

SMALL TOWN, AZ

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

BY GINGER S. EIDEN · PHOTOS BY JOHN BECKETT



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 sill 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.

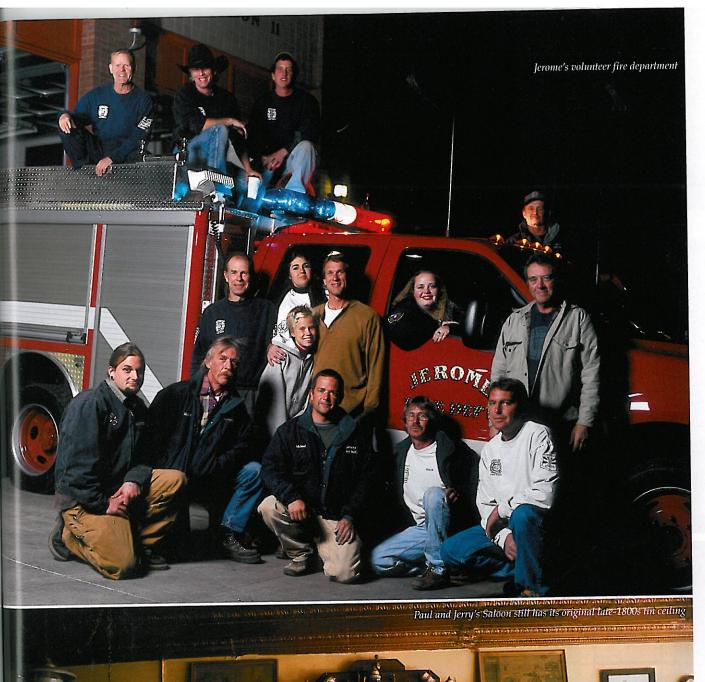
That said, there's still plenty of old-fashioned goodness to be found in Arizona. Our history books are filled with ranching and mining lore, and what remains of this yesteryear includes some of the most inviting communities to be found. We visited three that really take their small-town hospitality seriously, complete with volunteer fire departments, phone trees and some of the best pie a mouth 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











around 450, Jerome was once the state's third-largest city. Tourism dominates its economy, so it's no surprise that many Jerome citizens own a store or run a bed and breakfast.

With the town recently teetering on bankruptcy due to a slow in tourism, neighbors here have learned to lean on one another. Many get involved by writing grants, while others pitch in working for civic organizations. The gutted remains of the old jail house, which has slid roughly 250 feet downhill throughout the town's history, is spattered with coins from visitors' wishes, adding a surprising number of dollars to the town's budget.

Thanks to the town's phone-tree system (yes, the kind where every neighbor calls five friends, who then call five friends), Jerome boasts a 78-percent voter turnout for local elections. And despite the many hats the town's elected officials tend to wear, candidates are still pretty easy to come by.

A former council member and mayor, Town Clerk Al Palmieri is the first person to turn to when there's a question about Jerome or its people. If he doesn't know the answer, he'll know someone who does. After spending a dozen years working on Wall Street and in the banking industry, Palmieri decided to leave big cities behind and moved to Jerome in 1977. Naturally, he also runs a bed and breakfast.

Bundled up in a turtleneck and brown button-down shirt, Palmieri still sports the neatly trimmed hairstyle and casual business attire of a New York businessman. Sitting with near-perfect posture in his chair, he peers through his gold-rimmed glasses across the papers that litter the desk in his modest office. Mayor Jay Kinsella enters, his head barely clearing the top of the door-frame. Palmieri directs him where to sign a series of documents.

The towering Kinsella, who resembles Diamondbacks pitcher Randy Johnson, splits his time between serving the citizenry as mayor and serving up cold ones at his regular bartending job at Paul and Jerry's. Any leftover hours are dedicated to knocking down walls for the town's latest massive endeavor—renovating the old Clark Street School, built in 1924, for a new town hall, library and meeting space. The stoic building peeking over a northeastern bluff holds a colorful past, which includes a turn as a shopping Mecca and a flourishing discotheque that once drew people from as far away as Los Angeles. A scrap of wallpaper from the schoolhouse era is being preserved on one portion of a future library wall, capturing a campy excerpt from the classic *See Spot Run* series.

