

Mehitables Bakery: The Last of The Last

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

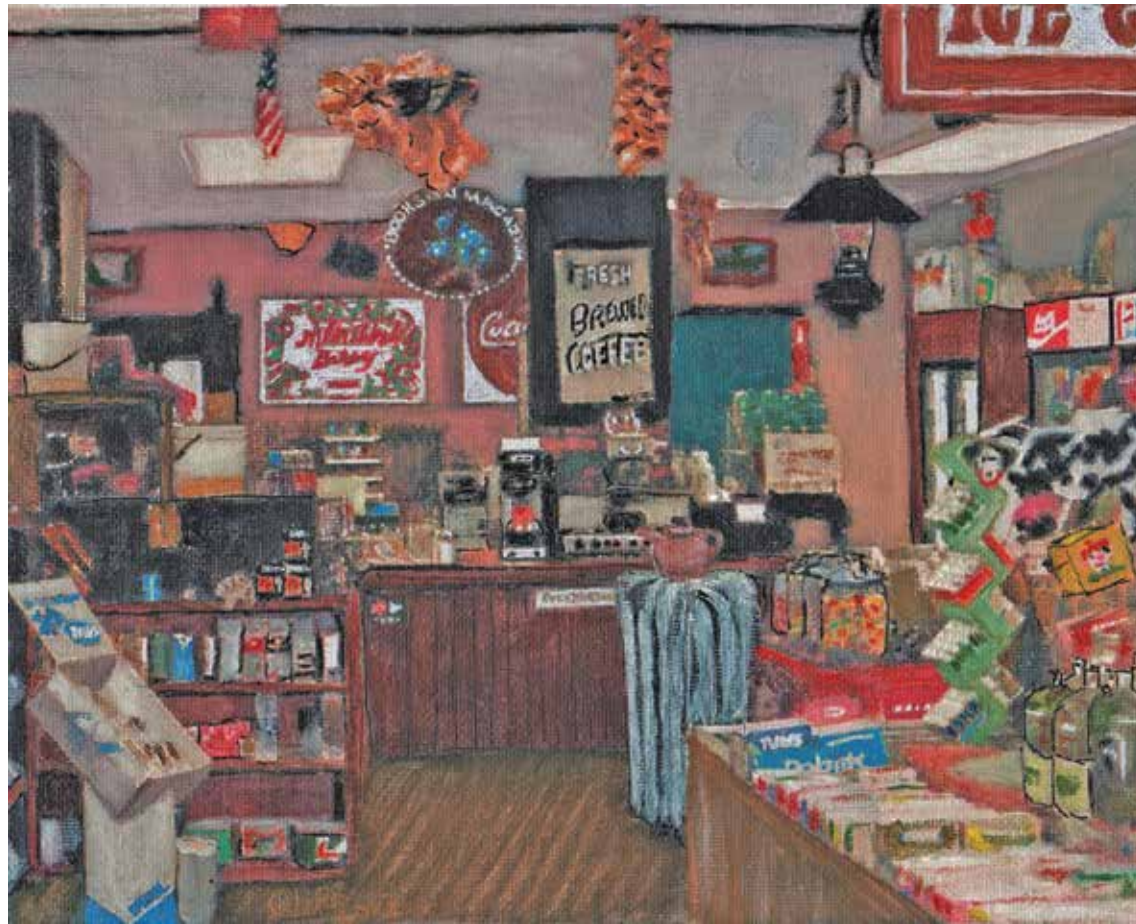
If you ask residents who have lived in Ashland a long time what former business they miss most, many will say Mehitables Bakery in downtown Ashland.

For 1985 to 1998, Mehitables Bakery inhabited 159 Main St. Owned and operated by Frankie Fournier Hagan, the bakery shared space with the Ashland General Store, opened in 1959 by her parents Lenny and Bunny Fournier. Visualize a long wrap-around wood bakery counter set back a bit to the right, tables in the front and back, a general store to the right, old signs and utensils on the walls, and antiques and used books to the left and in a back room up a short flight of stairs. Bulletin boards held flyers, business cards and announcements of Ashland happenings. Shoppers could buy newspapers, greeting cards, grocery items, gifts, magazines, candies and other unique items. The bakery served coffee, muffins, cookies, pastries, pies and other treats.

One of Hagan's fondest memories was the making of Mehitables legendary Thanksgiving pies. Her employees began their 24-hour baking marathon at 6 a.m. on Wednesday. As each pie came out of the oven, enthusiastic volunteers packed them into boxes for an early Thanksgiving Day pickup. The mingled aromas of apple, pumpkin, sweet potato, blueberry, egg custard, lemon meringue and French silk wafted through the air.

