

HISTORIC OUTPOST

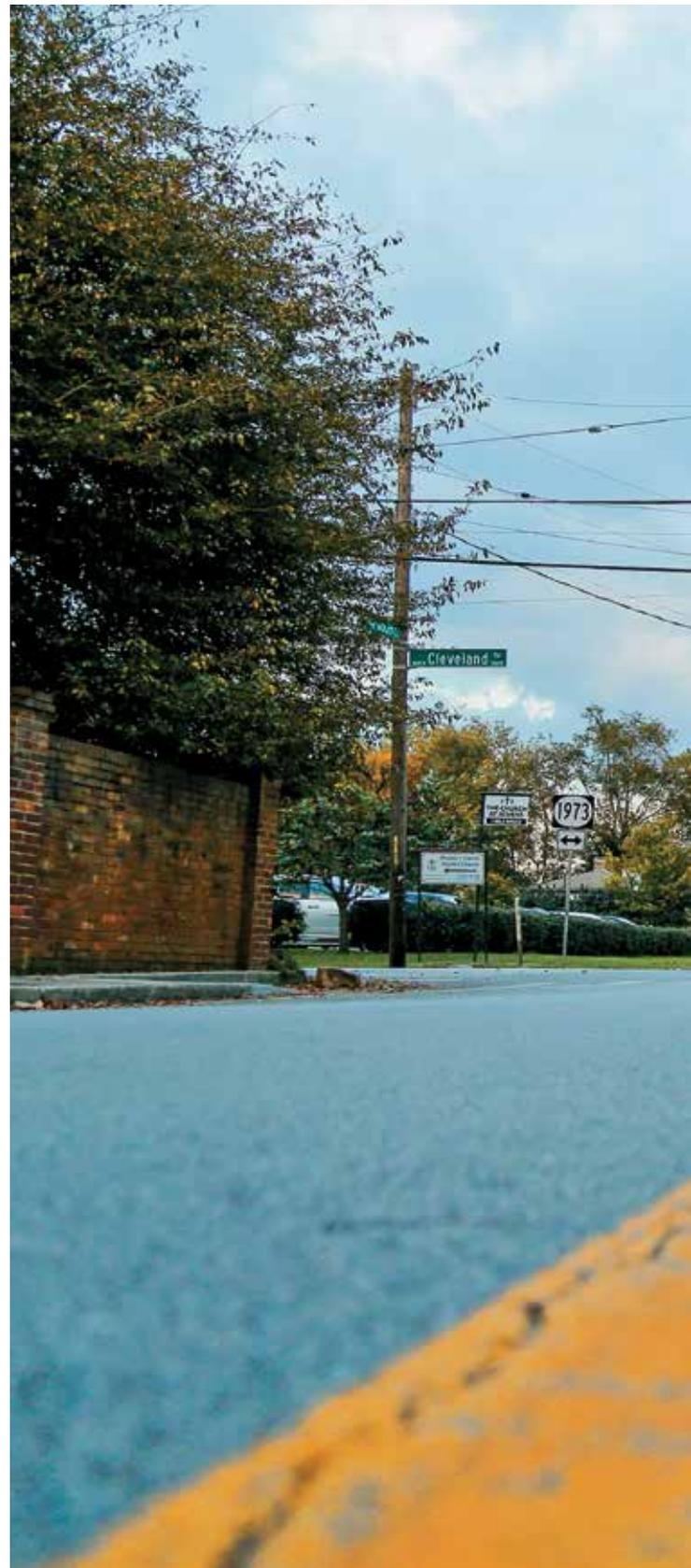
Frontier past and farming traditions define tiny Athens