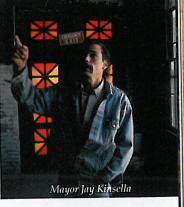
On the street below, small bursts of traffic hurl up and down the hill every few minutes. Fanny, a 2-year-old calico cat, is almost startled by the rumble of an engine, but she soon turns around to yawn and continue her job of keeping Jerome free of mice. An inexpensive exterminator, her only fees are an occasional stroke of the fur and pinch of someone's breakfast, lunch or dinner. Tuckered out from her duties, she retires mid-afternoon for a nap in her cozy bed next to the town secretary's desk.

Also keeping an eye on traffic is Vi Bruno. Outside Haven United Methodist Church, Bruno stands in blue jeans and moccasins, waving to people driving by. Positioned just off the only road in and out of town, she catches up with most of her neighbors as they pass in their vehicles. With a brisk, but silent shuffle and a soft Southern-belle-like demeanor, Bruno spends most

of her day looking after the peaceful sanctuary next to the parsonage, where she has lived a quiet life for 17 years. Looking up at the purples, yellows and blues beaming through the church's ornate stained-glass windows, she recants instances when citizens have raised money to help sick neighbors with hospital bills.







Often cast as a hippie hub, Jerome escapes some of the norms that rule most other societies. Smokers pack into The English Kitchen restaurant during lunchtime. It's the nonsmokers who are urged to visit the patio here. A chalkboard displaying the daily special of burger, fries and soup hasn't changed in 10 years. Owners Tim and Jayne Toth only adjust the price. And while the special is tasty, the true draw to this establishment is Jayne's homemade pies, which feature seasonal fruits and berries. She sells nearly four dozen a week.

A turn-of-the-century magnet for young men looking to dig up gold and move on to spend it in bigger towns, Jerome's entire being was built on mining. World War I- and World War II-era booms in the industry drew even more people to the hills, and with them came dozens of hotels and restaurants. Later, mining blasts caused parts of the town to shift and crack, and as riches in the earth dried up, most of the population moved away. Though the mines have been silent since the 1950s, Christine Barag stays in Jerome. One of the town's few natives, Barag's grandparents were miners here, and Barag works in the same dime store (The Mine Museum) her grandmother did many years ago. A pretty, yet strong brunette, the 32-year-old Jerome chamber president gathers a group of locals every holiday season to purchase 80 or so gifts for the town's children. "Every year, Santa brings a toy to every child in Jerome," Barag says, her feet smarting from the memory of last year's shopping trip. But as a chamber president knows, good business starts by keeping your customers happy.

Though on its surface it may seem cliché, giving back is truly a community mantra. Looking out the window of Jerome's Pottery Store, owner Dave Hall has a perfect view of the nine-year-old fire station he fought to have built. With vast arcing windows and a classic brick façade, the station looks as if it has always been a part of town. "I felt that if I was going to live here, I should contribute," says the 55-year-old former volunteer fire chief.

Jerome has a history plagued with major fires—four to be exact. And though extensive damage was left behind after each, the most recent scorching a hotel and 26 homes in 1926, the town's people continued to stay and rebuild. The town's first firetruck, a 1927 Dodge with 4,127 miles on it and a dulled coat of red paint, symbolizes the volunteer fire department's humble beginnings. The new one, obtained through a \$168,000 grant, shines brightly in comparison.

As the chilly night sky speckled with a blanket of twinkling stars embraces Jerome, residents gather in the upstairs meeting space above

the fire station. A few women who look as if they're straight from the cover of a Betty Crocker recipe book peel the foil from freshly baked brownies, cookies and cobblers.

A peace candle is lighted, signifying the start of the town-council meeting. The practice was started after September 11 and has been carried on at every meeting since. Though hundreds of miles of mountains and rivers separate this tiny town from the bursting population in New York, Jerome's people still suffered some of the emotional scars from the larger city's tragedy.

