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LIFE

SMALL-TOWN ARIZONA • A BRONZE FOUNDRY

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SMALL TOWN, AZ

A slice of pie and life in Jerome, Wickenburg and Bisbee

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When shopping centers, traffic jams and housing developments with clever names like Whisper Rock and DC Ranch stretch as far as the eye can see, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine a life where the only grocery store in town features a single aisle and isn't open on Sundays. Though our fair city lies on the farthest northeastern fringe of the Valley, it's still facing imminent build-out in 10 to 20 years. The quaint downtown core seems to lose some of its charm because it's nestled between a web of packed freeways and two of the nation's busiest airports. And while our growth has brought about plenty of economic success, it has left many with a strange craving—a need to simplify.

That said, there's still plenty of old-fashioned goodness to be found in Arizona. Our history books are filled with ranching and mining lore, and what remains of this yesteryear includes some of the most inviting communities to be found. We visited those that really take their small-town hospitality seriously, complete with volunteer fire departments, phone trees and some of the best pie a smooth has ever tasted. Jerome, Bisbee and Wickenburg may seem tiny in population, but they all boast big hearts that make anyone feel right at home.

JEROME

A tiny treasure built along the mountainside just minutes away from busy Sedona, Jerome and its people beckon your soul. The road into town is flanked by tree-speckled hills accented with the pastel blues, yellows and oranges of Jerome's many mining-era homes that peer over the mountain edge like matchboxes perched on tenuous toothpicks.

The smallest incorporated town in Arizona with a population fluttering





Red Hat Ladies at The March Have



Carol Williams



Merle Norman

over the years, Flower jokes that the men have figured out how much work is involved with the position. "I raised six boys," says Flower, her hair sculpted into perfect white curls. "I guess I'm used to running around."

The afternoon light casts an orange hue outside, a sharp contrast from the dark cavernous lounge the Elks escape to. A slight breeze rustles the trees along nearby Hassayampa River, and most of the cars parked along the downtown streets already have disappeared. Just as it seems like a small stream of tumbleweeds should be rolling in, a few couples begin to gather outside the Saguaro Theatre for the evening's showing of *About Schmidt*. Though a 25-cent ticket feels more in tune with the small movie house's historic setting, viewers shell out the same \$6 for as folks in the big city. But when you consider the Saguaro's been entertaining people since 1948, it's really a small price to pay. And if you're lucky, they just might be showing a *Wisteria*.

Winding through the Male Mountains, it takes a while for Bisbee to reveal itself from within the city crevices. A mining town at its birth in the late 1800s, Bisbee has slowly made the shift to artists' community since Phelps Dodge closed its mines in 1975. The town's spread-out population currently sits at 6,000. Like Jerome, Bisbee works hard to attract tourists. With more than 10 bed and breakfasts in the heart of downtown, visitors are also accommodated by a slew of unique renovated spaces, many of which have intriguing pasts. Located above a printing shop along Brewery Gulch, the town's main drag, 400 Club Suites once served as miners' quarters and is said to have had a brief stint as a brothel as well as a high-end gentleman's club.

An expert on Bisbee's past, Boyd Nicholl serves as historian and curator for the town's mining and historical museum. Growing up in Tucson, Nicholl has lived in Bisbee for 26 years. "I always joke that there are 11 jobs in town, and I've got one of them," he says laughing through his lumberjack-like beard. The building that houses the museum was originally the Mason's Hall and downstairs housed Phelps Dodge headquarters.

Twisting the dial on a large vault door on the museum's second floor, Nicholl points to a secret stash of historical finds he has tucked away for safekeeping. Just on the other side of the thick metal passageway hangs a photo of Bisbee's 1913 champion Knights of Columbus soccer team. It's one of more than 8,000 original prints Nicholl manages in the archive room, which also holds an impressive collection of minerals.

The second story of the museum looks out to the town's western end, where Fred and Vivian Stewart ready arrangements at their flower shop. The Stewarts have owned Bisbee Florist, a downtown staple for at least 25 years, for a little more than a year. The couple moved to Bisbee six years ago from nearby Elfrida Valley, where they lived for 25 years.

