



A Cumberland River steamboat arrives in Granville in the early 1900s.

Resurrection of a steamboat town

The rich history of tiny Granville is helping to ensure its future

Story and photos by Mark Johnson

Downtown Granville, located 12 miles northeast of Carthage on Highway 53, is easily small enough to hit a golf ball over on a still day.

With a nine-iron.

Here in this tiny Jackson County town, you can confidently stroll down the yellow line of Clover Street, commonly referred to as “Main Street,” without fear of oncoming traffic — chances are, there is none. And when there is, you can easily hear it coming from far away, since the only competition for ambient noise is most likely the occasional buzzing bee or barking dog.

“When the sun is shining pretty and you look down the street past the general store, the little doctor’s office, the museum, and the Methodist

church, it almost feels like a village in Connecticut,” says Harold Sutton, proprietor of Ben Sutton Store & General Merchandise, one of Granville’s landmarks. “It’s just cozy.”



Just down the street, bordering the backyards of a row of historic Granville homes, Cordell Hull Lake laps gently at a rocky shoreline that used to be 300 feet further away before a 1972 Tennessee Valley Authority dam project turned this stretch of the Cumberland River into a leisure lake.

The docile lake waters belie the excitement of the arriving and departing steamboats of the early 1900s, back when the town served as

a bustling agricultural hub from which area farmers marketed and shipped their products.

Strong whistle blasts from downriver would announce the arrival of a steamboat and trigger an immediate discharge of children from churches and schools, sending them running to the boat landing to see what treasures the docking boat had stored on its lower decks. Stories are told of frustrated schoolteachers who devised shortcuts to the boat landing solely to intercept excited schoolchildren.

Located within the town limits at that time were several Cumberland River ferries and two large warehouses that handled the redistribution of produce and dry goods.

The riverboats were also a favored means of leisure travel. Many area residents who made the three-day cruise to Nashville enjoyed opulent conditions on the upper deck, including staterooms, gourmet foods, and excellent service.

Over the years, paved roads and automobiles replaced the riverboats, and the main industry of the town disappeared. Though agriculture has persisted in the area, many of the buildings that comprised the once

busy town are now gone — with a few notable exceptions.

One of these is the Ben Sutton Store building, which began its existence in the 1890s as the Cooper Store.

Store now being renovated

Harold Sutton, who purchased and began renovating the building in 2000, explains that even though the store has changed operators several times during its history, it has always functioned as a general mercantile.

“They carried all sorts of goods in here,” Sutton says. “From hard candy and dry goods to ice cream and hardware — you name it.”

Sutton, a retired building contractor from Mt. Juliet, says he fell in love with the town after noticing an advertisement for Granville’s annual Heritage Day Festival in 2000 and deciding to attend.

“I’d never even heard of Granville until that day,” he says. “I told my wife, Beverly, ‘Let’s go see this little town.’ I was taken with the

store at first glance and thought, ‘Here’s a real opportunity for us to be involved with something special.’”

Part of Sutton’s fascination with the store was due to his shared surname with its most famous owner, Ben Sutton, who was reputed to be a



A view of downtown Granville shows the Ben Sutton Store, which is now being restored.



LEFT: Randall Clemons, left, and Harold Sutton survey the wraparound balcony of the Ben Sutton store. RIGHT: In the Granville Museum, Clemons stands behind the teller window of the original Security Bank and Trust of Granville, opened in 1931.



“character” by local townspeople. Though the current owner has yet to find a connection in his family tree, he wonders if his family might have originated in the area.

“I haven’t found the link yet, but I bet I will,” says Sutton.

When he first opened up the building, which had been unoccupied for nearly 30 years, Sutton says he was amazed to discover many original items not only intact but in near mint condition. He found jars of produce still on the shelves, typewriters and scales, clocks and books, oak-and-glass display cases, and many other items one would expect to find in an old general store.

Perhaps most exciting was the discovery of numerous bound ledger books, dating to the 1890s, that contain handwritten records of every store transaction.

Granville historian and native Randall Clemons recalls his grandmother’s stories of shopping in the store as a newlywed.

“She told us she bought every single item for her new home at the general store,” he says. “I’m determined to go through all those ledgers until I find her entries. I think that’ll be really neat.”

“It’s just amazing,” Sutton says, gesturing to a row of high, dusty shelves where the books are lined up. “We simply haven’t had time to go through all of them yet.”

Delighting local residents

Within one year, Sutton and a small group of friends had not only saved the building from the brink of collapse but restored it to a level of authenticity that shocks and delights former residents who shopped there in the old days.

“Oh, when people come through the door, you should see their faces,” Sutton says, smiling. “They didn’t think they’d ever see this place again and feel like they’ve stepped back in time.”

Clemons, whose family moved to Carthage in the late 1960s when the rising lake claimed most of their farmland, says the Sutton store and the

Granville Museum, in combination with Granville’s annual Heritage Day Festival, which is held each May, are breathing new life into the old town.

“We expect 3,000 people this year for Heritage Day [May 24],” says Clemons, who is chairman and CEO of Wilson Bank and Trust in Lebanon. “The street will be packed, Harold will sell out of ice cream; we’ll have music and square dancing — it’ll be great.”

Clemons says the Granville Museum was created and dedicated in 1999 by a group of past and current residents to honor the bicentennial of the town’s settlement and to preserve the vacated Granville Church of Christ building, where the museum is located.

“We never imagined how the museum would grow,” says Clemons, who serves as the museum president. “It’s unreal how many people have brought in photographs and memorabilia.”

The museum contains hundreds of historical pieces donated by townspeople, including many photographs, quilts, signs, and items for a room dedicated to Granville’s military veterans.

Clemons says the goal of the museum committee is to preserve the town’s rich history and charm while reintroduc-

ing commerce to the area in a positive way.

“We’d love to see more of these old buildings renovated and fixed up,” he says. “And with the festival events we have, and the Sutton store receiving interest, I see good things for this town in the future.”

“Seems like every time we feel like slowing down, things just get better,” adds Sutton, laughing. “Heck, I’d much rather be here talking and visiting with people than sitting at home watching television. And if we sell a little something at the same time, well, that’s okay, too.”



Granville lies just to the left of scenic Cordell Hull Lake.



Seated on the mercantile’s famous whittled-down bench are the Sutton Store owners, then and now — Harold, left, and Ben, who is now deceased. The image of Ben is from a photo taken on this same bench in front of the store in the 1950s. — Photo illustration by Mark Johnson

Upcoming events in Granville

Granville’s Fifth Annual Heritage Day Festival will be held on Saturday, May 24, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Events include antique car and tractor shows, a forestry wildlife simulator, bluegrass music, square dancing, and a history parade. Old-time exhibitions will be held, including a working gristmill, blacksmith’s shop, woodworking, soap-making, and candle-making. A Civil War program will feature living history, battle field hospital, and Civil War service demonstrations. Visitors can also expect old-time cooking and candy as well as buggy rides.

The Ben Sutton Store and Granville Museum will be open throughout the day. The museum will also be open from noon to 3 p.m. each Saturday from June through October. The Sutton Store will be open on Saturdays throughout that period, too. For more information about Heritage Day or the Granville Museum, call Randall Clemons at 931-653-4511 or visit www.granvillemuseum.com. For more information about the Ben Sutton Store, call Harold Sutton at 615-754-9838.