

313

THE FLINT HILLS MAGAZINE

An abandoned general store finds
new life as a modern gallery

Restoration

20 QUESTIONS

Gen. Grigsby

Fort Riley's commanding officer
on his soulmate, his heroes
and the last time he cried

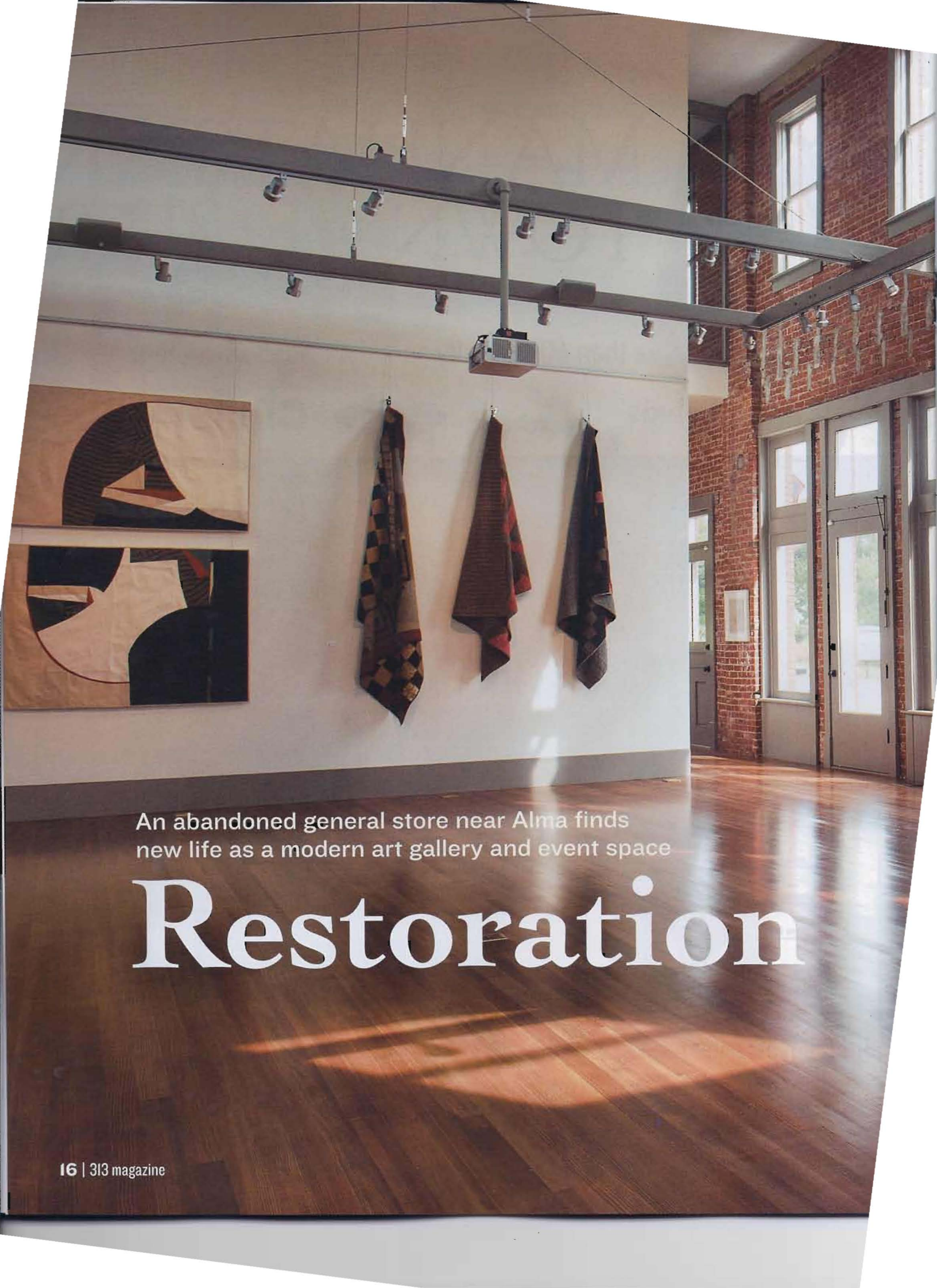
FOOD & DRINK ISSUE

- Best burgers
- Artisan cheeses
- Tallgrass' new brews
- Pie at Farmacy Cafe

Decked out

Just in time
for the holidays,
a home store
prepares to open
in Manhattan

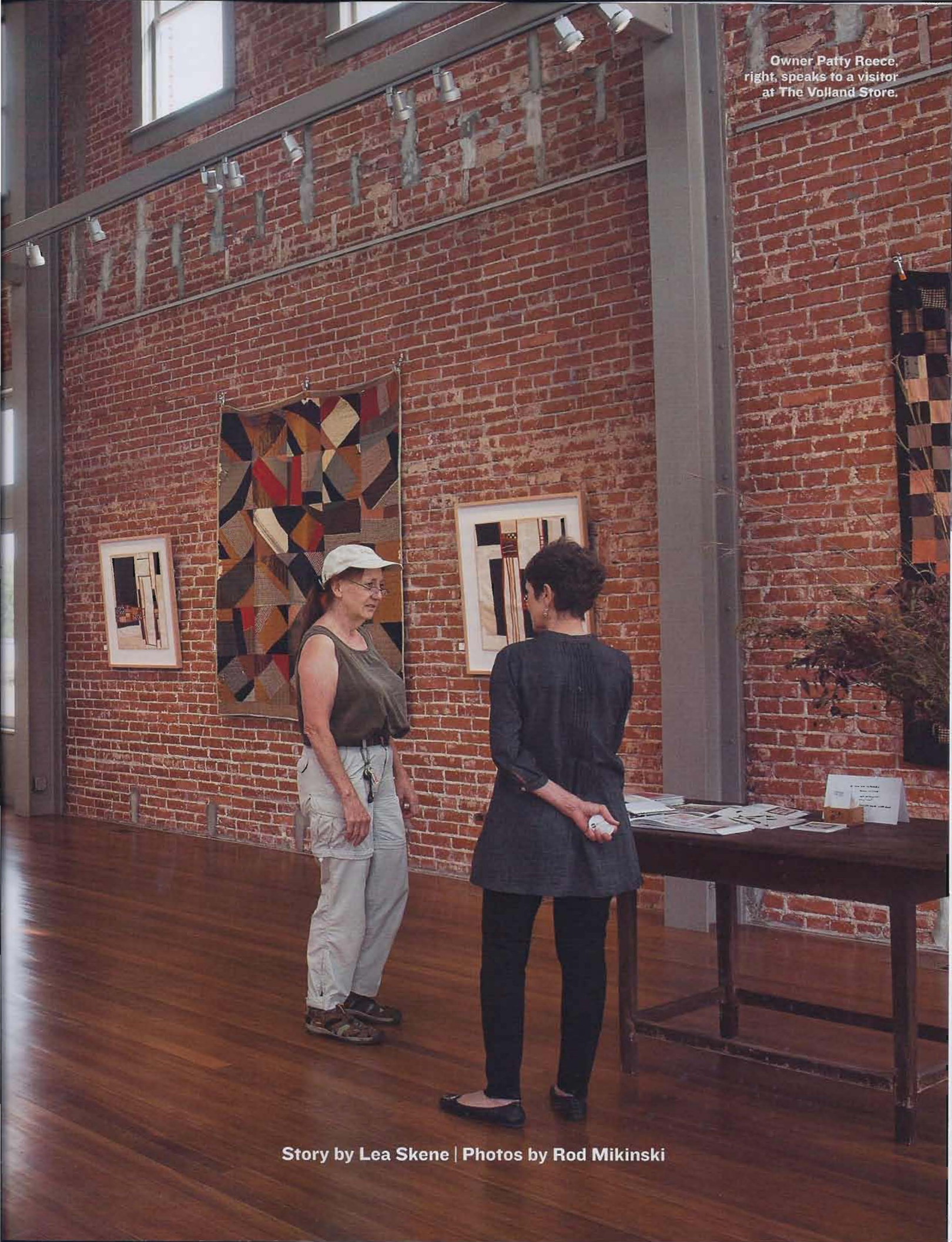
