

Jennie Gaines  
Proprietor  
Kerrs Creek General Store 1982-2006  
By Sarah Clayton

It was an otherwise normal day at the Kerrs Creek Country Store in the early 1980's. Jennie Gaines and her husband, Frank, opened at the usual 6 a.m., offering coffee and breakfast sandwiches—eggs, ham and or sausage on a hamburger bun--to those heading to work in Lexington or Glasgow; a farmer looking for a fan belt for his truck; another for a box of nails; another, bullets—the groundhogs were in the garden again; a couple of tractors rolled in for gas; mothers bought shoes for their children, or sugar for jam-making; the lunch rush of hot dogs and hoagies was over, when a long, black limousine glided up to the single gas pump outside.

Jennie Odell Kayton Rhodenizer Gaines could see it through the screen door from her post behind the counter. A car almost as long as a tractor and wagon.

Jennie (from Rockbridge Baths) and Frank (from Brooklyn, N.Y.) had only recently rented the store (they bought it outright in 1988) and were enjoying meeting the locals, people who came in every morning for breakfast, or stopped by throughout the day to pick up a carton of milk. Maybe some eggs. Beer. A country store had everything, it seemed, though not a lot of choice. They weren't big places. Just convenient. As the limousine chauffeur was discovering.

Frank went out to pump the gas. Jenny stared. Their August world was brittle from drought, and humming with the crackle of insects gleaning the withered fields. Nearby, Kerrs Creek had little to say as it moved sluggishly through its bed of exposed rocks, no longer singing

the aria of spring, that serenade of tumbling mountain water flowing through the valley. It hadn't rained for weeks.

"The kids got out the back seat," says Jennie. "And then Mrs. Kennedy got out and that's when I knew who they was. They wanted gas and to use the bathroom just like anybody else."

"Did you call the newspaper or anything?" I ask, equally agog at such a happening in Kerrs Creek. I'd seen a Mercedes once as a child and, even more thrilling, a Land Rover complete with spare tire and extra gas can clamped on top just like the pictures in National Geographic. But we didn't live in a limousine world here in Rockbridge County.

"I think I was too blowed out of the water to think to do it," says Jennie.

"Was she friendly?" I ask.

"Yes, very cordial."

"Did the children want anything?"

"You know," she says. "I don't remember. I just don't remember. They drove away. I think I was still in shock."

John David Fitzpatrick, who had operated a store over North Mountain near the Longdale Iron Mines, opened the J.D. Fitzpatrick and Sons (the name of the store was later changed to the Kerrs Creek General Store) in 1904, to offer provisions for a series of cabins he rented out nearby. A 1902 article in the Lexington Gazette described it thus: "Mr. John Fitzpatrick, who lives on the premises during the summer months, looking after the interests and comforts of the many visitors who occupy his clean and comfortable cabins that run in

rows to the [Big] Spring which is several hundred yards up the valley. The water is chalybeate [iron-rich] and Sulphur and delightfully cool and refreshing.

“Cabins can be rented for a very small sum per week and parties can keep house, or can get board with Mr. Fitzpatrick who is well fixed for this purpose. The principle amusements are fishing and hunting during the day and game playing at night upon a large square platform, which the genial host has had built for this purpose. Its close proximity to the Alum [Rockbridge Alum Springs, a summer resort to the west over North Mountain] makes it also a desirable place to spend the summer.”

Despite the store being explicitly J.D. Fitzpatrick and Sons, according to the census, John David was more a farmer than a merchant, and there’s no mention of owning cabins. Daniel Snider, born in 1929, has lived in the neighborhood most of his life, and has no memory of any cabins behind Fitzpatrick’s store. Jennie Gaines says when she and Frank took over the store in 1982, there was a small, dilapidated cabin by the creek in such bad shape, Frank and the rest of the members of the Kerrs Creek Volunteer Fire Department used it as a training session and burned it down. The cabins, it seems, had been a short-lived enterprise, perhaps closing down in the Depression, never to be revived.