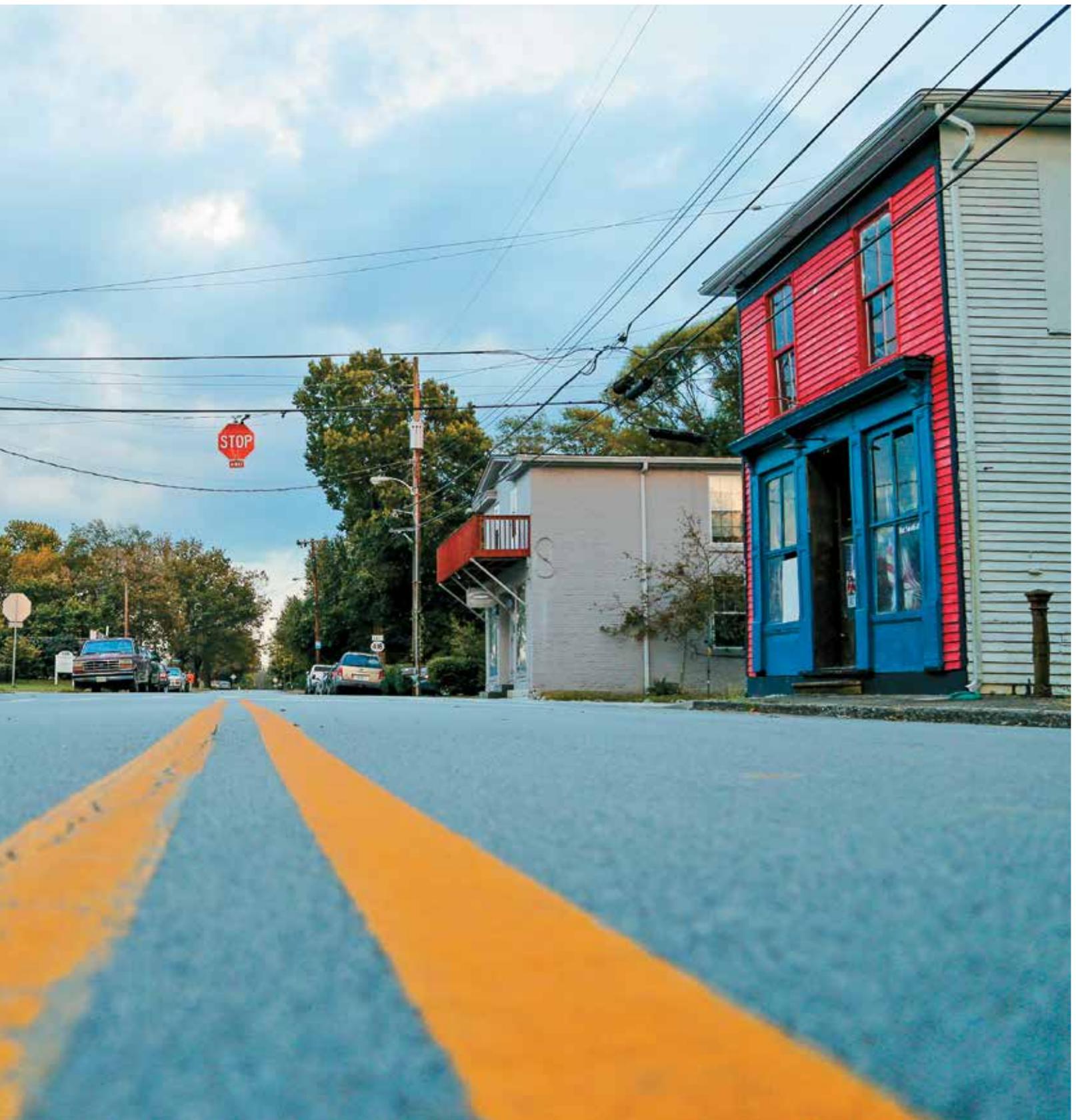
By Vickie Mitchell | Photos by Michael Reaves

The stop signs at the intersection of Athens-Boonesboro and North Cleveland roads don't just slow down traffic. The four-way stop signifies that you have arrived in Athens [pronounced ā thənz], one of Fayette County's historic hamlets.

In the late 1700s, settlers and soldiers trod both those roads, which were originally buffalo traces. Today, as travelers driving into Athens from Lexington, 10 miles northwest, approach the four-way stop, they see a row of historic townhouses to the left and two ancient storefronts on the right. Each of the five buildings bears a National Historic Register plaque, the first hint that what appears to be a modest little spot in the road is actually a place of historic significance.

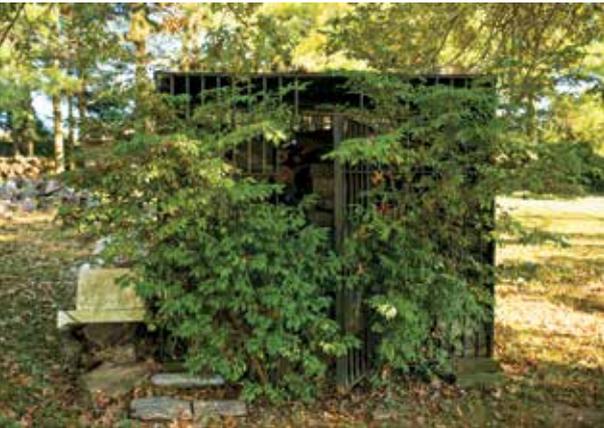
Most Athens residents are longtimers. Many are descended from early settlers; even those who can't





Buffalo once trod the traces that became Athens' main roads.