FIRST
ISSUE



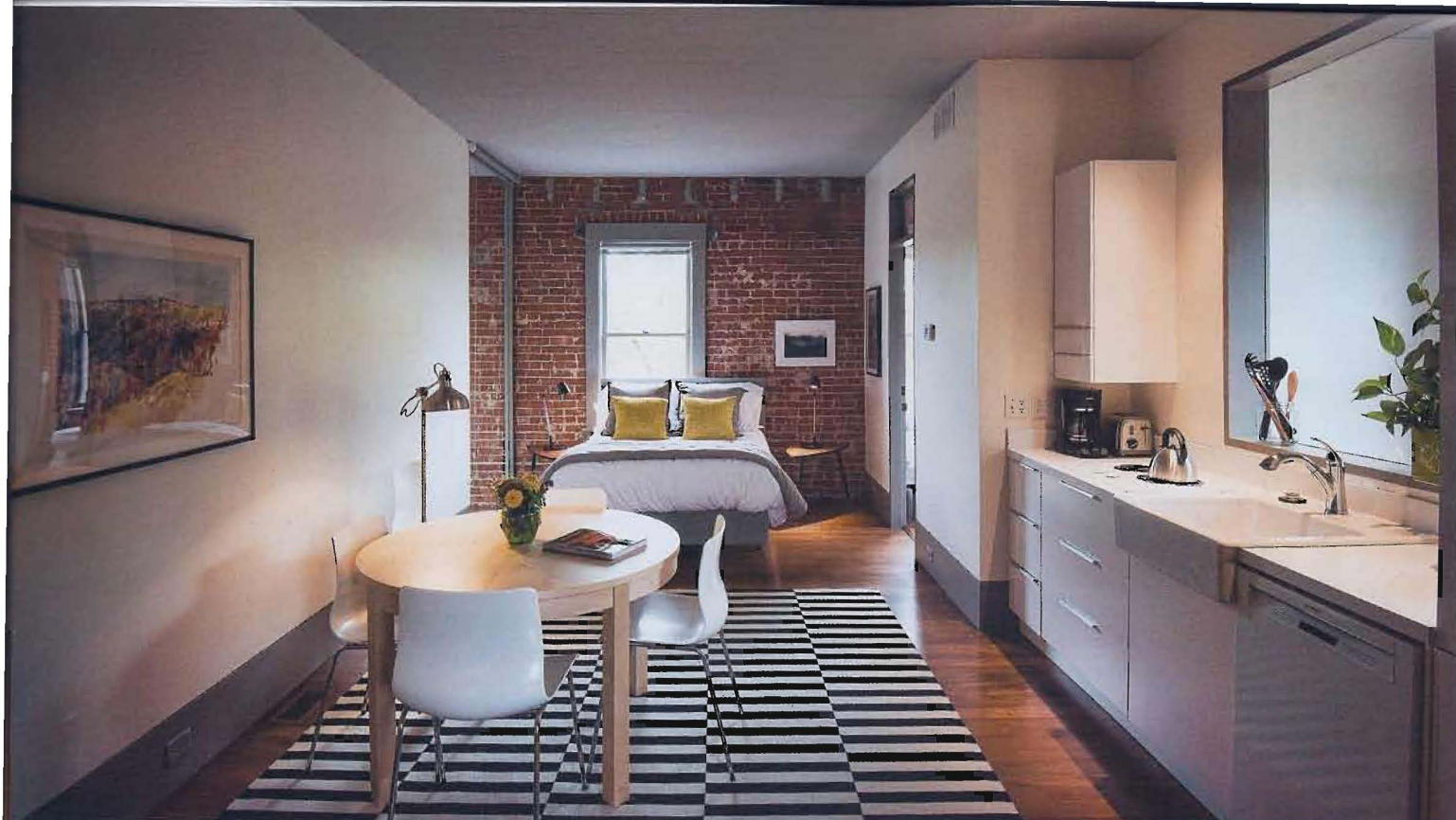
An abandoned general store near Alma finds
new life as a modern art gallery and event space

Restoration

Owner Patty Reece,
right, speaks to a visitor
at The Volland Store.