The 1870 census for Lexington Township has J.D. Fitzpatrick at 8 years old, the first-born child of Delilah Fitzpatrick (1826-1897) and John O’Farrell Fitzpatrick, a carpenter, who was born on Colliers Creek in 1833 and died on Kerrs Creek in 1911. His obituary states that “Mr. Fitzpatrick formerly conducted a store south of town” and had “served as a Confederate soldier in Company C, 14<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry,” during the Civil War. John O’Farrell’s father, of the same name, was born in Ireland in 1800.

The 1880 census for Lexington Township census has J.D. as a farmer and his father as a general merchant (apparently at the store 'south of town').

In 1900, J.D. is in Clifton Forge, twenty-six miles west of Kerrs Creek, employed as a "grocery merchant," and ten years later, he's living with his father, and four grown children in Kerrs Creek, back to farming. His 21-year-old son, William Everett (1888-1969), is running the store and also farming the family land several miles north of the creek where Shumate's Sawmill once stood at the intersection of Fredericksburg Road and Maple Swamp.

John O'Farrell, died in 1911. In the 1920 census, William is still tending store and there's no mention of farming. The Fitzpatricks' 'lodger,' in the 1930 census, John Homer Fitzpatrick (1890-1952), J.D.'s younger brother is listed as, "merchant, general store," and Mr. Snider remembers Homer in the store, but also that something wasn't quite right with him mentally and he ended up in an institution.

J.D died in 1934 around the time he handed over the store to his son, now William Sr. and his daughter-in-law, Vallie. They were living in the house they built behind the store where Jennie Gaines lives today with her son, Wayne Jr., his partner, Rhonda Hostetter Rhodenizer.

William and Vallie's daughter, Marjorie Fitzpatrick Hollandsworth, recalled her father's tenure at the store in a May 2006 article written by Doug Chase for the News Gazette: "I remember people coming to the store on horses from up in the hollows," she said. "There was a fat, pot-bellied stove in the rear of the store and local folks like Moore Harper and James Laird would drop by and visit and talk. Everyone called my father 'Mr. Willie' and my mother 'Miss Vallie'." My mother taught at the old Highland Belle School," whose battered hulk looms today over the center of the Kerrs Creek Community like the Ark on Mount Ararat.

“My mother always had a huge garden at the house with grand flower beds and shrubs,” said Marjorie. “There was a white picket fence and a huge oak tree, now gone in the back yard....I think goats got loose in the yard and destroyed many of the beautiful things.” Marjorie was one of the founders of the Lexington Garden Club and, later, president of the West Virginia Garden Club when she moved away from Rockbridge County. “My father loved that store. He worked from 6:30 in the morning until 9 at night. He loved the people and loved the store just as my grandfather did before him.

Doug Chase, who was a classmate of mine from sixth grade through high school, mentioned in his article meeting a 16-year-old local boy, Brian Smith, the day he went out to interview Jennie Gaines about the closing of the store after her 24 years at the helm.

“This place has a lot of memories for me,” Brian said, looking around at the nearly bare shelves. “When I was a little kid, before we’d go up on the mountain, we’d come here, and I’d get a bag of popcorn and a drink. Every time I came in, there were gadgets and gizmos back there. You could always just wander around and look at all that stuff if your parents got to talking and you got bored.”

I, too, used to come to this store from time to time in the early 60s if I was down this end of the creek. Usually when Jeanne Anderson, my Highland Belle friend, and I were out exploring, or visiting our classmate, Connie Berry, who lived farther east along the creek, or later, in high school, stopping in for a cold drink on the way back from swimming in Goshen Pass. In my memory, the store is always filled with men. Just hanging out.

“It was like a men’s gossip session in here,” says Jennie. “The stove was gone by the time Frank and I took over, but the men still gathered. There was chairs and benches. Some of them would stand.

“Several people told me that, after we closed the store, they started meetin’ at the dumpsters up the road. I thought that was hilarious. But sad, too. It’s good to have somewhere to meet.”

Harvey Hotinger, who’s lived a mile away most of his life, said in Doug’s article, “this was the first store I ever recognized as a store in my life. When cash was tight, folks used to take eggs over there and trade them for groceries. I could fill up my car with gas for two dollars.”

