

The Clayton outdoor library



By Mary Cook

Where can you find a library that's open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, has no membership cards or fines for late returns, and operates on the honour system? Well, there is such a library right here in the Ottawa Valley.

Granted, it's not your conventional library. There's no librarian, you can borrow as many books as you want, and the selection is limited. But it's been in operation since the late '70s, and its rules and regulations suit the community just fine.

This library had a humble beginning. It started in a few cardboard boxes in Gemmill's General Store in Clayton, a small village about 15 or 16 kilometres southwest of Almonte, a store that has been in continuous operation since 1859, and is now owned and operated by Shelly and Chris Armstrong and known as the Clayton General Store. "We have every intention of keeping the library operating, just as it has been for decades," Shelley said.

So how did the library get its start, and what has kept it going for so many years? Well, it actually did start in a couple of boxes of used books in the Gemmill General Store. Customers would root through the boxes, take a few, and often brought back more than they had borrowed. It got to the point where there were too many books to keep in boxes, so shelves were built on the front veranda outside the store, and soon the shelves were full too. And like Topsy, the library just grew.

While the weather is favourable, the shelves stay outside, but once the snow comes and the books could be damaged, the whole library is crammed into the store for the winter months. It's heavily used indoors or out.

So what can you find on the shelves of this unique library? Just about everything. There are children's books, text books, romances, westerns and how-to books. "We don't put out magazines, because they blow away," Shelley told us.

It's no surprise to the Armstrongs, who were born and raised in the area, that there

is absolutely no vandalism, and the system has never been abused. “This is a very honest community, and we just don’t expect that kind of behaviour out here in Clayton,” Shelley said.

The library isn’t used only by the local community. In the summer Clayton grows to include many tourists and summer campers from as far away as the United States and Toronto. They flock to the library shelves and are thrilled that there are no rules and regulations like they have in the cities. Tourists especially, like the fact that if they can’t sleep, or come home late, they can wander down to the Clayton General Store in the dead of night, and pick up a few books to read at their leisure.

And it’s the community that keep the shelves full. “People bring books all the time. We often don’t even see them doing it. We will just notice a new batch of books to add to the shelves,” Shelley said.

The Clayton General Store is reminiscent of the old-time stores once dotting every rural community in the Valley for two centuries, but now carrying many items, and offering unheard of services in the early years in this part of Canada. Now you can rent a movie, buy a lottery ticket, gas up your car, and have a steam-cooked hot dog. But like the old-time general stores, the Clayton General Store sells nails, operates the local post office, sells fishing licences, and carries a complete line of groceries. It’s open seven days a week, Monday to Friday, opening its doors at six in the morning, Saturday the first customer usually wanders in around 7 a.m., and on Sunday the Armstrongs can sleep in. They don’t open until 8 a.m.!

And unlike any other general store, anywhere, you can get an armful of good reading material any time of the day or night, and it doesn’t cost you a cent. That in itself makes the Clayton General Store unique.

This article originally appeared in the May 2010 issue of Forever Young Newspaper.