Story by Lea Skene | Photos by Rod Mikinski



The Volland Store's renovation includes a studio-style loft. The space, available to rent for \$125 a night, includes a bed, bathroom, kitchen and dining table. The store was built as a mercantile along a busy railroad cattle route, but it was abandoned for decades before the new owners decided to make it into a gallery and event space.

The rise, fall and rebirth of The Volland Store



The loft overlooks the gallery space.

As postmaster of Volland for the majority of his life, part of Otto Kratzer's morning routine was to walk the short distance from his home to the railroad tracks and retrieve a canvas bag tossed from the train window as it passed through town.

The bag was filled with that day's mail, which Kratzer would sort and distribute among the town's residents.

At its peak in the decades following the turn of the century, the community — 9 miles southwest of Alma — was home to about 300 families. In the years since, the population has dwindled to just one official resident.

Kratzer's life paralleled the rise and fall of the town in more ways than one.

He was born the year before the Rock Island Railroad purchased land for its tracks, founding the town of Volland to serve as a refueling stop for the steam-powered trains that would soon be passing through the Flint Hills on the way



Greg Hoots, Volland's unofficial historian, helped find a buyer to save the building.

to Kansas City.

The youngest of 14 children growing up on a homestead in nearby Alma, Kratzer was 18 when he decided to go into business with his oldest brother. The two purchased a small one-room general store next to the Volland train tracks and their adjacent stockyards.

The movement of cattle into and out of surrounding farmland sustained the rapidly growing Volland community. The town became a pit stop for cows being shipped north by railroad from ranches in Texas

and New Mexico, giving them a chance to eat plenty of Flint Hills grass before continuing on to Kansas City slaughterhouses.

As the town grew to support a flourishing cattle route, the Kratzer Bros. Mercantile store also expanded.

In 1913, the two brothers constructed a larger building for their booming business across the street from the original one.

The walls were made entirely of brick, supporting story-high windows and

topped with a tin roof. The new store was built to last.

THE STORE AND ITS OWNER

The business became central to the Volland community — a combination grocery store, post office and gathering spot.

"I came to Volland in September of 1939," longtime area resident Mary Schultz said in an interview with local historian Greg Hoots. "I was a new bride and I was 19 years old.

"The store was a general store. You could buy most anything here — any-



Nearly all that was left of the building before the renovation was the solid brick exterior.

thing for a man, woman or a child."

When the house where Kratzer lived with his wife and two sons burned down one day, the family renovated the store to include a living space upstairs and moved in. Some nights Kratzer would invite his neighbors to eat in the store's upstairs dining room. Other nights he sold them beer in the store's basement — before, during and after Prohibition.

While his store gave Volland residents a place to come together, Kratzer's personality gave them something to talk about. Part of his role as a businessman was bringing new ideas and technologies to residents of a small Kansas farming community. When telephone lines were installed in the county, his store became one of the first places to use them.

Growing up in Volland, Mary's son Gary remembers riding his bike to the store as a child. "I heard all of Otto Kratzer's stories," he said. "He just amazed me as a kid because he had lived a lot of his dreams."

In 1913, Kratzer purchased a motorcycle — one of the first models produced — and rode it all the way from Volland to California and back,



Original store owner Otto Kratzer, prepares to leave for a motorcycle trip to California in 1913.

Now open in Manhattan!

Dr. Challa &

KMC
DERMATOLOGY

Beyond the Surface

We treat conditions of the hair, skin, and nails including:

- Skin Cancer Screenings and Biopsies
- Psoriasis
- Atopic Dermatitis
- Acne
- Rosacea
- Dermatologic Surgery
- Eczema
- Cosmetic Dermatology
- MOHs Surgery
- ... and more

Call (785) 320-7774 or visit KMCPA.com to make an appointment.