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Left, Athens' original jail cell now sits in resident Charlie Miracle's yard and is used to store firewood. Right, a historic marker on the outskirts pays tribute to the brother of Daniel Boone. Below, the old Athens school is now an antiques market

trace their ties back several generations have often lived here all or most of their lives. And although Athens' core is only about eight small blocks, many who claim it as their community live miles beyond it, on small and large farms in the rolling, rugged lands that rise from the nearby Kentucky River valley.

Such devoted residents help explain why Athens has fared better than other small, rural communities in Fayette County. "A lot of these little hamlets have dwindled over the years, and some don't even exist anymore," said Kathy Plomin, who represents Athens and much of rural Fayette County as 12th district

councilperson. "Yet they all have these rich histories."

That is certainly the case when it comes to Athens.

FRONTIER ROOTS

Most people know that Daniel Boone built Fort Boonesborough, 12 miles south of Athens. Fewer know that in 1779, when the fort got crowded, Boone and a few other settlers trekked up to a ridge near present-day Athens. They built a fort. A nearby spring supplied water, and a cave served as a hideout should Indians arrive. A few years later Boone moseyed on, but others stayed at what became known as Boone Station. Some 40 acres of the original site are now the low-key Boone Station State Historic Site, a half-mile from downtown on Gentry Road. The park's one-mile trail gives locals a place to exercise and walk their dogs. A stone marker recounts the site's Boone connection.

Driving along Gentry Road and some of the other small lanes near Athens, it's easy to imagine the frontier that Boone settled. Although some farms are pristine, their pastures cleared for Thoroughbreds and beef cattle, others are a tangle of wildflowers, weeds, and scrub trees. Craggy cliffs shoulder the road; trees crowd out the sun. It's no wonder that Betty Jo Morgan's granddaughter used to peer worriedly out the car window as they drove along. "She thought Indians might be coming," said Morgan.

Even when the fear of Native American uprisings had passed, Athens was an uneasy place. Fires destroyed its industry and businesses in the mid-1800s, and by 1871 the town had gained a reputation for rowdiness, with its residents passing a resolution "deploring recent lawlessness," according to a newspaper





Clockwise from top, Charlie Miracle, Athens' unofficial mayor, stands outside his childhood home; Boone's Creek Baptist Church dates to 1785; Athens-Boonesboro and North Cleveland roads bisect the town.

account. Then, nearly 20 years later, the town seemed hell-bent on more trouble as it voted to go wet. Sure enough, as the liquor flowed, so did problems, with a feud between a judge and a farmer that ended in the death of another resident grabbing the biggest headlines. Perhaps not surprising, when liquor licenses at Athens' three saloons expired in 1898, a judge opted not to renew them.

FIVE CHURCHES, ONE SMALL TOWN

One has to wonder — did all the waywardness make Athens fertile ground for religion? It is home to five churches, a generous number for a small town, and one of them, Boone's Creek Baptist, has been there since a few years after Boone arrived. Its modern sanctuary sits on the same site as the original log church, built after the congregation was formed in 1785. Boone's older brother, Samuel, and Samuel's wife, Sarah, were among the church's founders.

As with Athens, the church has had its struggles. Longtime members Cecil Short, his sister Jane Parker, and Morgan, who was church secretary 44 years, all remember dynamic pastor Lloyd Mahanes, who brought the church back after it had dwindled to 13 members during World War II. Because of gas rationing, Mahanes rounded up his flock in his 1939 Studebaker. "He'd run down to the river and out to Jack's Creek," said