At 59, Vivian has the skin and style of a Hollywood starlet. She stays busy splitting her time between her Merle Norman cosmetics business in Douglas and the flower shop, while pursuing a master's in floral arrangement from an Arizona State Flower Association school in Tucson. Her husband says he likes the peaceful lifestyle of working among blossoms, though he admits things can get rather busy during the holidays. But after working 40 acres as a pecan farmer for years, a little holiday rush for roses and carnations is a breeze. "I had about 2,000 trees, and I put them in myself at 60," says the 82-year-old whose small frame still looks ready to sport a set of suspenders from his farming days.

Like most Bisbeens, the Stewarts grab the community-involvement bull by the horns. If given the opportunity, Fred can rattle off a mile-long list of the things that make his try

BISBEE



Parsons's Bistro celebrates one year in business

farmer-mining town special, from Douglas Wayman's Castlerock Style beauty shop, which every year boasts the best Christmas light display, to the town's chorus, of which his wife is an active member. In fact, walk into any store, restaurant or inn in town and you're bound to find at least one chorus member. And the odds are even better that someone will give the credit for the community's musical talent to local music teacher Joseph Curtis. "Singing is a very important part of this town, and he's got this whole town singing," Vivian explains.

With his soft brown eyes peering over the top of his upright piano, Curtis charts a series of "me, may, ma, mow, moon" to the 20 or so students in his beginning high-school choir class. At 40, Curtis has been involved with music most of his life and has been Bisbee High's music director for 10 years. Since his arrival, the number of singers in town has grown tenfold, and the high-school choir has traveled to New York and Montreal. The group is planning an overseas voyage to Europe this month. "When I first got here, I was told that I wouldn't be here long because the choir wasn't very good," says Curtis, who now teaches about 450 students from third through eighth grade and leads a 75-member community choir that tours the country.

Daily Diner owner Charlie Lewis, one of Curtis' apprentices, sings a few lines from his lead role in the community production of *The Festive*



Parsons's chef Stephen Fleeman



Bisbee music teacher Joseph Curtis



Charlie Lewis and his famous pie in a cup

tics while he dishes out scoops of his famous pie in a cup, an invention spawned from a party conversation with friends. Lewis, a Marie Calender protégé, came to Bisbee almost four years ago to reopen Dot's Diner, a small establishment on the outskirts of town. He later left Dot's and opened the Daily Diner so he could work in Old Bisbee. Decked in a white apron and toque, Lewis whizzes away the day zipping around the small diner grill-prepping burgers and melts for locals and tourists.

As the sun sets, residents gather at neighborhood restaurants and bars. Some squeeze into the Earwig Factory, an eclectic art shop and performance venue, to catch a late-night showing of the documentary *Beating for Columbine*. Others wrap themselves up to walk their dogs and enjoy the chilly southern Arizona air.

A large group gathers around the bar at Parara's Bistro located in the heart of downtown Bisbee. It's a special night for this establishment. Celebrating their first year in business, owners Nancy Parara and MaryBeth Wall raise a toast to a dining room filled with friends and regulars. Many have comfortably camped out for the night, their jackets slumped over their barstools. Both psychology majors by trade, the duo is at ease working with people. Wall still works as a flight attendant while Parara manages the restaurant full time.

Parara's has an urban feel with tile floors, brick walls and iron accents. If it weren't for the gaping mine remnants down the road and surrounding mountains green with vegetation, you'd swear you were in the middle of a cosmopolitan setting. The staff acts as if working at a five-star resort restaurant. Decked in simple black T-shirts and black pants, they weave in and out of tables somehow never colliding. Trained at Scottsdale Culinary Institute, Chef Shannon Powman and Sous Chef Erica Beann serve up an amazing menu that features marinated pork chops, ribs, pasta and such. Wall and Parara busy themselves behind the bar serving drinks and tending to guests.

Raquel Chapman, 19, buses tables at the restaurant. A Bisbee native, Chapman bursts with excitement at the success of the restaurant in her tiny town. Stocking her station with glasses, the petite teen recounts stories from her youth such as the time her mother had to hold her up when crossing flooded streets to keep her from drowning. And while she's happy to see high-end restaurants and galleries beginning to filter into town, she's in no rush to leave her roots for a real metropolis. "A lot of my generation, they hate small-town living because of the gossip," she says. "A lot of my friends want to get out of here, but I love it. It's Bisbee, and it's my home." ●



St. Patrick's Church