

Modest Monuments to Optimism

By Richard Margolis

THE village of Pahaquarry, N.J. (population 22), has been clinging to the edge of a mountain for a century and a half. Nowadays it is also clinging to life, hoping to survive a bad case of progress.

Difficulties arose nearly two decades ago when Federal officials included the town in a vast new national recreational area. In due course the government bought the mountain, including just about all of Pahaquarry.

Things have been going downhill ever since. Mayor Donald von Hagen's roadside tavern, the Coppermine Inn, was expropriated and then leased back to him on a temporary basis. His commercial campgrounds were simply shut down.

To add to Pahaquarry's woes, the single road that leads to town has become all but impassable. Last year half of it buckled and fell into the Delaware River 3,000 feet below. "It's bad for business," says the mayor, a man of few words.

Pahaquarry doesn't collect taxes anymore because, as von Hagen points out, "We've run out of property to tax." The last of its three schools closed nearly a generation ago, but that no longer seems to matter—there are no children left in town, anyway. "We're all getting up in years," says von Hagen, who is 57.

Still, all is not lost in Pahaquarry. In accord with state law, the town maintains a full municipal roster, including the mayor and two other members of the Township Commit-

tee, a treasurer, a tax collector, a tax assessor, a town clerk and a town counsel. Their annual salaries range from von Hagen's \$300 to \$350, what the clerk and tax collector are paid. Pahaquarry has \$90,000 in its treasury left over from more prosperous times.

Shortly before last fall's elections, the town attracted some unbidden press coverage when officials forgot to reserve a slot for mayor on the ballot. Von Hagen's term of office had run out, so Pahaquarry's 22 voters ended up red-faced and mayorless.

The way they wiggled out of their dilemma proved to be vintage rural: creative, practical and cheap. Not caring to spend \$400 on a special election, they persuaded von Hagen to "resign," thus creating a "vacancy." The Township Committee then filled the vacancy by reappointing von Hagen as mayor. The tactic resembled young Abe Lincoln's solution to a similar problem that came up when he was drilling a platoon of Illinois irregulars. They marched into a fence, and Lincoln didn't know how to get them over it in proper military fashion.

"Fall out," he finally ordered, "and fall in on the other side."

With the whole U.S. government arrayed against Pahaquarry, no prudent outsider will wager a dime on its chances of surviving. But the residents, being rural, keep hoping for miracles.

"The town just doesn't want to

give up its identity," von Hagen says. "I think it might stay here for quite awhile. You can't just up and say there's no more town."