The store burned to the ground in 1944. The Rockbridge County News reported: “The blaze, which is thought to have been caused by an electrical short circuit, was discovered by a passing neighbor. Mr. Fitzpatrick was in the front of the store at the time and unaware that the rear of the store was in flames....The two-story frame building burned for three hours while firemen fought with a single stream hose with water pumped from nearby Kerrs Creek.”

Mr. Hotinger remembered the fire. He was 13 at the time and recalled the excitement of it all, the smoke and sirens. “Dad wouldn’t let us go near it until it burned down completely. Nothing there but hot beds of coal. I mean, it burnt. But the cans in there were just like fireworks. They’d swell up and burst. Went up in the air about 15 feet. That was exciting....But then, I understand, and I think I’m right on this, there was a little brick filling station and he [Mr. Willie] opened that up as the store. I remember pumping the gas. That was always interesting. There was a glass thing and you turned the handle to fill it with one, two , three, four or five gallons, then you’d take the hose out and stick it in the car and it worked just fine.

“A little place like this didn’t get the fancier pumps for a long time after they came in, said Harvey. “they probably didn’t have electrical power out to the pumps so had to do it by hand.”

“We were an ‘all serve’ gas station,” says Jennie. “We pumped your gas, washed your windshield, checked the oil. No self-serve at that time.”

The kerosene dispenser, operated much like the gas pump, still sits near the front door of the now closed store, waiting...perhaps remembering the old days when things were so much simpler. Or seemed to be. Perhaps hoping to be called back into service. Perhaps remembering the day Ethel Kennedy came by.

Over the years, quite a few luminaries have stopped by the store, including Senator John Warner, and Representatives Bob Goodlatte and Ben Cline.

“Sometimes they’d put their election signs in our window,” says Jennie. “We considered being educational. If the representative from the other party came in, we would put their sign in the window, too.”

After the big fire, Mr. Willie did run the store out of the brick filling station until the main building that stands today was constructed, then carried on as before until the mid-1960s. He died in 1969. His son, William Jr., ‘Billy’ or ‘Sonny,’ as the locals called him, took over the business.

Jennie Gaines was newly married in 1966, living in Rockbridge Baths where she grew up. Her first husband, Wayne Rhodenizer, was serving with the army in Vietnam.

I remember Wayne from Highland Belle days. He and his brother, Kenny, were in seventh grade with Philip when I was in the fifth grade. They were grown men by that time, probably 15 or 16 years old. Wayne looked like Elvis Presley, full-lipped and sleepy-eyed.

“I started goin’ with Wayne when I was 12 years old,” said Jennie. “I graduated from high school when I was 17, went to work for Dr. Ben Anderson, and in two weeks Wayne and I was married. We was plannin’ on getting married the next year and, well, he got the notice where he would probably get drafted. He got to talkin’ and said he wanted to get married before he went in the army.

“I can remember my mama goin’ up to the courthouse with us and sayin’—‘I don’t want you to get married, but I don’t want you to be like me and run off. I’ll sign for you.’ I was seventeen. Wayne come home from Vietnam on leave at Christmas, and Wayne Jr. was born in September. Wayne Sr. didn’t get to see him until the next April, when Wayne Jr. was seven months old. He told me he didn’t even know he was a new dad until Wayne Jr. was three days old. He was out drivin’ a supply truck [in the jungles of Vietnam], making a delivery.”

“Wayne had a different attitude when he came back from the war,” says Jennie. “He would drink. He wouldn’t talk about his experiences in Vietnam. When we had problems, he would say, ‘I’m so sorry. I won’t do it no more.’ But at that young age, I was thinkin’, ‘I’ve got a child. He needs his daddy.’ It hurt me. But I stayed on.”

In January 1977, Jennie went to work for the Rockbridge County Sheriff’s Department.