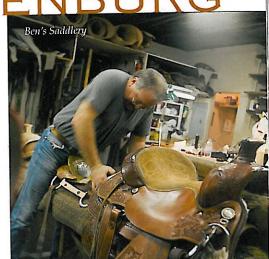
As the meeting nears its close, the 15 or so volunteer firefighters seated in a cluster of folding chairs are given a round of applause. The men and women ranging from their teens to 61 exude the athletic prowess of a sports-bar softball team. Slowly, they make their way to the tiny table in the center of the room to pile a few brownies and cookies on their small square napkins. It's the only payment they receive for protecting their town from fires for yet another year, and it seems to be just enough.

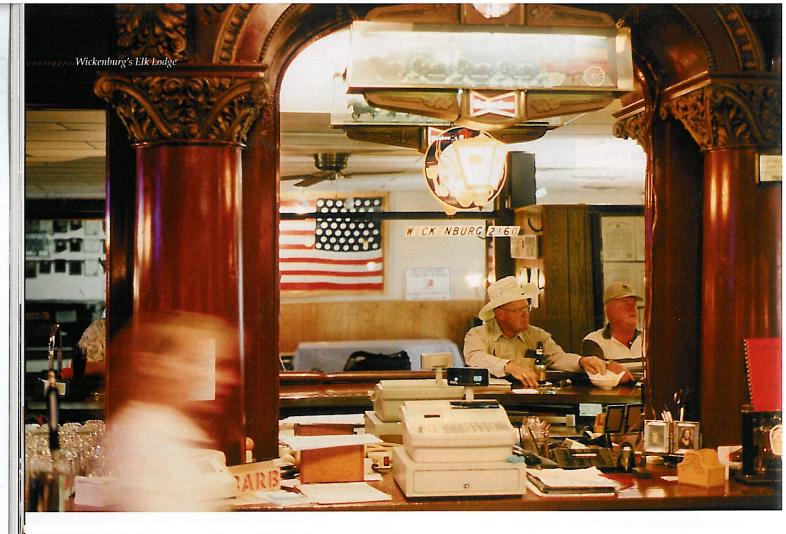
The West is alive and well. Sure, parts of this 5,000-person town have been slicked up with custom hillside homes. But at Wickenburg's core lies a chewy rawhide center, from the old railway station that now houses the chamber of commerce, to the Saguaro Theatre movie house, which is now equipped with an impressive sound system and modern seating arrangement, yet still shows only one film a day.

A late-morning visit to Ben's Saddlery in the oldest part of town divulges the cowboy spirit that defines the town. The shop tickles the

WICKENBURG

nose with the dirty yet sweet aroma of a wrangler's desert campsite. It's a place people discover accidentally during a trip through town then end up staying for years, like owner Bruce Meier who bought the establishment in 1988. He swears that little has





changed in the course of three owners and 50 years.

Aisles are lined with boots, saddles and authentic tack. In the back, Karen Lamontagne works, tanning and punching a few belts as an old Willie Nelson tune plays in the background. She's not building a saddle today but definitely looks forward to her next horse-riding client. "I knew nothing when I started and made tons of mistakes," says the 35-year-old who moved to the sleepy Western enclave 12 years ago to escape the New England snow in New Hampshire. Now, her leather creations are works of art, and the spunky dishwater-blond is even said to have talked a Harley-Davidson-riding gent into purchasing a pair of flame-decorated chaps just so she could design them.

The youngin' at Ben's Saddlery isn't as seasoned as he appears. With a weathered face and handlebar mustache, L.A. Francis Jr. looks a lot like old Ben himself. But Francis, who came here by way of Wyoming in 1987 after "wranglin' dudes," has only been at this gig for a little more than a decade and says it just seemed like the perfect fit for the time. "I needed a job," he says with the raspy laugh of a real cowboy.

Down the road, tourists filter through the town's Desert Caballeros Western Museum on their way to and from Las Vegas for a brief lesson on great Western art and heritage. But scratching beneath the museum's surface of Western artwork and display cases filled with Western gear and Native American crafts and jewelry reveals a true local treasure—Peter Booth.

