going to lose our downtown."

In January 1995, a Daleville strategic planning committee created a "development road map" to guide the town's future physical development.

"We see downtown Daleville becoming a quaint, charming center for specialty retailers and other small businesses," the plan said.

But the committee quit meeting after the plan was adopted, says Kay Gipson, town clerk-treasurer, and the downtown looks nothing like the downtown portrayed in the plan by a consulting firm.

"It was a nice dream, the beautiful walks and trees," Gipson said. "Some day it may be that way."

But part of the plan, spelled out in a song titled *Hold on Daleville* (Sung to the Tune of *Oh, Susannah*), has come true.

Verse: "I was drivin to ole Daleville to shop until I drop, and behold it was so beautiful, my eyes about went pop.

Chorus: "Hold on, Daleville, the best is yet to be, with parks, shops, signs and history, you'll be a sight to see."

The town was platted by Alexander Campbell Dale in 1838, around the same time that Texas revolted against the Mexican government, McCormick invented the grain reaper, and the abolition of slavery was becoming a crusade.

Dale, a Maryland native, was a veteran of the Revolutionary War. He and his wife, who were first cousins, raised five children. Dale died a couple of years after the town was platted.

East Central Indiana's natural gas boom in the late 1800s brought a clay-tile factory, a brick manufacturer, a stove

recent commercial development on the south side of town.

The town's assessed value jumped from \$6.3 million in 1992 to nearly \$15 million last year.

Maddox can see the new development out her back door.

She and her brother, a South Bend physician, have sold commercial developers land, including the apple and peach orchards that their father, Martin Davis, planted in the Roaring '20s.

The orchards had grown old, and "the ground got too valuable," Maddox said. The property is being developed as a commercial park. Streets and sewers already have been constructed, and Maddox said a medical office might be the first occupant.

"I'm going to watch it all happen, and then decide whether to run," Maddox said.

If she decides to move, she won't have any trouble selling her house. The commercial developers already have asked for an option to buy it.