Olde Southport Village Shoppes: A Dreamer's Village Takes Shape

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He is not sure which came first, the idea or the opportunity, or maybe they arrived at the same time. In any case, when Phil Hemphill saw an abandoned restaurant and a broken down garage on one and a half acres on Howe Street in Southport, he bought them as fast as he could because he saw what that property could become.

"My wife thought I was crazy," Hemphill says, "but I could see a village there. I drew up a plan that had 12 little houses on it, which would all be specialty shops in my little village. I dream all the time." That was 14 years ago and his dream has come true.

Hemphill's first step in developing his village was to renovate the restaurant. He created Olde Southport Village Barbecue and ran that business as the only chef for several years. Hemphill recalls that during the renovation, there was one place on the floor that simply resisted all attempts to break through it. It turned out to be a buried safe. The only solution was to cement over it. "I still don't know whether that safe has gold in it or what," he says.

Hemphill then renovated the old garage, and it is now leased by Carolina Candelaria for her therapy practice. That was the end of the existing structures on the property, but it was only the beginning of what Hemphill had in mind for his village. From that point on, he would have to figure out a way to acquire the rest of the cottages for his village.

The first building he found was a little place on the corner of Leonard Street and Atlantic Avenue in Southport. One evening the owner of that house had dinner in Hemphill's restaurant and happened to mention that she was going to have her place torn down. Hemphill offered to truck it off her property, thus acquiring his "shot-gun house," so called because "all the doors line up and you could shoot a bullet through the house without hitting anything." The salvaged shot-gun house is now GiGi's Consignment & Curiosities.

Next came a two-in-one deal. Hemphill found a small house with an interesting history on Beach Road on Oak Island. The house had survived Hurricane Hazel in 1954. Following the hurricane, the owners of the house had scavenged wood that washed up on the beach during the hurricane and used it to build an addition to the house. The owners continued to live in the small house and used the new and larger addition for storage. After the owners moved out, the men in the neighborhood used the storage area for their Wednesday night poker games.

Hemphill acquired the house and trucked it over to his village. He then discovered that the house was too long to fit where he wanted it, so he resourcefully sawed it in two. “I cut it right between the bathroom and the bedroom,” Hemphill says. The original portion, at this writing, was awaiting its next occupant. The larger addition, which sits next door, is the home of Artistry, an upscale art and gift store.

The building that houses Tidewater Creations at the back of the village came from Willis Drive and was once used as servants’ quarters. The owner told Hemphill he could have it if he would rent it back to her. Hemphill agreed, but the arrangement did not last very long. Shortly after the homeowner opened a bakery there, her high school sweetheart from 1958 came to visit. The romance was rekindled, and they got married and moved to Burlington. So much for the bakery.

In a quest to preserve pieces of vintage Southport, Hemphill even rescued the bathroom door from the old police station after it was torn down. He put it in what is now Debbie’s Hair Design. Why? Because the old-fashioned police station bathroom had a peephole so the chief of police could keep an eye on his prisoners. “I thought that was a piece of history that shouldn’t be lost,”

Hemphill says. But Debbie is quick to point out that it is now the destroy the pecan tree behind it.” He agreed, and managed a door to her supply closet, so her customers can be assured that very careful excavation that left her pecan tree unharmed. they have complete privacy when they use her restroom. It was at this point that Hemphill decided his village needed a schoolhouse. Not a real schoolhouse, of course, but a building that looked like a school, so he built a classic school bell tower for his newly acquired cottage and painted the building red.

The next building came from Dosher Memorial Hospital.The hospital once owned a little four-room house across the street from the hospital, which at times was occupied by one of their nurses. The hospital wanted to get rid of the house badly enough to pay Hemphill to cart it away. He would soon find out why. The siding was insulated with asbestos and needed to be replaced. No problem. Hemphill found a dumpster filled with cypress wood in front of Port City Java and collected enough to reconstruct the siding.

The hospital’s house also needed windows. Hemphill drove around town looking for building sites with dumpsters nearby and hit the mother lode. The Mt. Carmel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church on Lord Street was replacing its windows with stained glass. He took the ones they discarded and installed them in his new little house. Then he painted the building pink and built a small steeple on top. This is now the home of My Aunt Sal, an all-natural soy wax candle store.

One of Hemphill’s more challenging architectural feats involved enclosing what had previously been an outdoor stage for Friday night gospel singing. The trick was to do this without destroying two very old oak trees because, as Hemphill jokingly puts it, “You can shoot the mayor, but you can’t cut down an oak tree in Southport.” His solution was to have the trees go right through the porch and the roof, which not only complied with the local building codes, but also makes an interesting tourist attraction as well.

The old police station on Oak Island that was once the getter is the gabled roof made of metal shingles, which are estimated to be at least 125 years old.

The cornerstone of Olde Southport Village Shoppes is the Village General Store, run by George and Sheila Bishop. The building was restored to look like it did when it was on W. West Street in downtown Southport. The Bishops sell mostly those items that would have been available in the original store — jams, jellies, honey, relish, pickled eggs, candy and gum.

Hemphill made the 12-foot waterwheel that sits next to the Village General Store to give the store and the village some historic authenticity. It is made out of 150-year-old cypress. “And it was a lot bigger and heavier than I thought it would be,” Hemphill says.

The village pathways are made of bricks that come from everywhere. The original bricks were from the old Dosher Memorial Hospital building, the City Works building and wherever else Hemphill could find them. But return visitors to the village have been bringing him bricks from their state. The village has bricks from nearly every state up and down the East Coast and one from Africa.

Eleven specialty shops make up the village, and they are marked with the letters A through L. However, there is no building H. That building will one day be at the far end of the village where there is now an empty space, which is used for parking. Hemphill skipped the letter H because he has a special plan for that letter and that space.

“I want to find an old Pullman dining car and serve coffee and breakfast buns,” he says. “And I’m going to call it ‘The South Perk Express.’”