Armed with a Ph.D. in history from Purdue, Booth fell in love with Wickenburg's vast land four years ago when he decided to take on the position as the museum's education director. Spilling out tidbits of Wickenburg history and lore with each step, such as the town's right as the birthplace of the bolo tie, Booth is like a bull let loose in a rodeo, attacking every display with the same burst of excitement. He can



point out a favorite story from every exhibit. But the creation that lies downstairs is perhaps what excites him most. A tiny version of Wickenburg in its heyday fills half of the basement, and an adjacent mini ranch scene will open up soon. Primarily the work of volunteers, the ranch scene is the product of several interviews Booth conducted with old ranchers from the area. He hopes his work will dispel some of the area's myths, like the town's prime ranching being of cattle. "Most people actually ranched angora goats," he explains.





Lunchtime in town bustles. Just off the main drag, at the March Hare, Maryfransis and her chef Kathleen (last names are reserved for the IRS only) ready quiche and dessert crisps. A favorite hangout for the Red Hat Ladies, a group of retired socialites who often drive up from Sun City, the restaurant is an old Victorian home that still exudes the era's charm with rabbits, knickknacks and frills.

Unable to escape her work during the lunch hour, Carol Williams hides in a small office at Wickenburg High School, speeding through the last few bites of chicken she brought from home while sitting at her desk. With the casual dress of a teacher, Williams reveals her business side, but grand hand expressions and flashing eyes hint at the artist that lies underneath. Just back from a trip to Tucson, the theater director's mind is already racing to what show she can bring to Del E. Webb Center for the Performing Arts next. The center was the idea of Maricopa

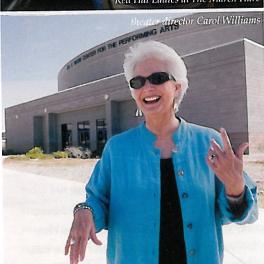
County officials about six years ago. Bake- and garage-sale funds built the shell, Williams explains, and then a \$1.2 million grant completed most of the inside. "It's not finished yet; it still needs equipment, but we can use it," says Williams, looking out across the empty rows of seats like a proud mother. Her baby is just entering its second season.

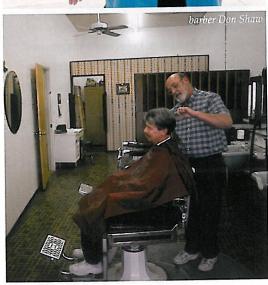
While local high-school students perform and learn at the theater, the big shows that usually grace Phoenix and Scottsdale stages often make a stop in town, too. And full houses are common. "I have this dream of Wickenburg becoming an arts Mecca, and why not?" asks Williams, who was born in the small Arizona town of Clifton.

Satisfied with things just as they are, Jack Lutch and L.J. Koressel chew the fat over a couple of pints. Regulars at the Elks Lodge bar in the heart of downtown, the two older gents are happy with their small-town lifestyle and wouldn't have it any other way. "There's no shootings, no traffic, and we like the nice waitress, too," Koressel jokes, giving barmaid Barb Fant a quick wink.

Elks members sprinkle in throughout the day to lean their elbows along the bar, which is from an 1850s saloon in Silverton, Colo. Reminiscent of a Prohibition-era speakeasy, the lodge allows members entry by buzzing at the door. Alice Flower's in charge of the joint. As Exalted Ruler, Flower has come to the lodge every day this week to work on programs and fund-raising opportunities for the many youth programs the Elks support. One of a handful of women to serve as Exalted Ruler







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 fee 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 Western.

Winding through the Mule Mountains, it takes a while for Bisbee to reveal itself from within the cliffy 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 man-

BISBEE

ages 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 Bisbeeans, 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 tiny



former-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 peeking over the top of his upright piano, Curtis chants a series of "me, may, ma, mow, moos" 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 Fantas-*







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 Callender 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 wiles 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 *Bowling 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 Parana'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 Parana 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 Parana manages the restaurant full time.

Parana'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 Plowman and Sous Chef Erica Brann serve up an amazing menu that features marinated pork chops, ribs, pasta and such. Wall and Parana busy themselves behind the bar serving drinks and tending to guests.

Raquel Chapman, 19, busses 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 recants 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."