"Almost all our baked goods came from my grandmother's, mother's and aunt's recipes," Hagan said. "Before I opened the bakery I got advice from the best bakers in Boston: make everything from scratch and the bakery will be high quality."

The Classical Revival building that housed Mehitables and the General Store was constructed



Mehitables, painting by Cliff Wilson.

in 1838 by local builders Studley and Homer. The bakery had wood floors, a tin ceiling and a long oak counter originally used in the library of Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester, Mass., where Hagan taught school. Hagan named the bakery after the woman baker who built and lived in her historic home at 171 Fountain St. "Mehitable Haven used to bake bread and pastries, pile them into her horse and buggy and head off to Downtown Ashland where she sold them to widowers and others without access to a baker."

Originally part of Hopkinton until Ashland incorporated in 1846, the historic antique housed a number of commercial enterprises. Over the years it has been home to a carpenter shop, a tailor, Romeo's supermarket, Wally's restaurant, a boot busi-

ness and a general store, where it was the exclusive distributor of newspapers in town. Currently, it houses Lunker's Outfitters, a multi-service store founded by avid fisherman. They offer assistance with stoves, fireplaces, and chimneys as well the opportunity to purchase bait, tackle and other fishing equipment.

Memories of a Different Age

Longtime resident Dave Foster recalled fond memories of Mehitables. "My wife and I chose to buy a home in Ashland because it had John Stone's Inn and Mehitables right next to each other. They had a quaintness about them, the last remnants of the way things used to be."

Resident Margie Matteson took her young daughter there every Sunday morning for several years. "I'd pack the stroller and we'd go down the big Prospect Hill, our destination being Mehitables," she said. "They had the most amazing chocolate chip cookies. Not too sweet, really moist and chewy. On warm days, they'd start to melt on the way home."

Matteson also spoke highly of the General Store. "It was like going to a different age. There was always something new. When

you walked in you didn't know where to look first," she recalled. "The store was lit up enough to be able to see, but still dark enough to have a sense of mystery. My husband loved the antique Coca Cola cooler."

But the bakery had another important function: It served as a little town hall. In the mornings, members of the "The Breakfast Club," Tony Santospago, Larry Hunt, John Ellsworth, Barry Bresnick, Gary Ghilani, Archie Beaton and Dave Teller, could be found drinking coffee and discussing local issues at the famous round table. Former Selectmen Dave Teller said, "Any time you went into the bakery, you could find someone to talk with often over the rumble of the nearby train. People dropped in to find out what was going on in town. The people that ran the store were really friendly."

Ronald "Red" Breault, who recently passed away, worked at the general store for 40 years. A beloved Ashland resident before moving to Charlton, his obituary read, "Horseback riding was his passion and he loved nothing more than sharing his love of horses with others. He will be remembered as a very giving man who always had a positive attitude." Employee Vin Rubeo

used to write an inspirational quote and the soup of the day on a black chalkboard outside the store. People often strolled by just to read the quote.

It was also a great place to get signatures for ballot initiatives. For many months, Dave Foster spent every Saturday and Sunday getting signatures for the adoption of the Community Preservation Act, a state-matched initiative that has made it possible to install the fields behind the high school, purchase Warren Woods and repair the clocks on the Telechron Building among other projects.

I actually met Foster at Mehitables when I was drumming up support to save Ashland's historic Town Hall from a demolition. New to town, I got the political ball rolling, as suggested by neighbors, at the Bakery. In that way, it was a central watering hole that brought residents together, a hole that has never been filled.

Hagan sold the bakery business in 1998. It continued with a different owner for another couple of years before closing for good. To this day, long-time residents still lament the closing of Mehitables.

"It was a gathering spot in the Town. We lost that," said Teller. "You can go to Honey Dew and Dunkin Donuts, but the bakery was more personal. They knew who you were."

Matteson concurred. "I get depressed when I think about it. It was one of the best things about downtown Ashland. Nothing in the world like it." She continued, "It was all crammed with stuff and everything was interesting. It was a treat for the senses."

"Ashland lost some of its identity when Mehitables closed," Foster said. "Along with John Stone's, it was a local place where everyone knew your name. It was the last of the last."

Currently, Ashland has no retail bakery. Two opened and failed in the past 10 years, yet a bakery always lands on the most coveted business list. Perhaps someday in the future, a local entrepreneur will stumble on this article in the *Local Pages* archives and decide that downtown Ashland needs a gathering spot. And just maybe, if we're lucky, it will be called Mehitables II and when you walk in to order a homemade Thanksgiving pie the owner will know your name.

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