“He started going to church with me but within a year there were more problems,” she says. “I just said, ‘I can’t take this anymore.’ We put in for a separation. It was devastatin’. I got a second job to support Wayne Jr. and me. I thought, if I have to scrub floors to keep Wayne Jr.,



I'll scrub floors. He's not gonna pay because Wayne and I couldn't get along. So I went to work for a security agency. Worked ball games in Charlottesville. Dances at Augusta Expo [in Fishersville]. I worked a wrestlin' match there one time. I was supposed to guard Ric (sic) Flair [born Richard Morgan Fliehr, a Hall of Famer with World Wrestling Entertainment and the National Wrestling Alliance, and regarded by some as the 'greatest professional wrestler of all time.']

"He was getting dressed in the girls' bathroom, and I was outside guardin' the door, and when he come out he stood there talkin' to me just like you and me right now," says Jennie.

"But he was a big man and when he got in the ring, he was the dirty guy. Mean.

"So I'm standin' there and here comes over this other big, strong man and said that, if I needed any help guarding Flair, he'd be there for me. He'd help me out. I thought, 'what in the world. I don't know you.' But he'd stand near the bathroom door when Ric was changing. I looked like Annie Oakley with a gun on my hip an' all.

"Then I was workin' at Expo again. A father and daughter country singers were playin' and I had to keep the people from gettin' up on the stage. And here comes this big ole man again. And he said, 'you've worked mighty hard tonight. Would you like to go home and change and come back and enjoy the night show.'

"Well, out of the blue, I said, 'yeah.'

"I'd never done anythin' like that before. I think it was God's way of workin'. When I went to get in Frank's car. That was his name. Frank. There was a white Bible on the seat. And I thought, 'this was meant to be. This is a good sign. We went back to the 7 o'clock show.

“Afterwards, we went to Shoney’s to eat. We started datin’. But I was only separated, not divorced yet, and was thinkin’ ‘I didn’t want to ever get married again.’ But Frank changed my mind. He asked Daddy could he marry me. Mama was standin’ there and said, ‘at her age, if she don’t know what she’s doin’ now, she never will.’”

“I made my own weddin’ dress. I didn’t want a white dress, you know. I ended up with a cream-colored one and a straw hat instead of a veil. I learned to sew in high school. From Mrs. Dunlap. Lois Dunlap. I loved her. From what she taught me, I made curtains, bedspreads, my clothes. Whatever I wanted.”

Lois Alphin Dunlap was the mother of the Dunlap boys—Billy, Tommy and Hootie—that were steady playmates of Philip and mine in our Kerrs Creek days. Both sets of grandparents—the Alphins and the Dunlaps—were early settlers to the area, and had big farms—our playgrounds--that got cut in two when Interstate 64 came through.

“The Richards, Carlson and Alicia, from West Virginia, had the store then, back in the late 70’s, early 80’s. After we were married, Frank and I were living over in Rockbridge Baths but Frank would come over and talk to ‘em. ‘Fore we got married, Frank fell and ruptured another disc in his back. He’d had disc problems before and wasn’t able to work after this last fall. He wanted to do somethin’ but he wasn’t able to hold down a 40-hour a week job.

“So, we rented the store, bought the merchandise, in 1982. Mr. Willie’s son still owned the buildin’. We called him Billy. Frank was kind of the overseer. My dad—everyone called him ‘Pappy’--loved to come in and pump gas for people. And, at Christmas he loved to bag the candy. He’d divide the ten-pound bags of bon-bon bars, coconut candy, double-dipped

chocolate peanuts, and the peanut candy that came in little squares, gumdrops, things like that, into one-pound bags.

“Daddy and Frank would sit in their chairs an’ if a pretty girl come in for gas, they would try to beat each other to the gas pump. Now, if a man come in or an old woman, they’d just set there. And I’d have to go out and take care of the customer. Or Barbara [Barbara Hostetter] did. Well, when we first went in, it was Mary Plogger helped us. She was Mary Southers before she married. So she worked the store till I come in from my office job. Eventually she had to leave to take care of her husband, and Barbara started helping out. I was working full time at the sheriff’s office and was the store bookkeeper and clerk on my days off. I enjoyed it all.

