Architecture Around Us
By Lu Donnelly

Hays Hardware, Chicora

One of the pleasures of driving through Pennsylvania's winter landscape is finding unusual places to stop and browse. One of my favorites is the Hays Hardware store in Butler County. This may be a surprise, but it's well worth the trip. The wooden store in the tiny hillside town of Chicora is as close as most of us will ever come to time-travel. Ed Huber, the great grandson of the store's founder, prides himself on being able to sell a single nail rather than pre-packaged nails tightly sealed in plastic. He and Mildred Parker, an employee for 53 years, sell straw, plants, and fresh-picked corn (in season) on the wide wooden front porch sheltered by a deep overhang.

This is no potpourri-selling tourist site, but an honest-to-goodness hardware store with wooden floors, the original cash register labeled “The Peck,” and floor-to-ceiling shelves, many with their original markings in script. The storefront has a pair of three-sided bay windows and two sets of double glass-paned doors. Between the entrances is a windowed office, complete with the original safe, from which the proprietor can survey his customers as they enter the store. The back room is piled high with the tools accumulated over 100 years in the hardware business and still heated with a Dexter wood stove. The rest of the building relies on a coal-burning furnace in the basement.

Chicora Borough, with 4,000 residents on the banks of Buffalo Creek, was settled as Barnhart Mills in 1795. It boomed under its new name of “Millerstown” when oil was discovered nearby in 1873. The population increased rapidly but unregulated oil wells and residential heating by natural gas led to five devastating fires there. One in 1874 destroyed 28 buildings, while another in 1892 burned the 10-year-old Hays Hardware to the ground. Founder Edward F. Hays rebuilt on the same site, opening in October 1892, the same year the borough's name was changed to Chicora.

(Chicora is the name of a South Carolina Indian tribe, still in existence, but the town was perhaps named for the Steamship Chicora, built c. 1891 for winter passage on Lake Michigan and lost in a January 1895 storm.)

Carpenters were plentiful in an area where wooden oil rigs, storage barrels, and new housing were constantly needed. The crew who built the store, using 2-by-12 joists in the basement and pine flooring, put it together in five months. A generous stairway to the second story, where larger items like furniture and bicycles were once displayed, is highlighted by a cherry newel post crowned by a wooden ball as big as a child's head. Heavy items are still raised and lowered from the upper floor by a hand-powered, rope-pulled elevator with an oak grille. The moldings along the tops of the shelves and the spindles outlining the storefront windows are all turned on lathes in styles outlined in the architectural catalogues of the era. Even
the brackets and half-moon nameplate on the façade are intact; these pieces of wood are often the first things stripped from an older building just before aluminum siding is applied. Here, all the decorative elements of a building from the 1890s have been carefully preserved.

While this store may be a jaw-dropping surprise to urbanites, there are two other stores selling general merchandise in Jefferson County that have many of their original fittings as well: the Truman store in Sigel, and Coolspring in the small town of that name. These stores are to be cherished and patronized, not only for their uniqueness, but for their owners and devoted employees who are such fine stewards of their traditions.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.