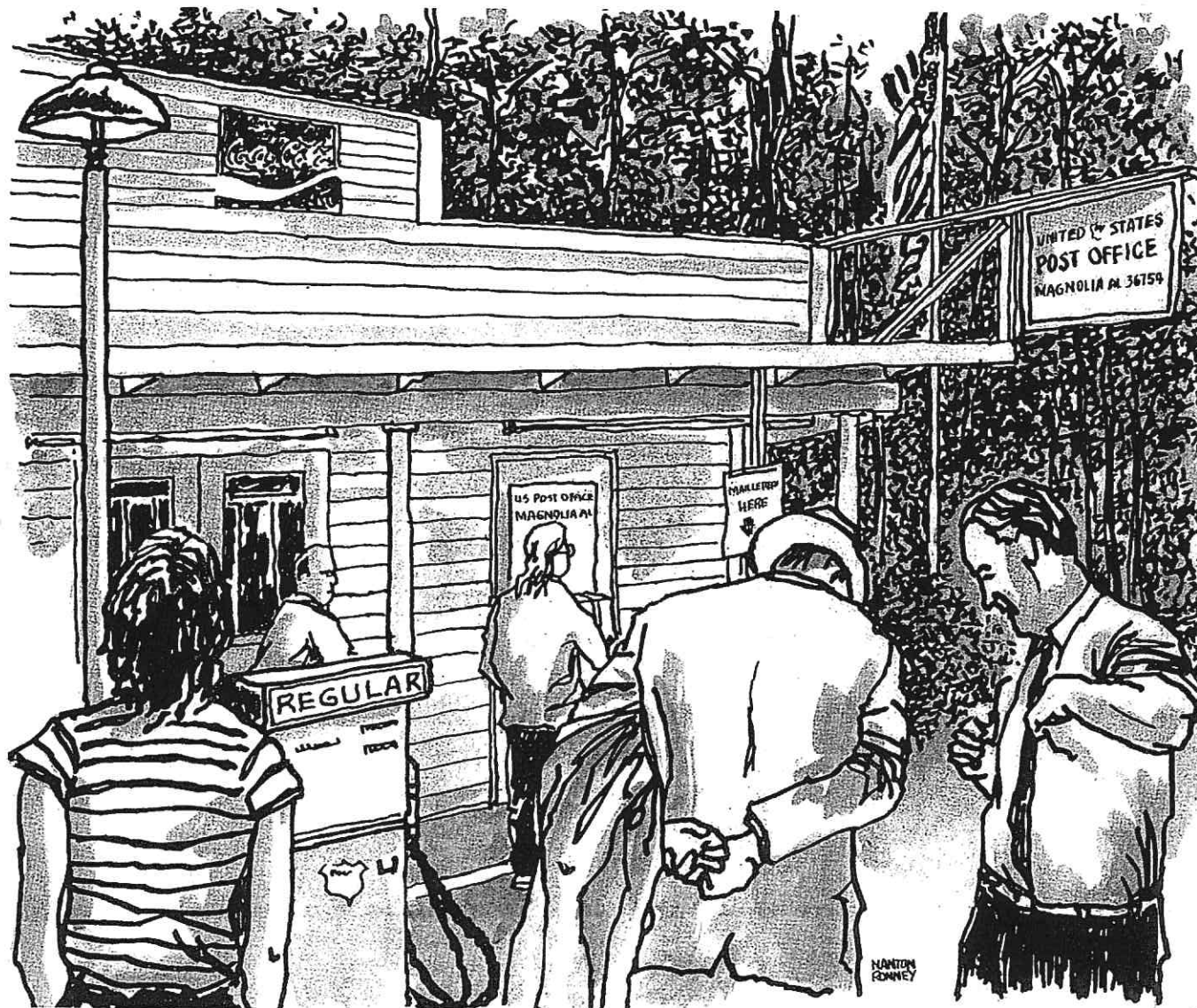
SCHOLARS and policymakers, of course, have built careers on upping and saying things like that. Their predictions about rural life have been peculiarly repetitive—and gloomy. Here is one characteristic prophecy expressed by two sociologists, William Simon and John H. Gagnon, in an essay titled "The Decline and Fall of the Small Town":

The land and the economy of the United States will not support as many small towns as they did before. It is very difficult not to see the future as a long, drawn-out struggle for community survival, lasting for half a century, in which some battles may be won but the war will be lost. . . . A future in which most such towns will become isolated or decayed, in which the local amenities must deteriorate, and in which will finally be left only the aged, the inept, the very young. . . .

It is probably fortunate that small town residents do not commonly delve into scholarly journals. They have no way of knowing they are doomed. At times their ignorance—innocence may be a better word—permits achievements that more knowledgeable persons might never attempt.

There was that town near the Texas panhandle—Olney—whose 4,040 citizens decided that what they need-

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ed was a joint library facility that could serve both the public school and the community. Lots of other small towns had tried something like that and had run afoul of one thing or another, but the folks in Olney remained happily unaware. As the community librarian put it, "The town citizens did not know they could fail. Their believing they had to succeed *made* them succeed."

Olney managed to raise \$450,000. The joint facility is there now, serving students and grownups alike. It stands as a modest monument to optimism, a force still to be reckoned with in rural America.

The residents of Magnolia, a tiny hamlet in southern Alabama, are yet another case in point. They saw their local identity vanishing when the Federal government closed their main gathering spot—the post office. So they fought back as best they could.

A newspaper account of this courteous crusade notes that the townspeople "didn't want Magnolia to become just a wide spot on Alabama Highway 25." They bombarded Washington postal officials with letters and petitions, and in time the closure decision was reversed. "We're just delighted about it," said Blanche Philips, one of several residents who spearheaded the drive. "We're mighty proud we won. Our prayers have been answered."

Magnolia, Olney and Pahaquarry do not add up to a civic prairie fire, but they do suggest that rural Americans are still blowing on lots of embers, and they don't seem to be running out of breath. There's a spirit out there, a loyalty to place and roots, that city people largely discount. Simon and Gagnon may ultimately prove correct, but I wouldn't bet on it: I have shared too many village dreams to the contrary, and I

have met too many rural residents who don't want their town to become a wide spot on the road.

A few years ago, the Wisconsin demographer Glenn V. Fuguitt paid tribute to the astonishing viability of our small towns: "I am struck by the fact that they prevail," he said, "despite most people's efforts to write them off. They may not perform the same functions as previously; they may in fact serve as little more than population nodes; they may even lose considerable population; but somehow they stay in there for census after census."

Stay in there, Pahaquarry. Only five more years till the next census comes around. □

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