“Frank and I’d get up at 5 a.m. and go over and fix the breakfast sandwiches. Mary would come in at 7-7:30 and I’d get dressed and go to work at the sheriff’s office. Get off at four and come in and work the store till nine. Then we had weekends to do. I mean, it was long hours but we were young. We was together. We’d eat at the store or go out afterwards to Howard Johnson’s. Get to bed between 10:30 and 11:00. Back up at 5:00. We enjoyed what we were doing.

“Like all the old country stores, we purchased the ham, bologna and cheese in ‘rolls’ and sliced them to the customers’ desires. We sold lottery tickets and fishing and game licenses. We were a check station for game in hunting season.

“After a while, you knew your customers. What they wanted. Mostly Kerrs Creek people goin’ to work in Lexington or over to James Lees [the carpet factory 20 miles away in Glasgow]. Start comin’ in a little before 6 a.m. We had a little grill in the back. We could fry eggs on that.

We didn't have a griddle till much later. Just skilletts. Then at lunch we had hoagies and hot dogs. We served 30, maybe 40 people a day.

"Frank always said 'give 'em good food. Don't slack on it.'

"A lot of the ladies in Kerrs Creek would come down an' talk to Frank," says Jennie. "Talk to him about their problems. He was like a big ole Teddy bear. Six foot two. And I told him, 'you're like the grandfather of the community. You know that?' I think it made him feel good. When his health failed, some would come in and say, 'well, you still sittin' in that chair?' And that would get him down. But he just couldn't do anything, you know, with his back the way it was, and getting' worse with other health issues too.

"Several times people would come through, and they'd be hungry but didn't have any money. We'd fix 'em somethin'. One time Frank happened to be there with me. And a man come in, said he was hungry, but couldn't pay. Frank give 'im a trash bag, said, 'go ahead an' clean up the driveway for me. Then come back in here.'"

"I was shocked. I said, 'Frank, you shouldn't have done that. That's gonna' make that man feel terrible.'

"He said, 'no.' He said, 'the people really want to work, you know. That lifts their esteem. Makes 'em feel like they've worked for somethin'. It's not a give out.'

"We didn't give away cigarettes. And not what I call junk food," says Jennie. Maybe you'd get someone off the interstate that needed gas an' they was on their way to UVA Hospital. We'd fill up their tank. And fix a bag lunch—sandwiches, canned food and milk. Things like that. We'd tell 'em to help someone else when they could.

“The New Monmouth Church up here, if someone contacted them an’ they needed food or gas, Harold Hotinger [Harvey’s brother] would call us and say, ‘this is the limit,’ giving me a certain amount of money to spend on them. ‘Do what they need.’

“But, if they come right straight to us, we didn’t send ‘em to the church even though we were members up there.”

*I remembered the people, always men, coming to our door when I lived in Birmingham, Alabama, in the late 1950s. Mother always fixed them something. Gave them a drink of water or glass of Tang, and a sandwich, but always kept herself between me and them though I don’t recall anything but politeness. My mother’s and theirs.*

*And my English Granny telling me of her childhood in London. She was next to the youngest of eight children, and had braces on her legs when she was young for rickets, a bone-weakening disease caused by “prolonged and extreme vitamin D deficiency.” But, Gran said, if anyone ever came to their door hungry, her mother, Catherine Sarah, for whom I am named, would share anything they had with them.*

*Granny was bow-legged from the side effects of rickets, but she was also an intrepid walker, and regularly put two miles under her feet well into her nineties. She broke her hip when she was 95 and was told she’d never walk again. I remember watching her in the physical therapy room at the Stonewall Jackson Hospital, so short the parallel bars were about eye-level, her thin, white hair coiffed like a small snowdrift, her beautifully manicured nails in stark contrast to the anemic, blue-veined aging skin, gripping the bars and slowly, false-teeth clenched, dragging herself along step by hesitant step. But walking. One didn’t tell Gran she*

*couldn't do something. She embodied the grit of the British Empire. Like the settlers around House Mountain. They would have never survived their long journey to Virginia, if they hadn't had grit. In spades.*

“When one of our customers suffered, maybe illness, accidents or death, Frank and I would visit and take them a ‘care package.’ When Pappy died in 1993 and Frank died in 1994, our neighbors, friends and customers responded the same way. It really felt like one big family.

