

# Great Falls CONNECTION

## The Day the Ice Cream Melted

Residents lament loss of Thelma's Country Store and ice cream shop.

By Aranya Tomseth

Wednesday, August 15, 2007

It was in August of 1970 – exactly 37 years ago – that Cathy Smith and her family moved into their new home in Great Falls. They were experiencing the usual August 90-degree heat wave, and at that time, Smith's home had no air conditioning and no screens.

"One of the first things the neighbors told us about, after Buck's store, was Thelma's," said Smith. "I was a bit leery when we drove up the first time – here was this less than pristine store in the middle of a cow pasture. Within a few minutes, however, Thelma and Frank had made us welcome. After one taste of that ice cream and we knew we had found a jewel."

From that point on, a trip to Thelma and Frank Feighery's general store became a treat for the whole family.

"We would sit on the door step eating our ice cream, watch the cows and ogle Frank's aqua-car," said Smith. "The cows would come over to the fence and eat the cones for anyone who couldn't quite finish. Thelma always welcomed us like old friends."

Like many local youths, Smith's son eventually worked at Thelma's part-time to earn money, and when her grandchildren moved to Great Falls, they continued the family tradition of going to Thelma's for ice cream.

Two weeks ago, Cathy Smith picked up her phone to hear her daughter crying on the other end.

"My daughter called me from her cell phone in tears, to tell me that Thelma's just wasn't there anymore," said Smith. "Neither one of us could believe such a Great Falls institution was just gone."

ORIGINALLY a gas station and general store that was built in 1931, Thelma's Country Store was made of old boards that came from a barn that had been torn down in the 1800s. Thelma and Frank Feighery bought the mom-and-pop gas station in 1950 and worked the store together until Frank Feighery died in 1988. Thelma Feighery continued to run it on her own, churning out her homemade ice cream for 51 years, until she died in 2001 at the age of 86. According to Fairfax County land records, her store was sold to Nest Estates LLC in July of 2002 for \$1,305,000. In May of 2004 there was an attempt to auction off the property. McLean builder Alan Shams was awarded the winning bid, but the deal later fell through when the investors set a higher price, closer to \$3 million, as was their right under the terms of the auction.

Since then, Nest Estates had continued to run Thelma's like the easy-going mom-and-pop operation that it had always been. In fact, the tearing down of Thelma's came as a painful jolt to just about everyone in the community. Even Dranesville District Supervisor Joan DuBois said she did not know about any plans for Thelma's until after it had been demolished. According to John Ulfelder, a co-chair of the Great Falls Citizens Association (GFCA) Land Use and



Contributed

**Thelma's black raspberry ice cream was a regular Friday treat for Cory Mastran.**

[Email this Article](#)

[Print this Article](#)

Zoning committee, the property is split-zoned, with the front portion along Colvin Run Road zoned for commercial development and the rear portion zoned for residential development.

"My understanding is that the owners have also filed for a demolition permit for the house, which is on the residentially zoned portion behind where the store was located," said Ulfelder. "As to the details of the possible commercial development, I don't know if it will be office condos like the Leigh Corners condos next door, or something else. My guess would be that the market will dictate."

Marta Roy, also a co-chair of the Great Falls Citizens Association Land Use and Zoning committee, said she has heard that the owners would like to operate something similar to the commercial development next door in Colvin Run Center, "like a condo with offices upstairs and some retail on the first floor."

THOSE DRIVING along Colvin Run Road today would see nothing to indicate that there was once a quaint and rustic place called Thelma's Country Store sitting on the lot near the intersection of Walker Road. It has been two weeks since Thelma's was torn down to make way for new development, but local residents are still waxing nostalgic for the quaint ice cream shop and general store that brought so many good memories to people of all ages.

Jackie Messer grew up in a little house on Colvin Run Road and according to Messer, her mother and Thelma Feighery were "the closest of friends."

"Some of my youngest memories include walking to the store with my big brothers and buying penny candy from the big glass case," said Messer. "We would look for a long time, before making our final decision – it was fun."

When Messer turned 15, Thelma Feighery gave the girl her first job. Messer said she was paid \$2 an hour, plus all the ice cream she could eat.

"And believe me, I ate ice cream all day long, rotating from flavor to flavor," said Messer. "I used to joke to the customer, 'one scoop for you and one for me.' I think Thelma may have lost money on that deal."

It is not only the long-time residents who are missing the famous ice cream store. Kate Kronmiller and her family moved to Great Falls in 1992, but said Thelma's has always been a special place for them.

"We missed most of Thelma's life but her impact is still being felt in our home," said Kronmiller. "My sons, now ages 13 and 10, were fortunate to meet Thelma once and fell in love with her sweet smile and homemade ice cream."

Jennifer DiMare Miravi said Thelma's ice cream served as a powerful tool of persuasion in her family.

"Besides being a local institution, Thelma's helped me on a personal level when it was time to bring in my children to the pediatrician for check-ups and vaccinations," said Miravi. "Knowing that a nice big ice cream cone was at the end of the appointment went a long way with Kameron and Alyssa – and believe me – I was never too proud to bribe them with a visit to Thelma's in exchange for their cooperation. Sometimes it was the only way to get them through their flu shots and vaccinations. Now that the kids are older teenagers, we look back on the memories of those doctor trips fondly because of Thelma, her ice cream and her ready smile."

Great Falls resident Janet Jameson was dismayed to drive by and see absolutely nothing where Thelma's once stood.

"There wasn't a piece of board ... not a trace," said Jameson. "Just reddish dirt swept clean."

Jameson lamented the fact that all of the old, familiar landmarks in Great Falls are gradually being torn down with little thought of what they represented.

"[There are] not many old places of Great Falls to put on a holiday ornament

anymore," she said. "Just a calendar of what once was – hope they don't bulldoze the old church while I'm sleeping one night."



©2008 Connection Newspapers. All Rights Reserved. [Privacy Policy](#)  
7913 Westpark Dr. ♦ McLean, VA 22102 ♦ 703-821-5050  
Site Design, Development and Hosting by [Timberlake Publishing](#)