Majdy Albahhar, MD completed his medical internship at George Washington University in D.C.;



Majdy Albahhar, MD

Dermatology residency at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York where he served as chief resident

during his last year; and Dermatopathology Fellowship at University of Miami Jackson Memorial Hospital. He is looking forward to joining the Manhattan community with his wife and children.

Accepting new patients and most major insurance plans, including Blue Cross Blue Shield and Medicare.

KMC Dermatology, Manhattan

4201B Anderson Ave., Ste. 2, Manhattan, KS 66503

Phone: 785-320-7774 | Fax: 785-320-7758

with locations in Topeka, Lawrence, Shawnee and Leawood

Kratzer Bros. Mercantile at Volland on opening day, Oct. 18, 1913. A large crowd, estimated at more than 500 people, gathered at the store for the event.

Photo courtesy Karen Durso and family



arriving in San Francisco just in time for the 1914 World's Fair.

"Otto was a flamboyant showman in his mannerisms and the things he did," Hoots, the historian, said. "Especially when he was a young man, he was bigger than life."

VOLLAND PHOTOS

When Hoots began his 34-year career delivering UPS packages in Wabaunsee



A view of the loft from the gallery below.

County in the early '80s, he stumbled upon the story of Volland.

It was decades after the community had begun its descent from a bustling railroad hub to a near ghost town.

Kratzer's time as the town's postmaster came to an end in 1955 when the U.S. Postal Service closed its Volland location in response to the town's rapidly declining population. Once ranchers started shipping cattle by truck instead of by rail, there was little need for the Volland stockyards.

Kratzer, at 69 years old, accepted his retirement with a degree of sadness. "I am getting too old for the hard work, and besides Uncle Sam will stop my pay," he wrote in a postcard to his niece. "So after today my address will be, instead of Otto F. Kratzer, Postmaster, Volland Kans., just plain old Otto."

Fast forward to 1980, when Hoots was just becoming familiar with his new UPS route. Driving past old buildings and ruins every day, Hoots became fascinated with the traces of history he saw.

The Kratzer Bros. Mercantile, by the time Hoots drove by, had been abandoned since Otto Kratzer's death in 1971.

Hoots started asking residents about the local history and became even more captivated by their stories.

"I got to know people really well," he said. "You get to be part of the community when you've worked in a certain place for that long."

In addition to Kratzer's larger-than-life personality, Hoots learned about the man's passion for photography when Kratzer's granddaughter, Karen Durso, donated hundreds of his negatives to the

IF YOU GO

The Volland Store is 9 miles west of Alma on old Kansas Highway 10, then half a mile south on Volland Road.

The store is open Saturdays and Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. and by appointment by calling Abby Amick at 620-272-6282.

The current exhibition, Women's Work: Points of View, is on display until Dec. 20.

The rate for the loft is \$125 a night. For reservations, call Wrenn Pacheco at 405-633-1273 or find the listing on Airbnb.

Wabaunsee Historical Museum.

The photographs reveal nearly every aspect of life in Volland, focusing on Kratzer's family.

Hoots contacted Durso to see about obtaining additional photographs from Kratzer's collection and ended up with more than 2,000 negatives as well as seven hours of video footage Kratzer had recorded on an 8-millimeter movie camera.

After receiving a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council, Hoots set to work developing more of the negatives. In the process, he developed extensive knowledge not only of the history recorded in the photographs but also of the man behind the lens.

"Otto was the life of the party at the same time that he was recording the party on film," Hoots said.

RENOVATION PROCESS

It was during his work with the photographs that Durso contacted Hoots to tell him about her plans to sell the store, most likely to someone who would demolish it and sell the bricks.

By then, in 2011, the building had stood abandoned for 40 years. The roof and second floor had completely collapsed, pressing all the building's contents down into the basement. As the ruined interior sank lower each year, the brick walls remained perfectly straight and square. From the outside, the building was as impressive and imposing as ever.