“When I closed the store,” says Jennie, “as far as I can remember, I had only three accounts that hadn’t paid up. And two of ‘em were for less than ten dollars. That’s outta 20/25 accounts we had a month. People on social security would pay after their checks come in. Some people got paid every two weeks. Some were on a monthly payroll. They come in when they got paid.”

“I got the most enjoyment at Halloween,” she says. “I mean, churches look down on Halloween now. But, back then, I dressed up like a witch one year. I dressed up as an army soldier once, with camouflage and Frank’s boots and a hat, and fixed my face. Sometimes we’d have a hundred kids come in for candy. All free.”

“But, did you have penny candy,” I ask, remembering walking down route 60 from our house to Smith’s Store about a half mile up the creek from Fitzpatrick’s, as it was at that time, picking up soda bottles as I went, and cashing them in at the store for two cents apiece. On a good day, I had ten cents or so to blow on penny candy. Not a candy bar. It was the boxes of different small candies behind the glass-fronted cabinet that called to us. So much choice. So

many different flavors. This was my nine-year-old idea of heaven. And to have my own money to indulge as I wished. It was a heady time.

“I remember Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” says Jennie. “And Donnie. I went to school with Donnie, and we all went to church together. It didn’t seem like our stores were ever competing against each other. It was never like that. Just the good old days with the mom and pop stores.

“We had bars of candy at that time,” says Jennie. “Behind the glass. Our penny candy we had in...it wasn’t jars...just containers. I remember when it went from a penny to three cents. Then, when I came out the store, it was five cents. Imagine, five cents for a fireball!

“In the spring and summer, we’d get fresh produce from the farmers around here. When we could get it. Then, when Dave’s Produce [a roadside farmer’s market on Rt. 60 east of Lexington. Now Herman’s Produce] come in, we go over and buy from him. We had ice, drink machines outside. Even a pay phone when we first come in until cell phones took over.”

“Sometimes the local kids would sell us fishing worms they’d collected. Then we’d sell them. We stocked a small amount of fishing gear. Children used to do all that kind of neat stuff. Not anymore. We didn’t barter for eggs. Salmonella. You have to have that federal FDA stamp on things, like your meats, and your eggs and your butter. Now, I understand other stores took eggs and things but we did not. I felt like working at the sheriffs’ department, I had to be above board.”

“Did you have salt fish?” I ask. These barrels of dried fish, like pale, flat ghosts floating in a salt brine, were in every country store, next to the counter on which sat a perennial jar of pickled eggs and a canister of Fireballs. But fish? And so odd looking. We never ate them and I don’t know why. My parents ate a wide variety of very disturbing things: pigs brains; pigs feet;

scrabble, a sort of fried loaf made from pig offal; shad roe; cow tongue. I was just eye level with the dining room table and seeing that wave of tongue dead ahead, and knowing what it was, and that I was expected to eat it, filled me with dread. But my parents weren't too rough on us; we had to taste everything but we didn't have to eat it all. Only, you didn't dessert if you didn't eat everything on your plate. I was willing to sacrifice dessert, but thrilled that salt fish never showed up on our table. Who knows, though, I might even have liked salt fish and ham.

"You could get them in a three-pound or 25-pound bucket," says Jennie. "We always kep' 'em. They were a good seller. Like the cheese. Daisy June cheese. Called that 'cause it was made in June. Come in a round box. We called it 'rat cheese.'"

"Mother called it June Daisy," I say.

"Well, Daisy June was what it was on the invoices," says Jennie. "One day someone comes in the store and asks why it's called that and Frank, he'd always be joking, he said that Daisy was the name of the cow that the milk come from for the cheese.

"I said, 'Frank, don't you be saying things like that.'"

"That's why people come in here, Jennie,' he'd say."

