



Who's laughing now?

Penetanguishene couple defy the odds with their Green Block Trading Post corner store

Text and photography by Mark Cardwell

Mike Cadieux says many people thought he and his wife Nancy were crazy in 2007 when they bought a rundown heritage building in Penetanguishene, Ont. and opened a large convenience store in it.

“We knew it was the perfect place for the store we had in mind,” recalls Cadieux, a Métis who grew up near the picturesque town on southern Georgian Bay, 150 kilometres north of Toronto. “But the building was in such bad shape that my lawyer said we were buying a future lawsuit, not a viable business.”

But who's laughing now?

After a decade of hard work, including a years-long stint without a single vacation, the Cadieux have created a flourishing business that has breathed new life into a local landmark.

Called the Green Block Trading Post, the two-storey building was built in the 1840s by Penetang's first mayor (and my great-great-grandfather) Alfred Andrew Thompson.

Thompson founded and ran a general store on the main floor and rented out offices on the second. He was also a well-known fur trader who dealt with Métis, Indigenous and French trappers from across Ontario who could then paddle up to the back of the downtown store on the aptly-named Water St. with their wares.

In the 1980s, Penetang commissioned a giant mural on one side of the store

that shows Thompson trading furs with several Métis.

A descendant of the French/Métis who relocated from Drummond Island to the Penetang area in the 1820s, Mike Cadieux says he always considered the mural to be as much a commemoration to Thompson as to his own ancestors.

“In an era when aboriginals were not even considered human beings, Thompson traded with them and brought them into his home to sleep,” says Cadieux. “When he died, elders came here and did a burial ceremony. You can still feel that spirituality here.”

“We Drummond Islanders have always been traders. It’s in our blood. I’m keeping an old tradition going here.”

Cadieux says he was saddened by the store’s decline in both appearance and as a retail outlet over the past several decades. The once-thriving general store became a shoe store, a flower shop and finally a threadbare corner store when he and Nancy, who is a Mohawk, bought it.

The couple moved into the largest of three apartments on the building’s second floor and went to work fulltime in the re-vamped store below, ending their 17-year career as a husband-and-wife driving team doing long-haul transport across North America.

A one-time partner in a corner store in the nearby village of Port McNicoll, Cadieux says that experience, together with Nancy’s and his Indigenous heritage, have helped restore the Green Block’s business lustre.

The corner store, which takes up half of the main floor (the other half is a professional services office) is notably a leading independent tobacco seller for both RBH (now Philip Morris) and Imperial Tobacco, winning several quarterly sales growth awards for both the region and across Ontario.

“We took this store from being one of the worst to one of the best in tobacco sales,” says Cadieux. Tobacco customer traffic, he adds, also generates brisk sales for lottery tickets and regular c-store merchandise.

Those sales, however, represent only about a quarter of store revenues. The majority of sales now come from the ever-growing number of Indigenous gifts and crafts that are now packed into the store’s aisles.

“When we first opened we didn’t openly promote the fact that we were aboriginal and that we had aboriginal products,” says Cadieux. “But times are changing and aboriginal people are no longer afraid of repercussions or social stigma because of their identity.”

He adds that Indigenous products are now in high demand and speak to renewed interest in aboriginal identity.

“This is the perfect place for our business,” says Cadieux. “Thompson planted the seed in this community that allows us to do this. And we Drummond Islanders have always been traders. It’s in our blood. I’m keeping an old tradition going here.”



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TOP TIPS

Keep your prices reasonable

"You have to be competitive in today's market," says Mike Cadieux. "People shop around and they go online. I tell people who say they found something cheaper online, come back and tell me that after you've factored in the exchange rate and shipping charges."

Understand your products

"People today want authentic, locally-made items. So you need to know where your products came from and who made them."

Put in the hours

"You need to work long hours to be successful in this business. There's no way around it. People shop at all hours now. You can't expect to do well if you work Dolly Parton 9-to-5."

SNAPSHOT

1 Water St, Penetanguishene, ON

Store size:

1,500 sq. ft.

Renovation investment:

\$500,000+

Services:

regular c-store merchandise, lottery tickets, tobacco products, Indigenous arts and crafts, including leather and fur goods and clothing, moccasins, handcrafted carvings, pottery, jewelry, etc.

Number of employees:

6 full time, including Mike and Nancy Cadieux.

Store hours:

Every day from 6:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.

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