Hoots reached out to Patty and Jerry Reece, a Mission Hills couple with a history of rehabbing old buildings, including their second home in Alma, purchased about 15 years earlier.

Already involved in the Flint Hills artistic community and aware of the building's history, Patty and Jerry decided to buy the property in 2011. Even after signing the papers, they had yet to figure out how they'd renovate it beyond promising not to tear it down.

What they settled on was a two-story gallery space, defined by the exposed brick walls and expansive windows of the original building, with a loft apartment at one end on the upper level. The space is available to rent for both private and public events. The apartment, too, can be rented by the night or the week. Patty said she also hopes to use the apartment space for an artist-in-residence program.

"We had a small window of opportunity to save what was quickly becoming just a ruin," Hoots said. "Patty and Jerry

"The town died when he died. It's been really gratifying to see the store saved."

— Greg Hoots

took the ball and created something I couldn't even have dreamed of.

"I kind of played a Tom Sawyer role in the project," he added with a laugh. "I got someone to come and paint that fence for me."

The first step in the renovation process was to clear out the building's remains. With rubble blocking most of the entrances, Patty said when they started out there was only one way in — through the basement door. She said they hired a couple guys with strong backs and 5-gallon buckets who cleared out enough space to bring in a crane and begin removing the larger pieces.

"My first thought was to turn it into a community center because I wanted people to still be able to come there and have

events and enjoy the space," she said. "I always want whatever happens there to be rooted in the local community because it's within the culture and history of the Flint Hills."

Through her collaboration with Hoots, Patty said she decided early on in the rehab process that the gallery would be used first and foremost to showcase an exhibit of Kratzer's photographs.

A photographer herself, she said she immediately appreciated Kratzer's talent. "He had a great sense of humor and sense of style, and I thought his photographs should be seen."

VOLLAND STORE 2.0

The store reopened after renovations in June of this year, when close to 500 people came out to celebrate the grand opening. Since then, the store has been open to the public Saturday and Sunday afternoons and available as an event space the rest of the time.

The current exhibit combines one artist's contemporary textiles with vintage American quilts, all displayed against the gallery's exposed brick walls.

Patty said she's continually surprised by how much the community has rallied around the renovation project from the beginning.

"It's been really interesting to see how it's gathered people together," she said.

Hoots said one of the most rewarding parts of his own work is seeing people's reactions to the stories he's uncovered. "A lot of people have their own memories of Volland," Hoots said. "The building isn't what it was before, but they can go back

MORE TO EXPLORE

Alma Creamery

509 E. Third St., Alma

Open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays

The creamery shop offers its famous cheese curds, made on site, as well as other cheeses and regional food products.

Antique Emporium

322 Missouri Ave., Alma

Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon to 6 p.m. on Sundays

A nice range of furniture, dishes and collectibles with a big selection of books in the back.

Beecher Bible and Rifle Church

1414 Lilac Lane in Wamego

Non-denominational Sunday services at 9:45 a.m. Tours by request by calling 785-617-1300 and 785-456-9591

The church was started by a group from New England that moved to Kansas territory in 1854 to establish it as a free state. Abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher encouraged the group to take rifles with them west to defend the cause if needed. They took the guns in crates marked "Beecher Bibles" so as not to arouse suspicion.

Native Stone Scenic Byway

See limestone fences and buildings on this beautiful drive that starts in Alma, going south along Kansas Highway 99 and then west on Kansas Highway 4.

Farmacy Cafe

327 Missouri Ave., Alma

Home-style food in a former drug store. (See story, Page 30.)



Photo courtesy Karen Durso and family
A depot agent, holding a mail bag, stands on the passenger platform at the Rock Island Railroad depot at Volland in 1905 as the train enters the station.

inside, and their memories are still sharp."

Above all, it's a place that reflects the vibrant personality and warm generosity of its original owner.

"Otto Kratzer loved to put on a show for people, and he loved to see the sense of community," Hoots said.

"The town died when he died," he said. "It's been really gratifying to see the store saved."