In 1994, Frank went into the Roanoke hospital to have three heart by-passes and ended with five. Barbara Hostetter increased her hours at the store so Jennie could be with him.

"He said it felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest," says Jennie, who, with her mother, stayed in the waiting room until the doctor came out and told her that the operation went well and he was in recovery. "We visited him then, and I said, 'Frank, I'm goin' home with Mama an' rest tonight but I'll be back up here early in the mornin', soon as Barbara gets to the



store to open up.' He couldn't speak because all these tubes was in him, but he held up his hand, giving the okay sign.

"Well, three o'clock in the mornin', I get a call from the hospital, they'd had to take him back to the operatin' room. He was having problems with his heart. He went into a coma, and he never come out of it. That was in 1994. Daddy had died in 1993. June '95 my mama died. So I've had some journeys, but God's been good to me.

"Barbara held the whole store together when Frank was in the hospital and after he died. I went over and helped with the breakfast sandwiches but she looked after the store in them days more than I did. Then her father was in the hospital and I said, 'Barbara, you just take off. You do whatever you need to do right now. You've done for me. This is the least I can do for you.' And that's when I began to wonder about closing the store but I just couldn't come to grips with that. I just had this feelin' that, no, this is not the time.

"Then I got sick and my temperature just kept goin' up. They thought I had a virus. Possibly pneumonia. Dr. Ellington sent me to Roanoke and I found out I had Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome. It's kind of like SIDS in babies is what they told me. It was stress-related. The doctor in Roanoke told my family I had a 50-50 chance of comin' out of it."

"But, out I came. My journey on earth was not yet complete.

"You know, when I come from the hospital, I was out of it for about six weeks. Didn't know I was in this world. Barbara would come in and get the store goin' in the mornin' and then a neighbor, Ludwig Stang, a retired New York city fireman, come in to help.

"Barbara would be in the back there fixin' sandwiches," says Jennie, "and Ludwig stayed at the register. Just for free...just for free. He was not a New York kind of person."

“I went back to work in November,” she says. “In time for huntin’ season. I always liked huntin’ season. We was a check station so the hunters would come in to sign up what they killed. Frank kept a record of who killed what on the back wall.”

But after Frank’s death and Jennie’s illness, the store never again stayed open till nine at night. It’s new closing time was 7 p.m.

“If hunters had game to check in after that, they knew to come knock on my door. I’d go over and check ‘em in. Never too late ‘cause they had to be out of the woods by dark, accordin’ to the law. But sometimes, if they killed somethin’ right before dark, dependin’ on where they was at, it could take a good while to drag it out.

“That was interestin’ to have the game come in,” she says. “We’d get five or six hundred deer a huntin’ season. I miss it. Even now, in November, I get to thinkin’. You know...it’s huntin’ season. You’d look forward to it. You could always tell when a kid got their first deer. They’d be so jubilant. You were only allowed I think one deer back ‘en. But a lot of people needed that meat for their table, you know.

“We posted all the game that got checked in on the wall, so all could see it, and even sponsored a ‘Big Game Contest’ each year.

“Last winter, my grandson, Travis, got his first bear. Twelve years old. His momma’s a bear hunter, too.”

I’m getting ready to leave, filled to over-flowing with the landscape of this woman’s rich life.

Jennie pauses in her crocheting to feel along the edge of the latest ‘prayer blanket’ she’s working on.

“You know,’ she says, satisfied she’s in the right place for the next stitch and plunging in the crochet hook. “I got an education in that store that I never got at school. Keeping books, lettin’ people charge, givin’ ‘em credit, ordering what we needed.”

“But you didn’t get a chance to talk to Mrs. Kennedy,” I say.

“They were just passin’ through,” she says. “Frank talked to ‘em. He could tell you more.”

*Jennie Gaines spends her days now making lap blankets for people. She started in the mid-1980s and to date has made thousands, giving them away to birthing mothers, sick children, dialysis patients, people in Hospice care, neighbors and friends. Despite her compromised sight, she can still make them by feel and, this year has sent out 259 blankets. “It uplifts me,” she says, “to do for people, to make somebody happy.”*