ALL ABOUT ATHENS

- **ATHENS WAS ORIGINALLY CALLED CROSS PLAINS**, a nod to its location at the intersection of two pioneer pathways.
- **IN 1779 DANIEL BOONE** and several families built a small fort a stone's throw from what would become modern-day Athens. The same year, pioneers built Bryan Station on the edge of Lexington.
- **IN 1826, THROUGH AN ACT OF THE STATE LEGISLATURE**, Cross Plains became Athens.
- **FIRES IN ATHENS IN THE MID-1800S** wiped out most manufacturing, including rope and woolen factories.
- **THE ATHENS HISTORIC DISTRICT INCLUDES A ROW** of connected townhouses and two storefront buildings near the intersection of Athens-Boonesboro and North Cleveland roads.
- **ATHENS' BEST-KNOWN RESIDENTS INCLUDE** former Lexington mayor Scotty Baesler and the late poet and Kentucky poet laureate Jane Gentry Vance. The Baesler and Gentry families are among a number that have long ties to Athens. The area's newest celebrity is a four-legged one. Racing champion Wise Dan lives on Forest View Farm, owned by Charlie and Amy LoPresti, just east of Athens on Athens-Boonesboro Road.

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Short. “Kids would be hanging out everywhere.”

That kind of dedication is still exhibited by many in the church, especially the longtime members like Short, Parker, and Morgan, all now in their 80s. “We’re here every time there’s a service,” said Morgan. “Right now, we are without a pastor. We’re searching for someone to help us grow.” Added Short, “Us old ones are dying off.”

POPULATION DWINDLES

As residents have moved away or passed on, Athens’ population has dwindled, and the town has lost some of the threads that knit a community together. Its post office closed in the early 1900s; the elementary school a block from town closed in 2006, replaced by Athens-Chilesburg Elementary near Hamburg. Today, there’s not even a country store, a long-standing tradition in an area with a large contingent of hungry farmers and farm hands.



Softball tournaments take place regularly at the Athens Athletic Complex.

Back when Cecil Short was growing up, he could walk from school and grab a snack at one of four country stores. “I’d buy bologna and crackers and a large Pepsi for 10 cents.”

Cotton Short, who runs the Athens Service Center with his dad, Charlie, is about half Cecil’s age, yet even when he was young, Athens had several country stores. “One of the store owners babysat me while Dad and Mom worked,” he said. “That’s how I got to know all the old people. ‘Course a lot of them have died off now.”

Nine years ago when Gene Rose moved his monthly antique sale to the old Athens schoolhouse, a country store thrived downtown. “You could go in and have home cooking for lunch,” he said. “It would be full of farmers.”

SLOWER PACE AND PASTORAL SETTING HAVE APPEAL

Even as cars zip along two miles away on Interstate 75, traffic and life in Athens move more slowly. The pace and pastoral setting are attracting some new faces. Among them is Adair Hoskins, who moved from Corbin in July to a house with three acres on one of Athens’ few side streets. “It’s quiet out here,” he said.

J. Mike Alexander is also planning a move to Athens. He knows it well because he’s run his vending and snack supply business out of one of Athens’ oldest buildings for the past 18 years. On the outside, the 187-year-old storefront looks much like it did when it was built as a tavern. It’s had several other roles since then — country market, gas station — and now, its second-floor apartment will become Alexander’s new home as he and his wife downsize from a house in Andover. He looks forward to small-town life. “There’s something about this place,” Alexander said. “You are close to everything but out in the country.”

On Athens’ fringes, there’s a little activity. Heading into town from Lexington, the Athens Athletic Complex draws weekend softball tournaments. Across the road, traffic comes and goes constantly from an industrial park where dozens of businesses, ranging from auto auctions and lawn care to UPS and cement makers, are headquartered. At downtown’s edge

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Working farms and Thoroughbred breeding operations surround Athens. Cecil Parker, 88, Jane Parker, 85, and Betty Jo Morgan, 84, seldom miss a service at Boone's Creek Baptist Church.

at the old Athens school, antiques and collectibles fill former classrooms for the Athens Schoolhouse Antique Show, held the first weekend each month.

A half-mile east of downtown on Athens-Boonesboro Road, 14 of 20 tracts of former farmland have been sold for development in the past couple of years, yet there's not much building going on yet. One owner has planted his three tracts

in corn, for example. "I think people are having some fun with the land instead of rushing to build," said real estate agent Richard Sims.

APPETITE FOR A RESTAURANT OF ITS OWN

Despite its rowdy past, Athens seems a peaceable place. Plomin doesn't hear much from constituents there. "Someone

did call me about trucks going too fast," she said.

The only bustle is at the Shorts' auto repair business just past Athens' four-way stop. The Athens Service Center is barely visible because of the cars parked in front of it. The business is so busy that the Shorts rent spaces all over town to park cars waiting for repair or pick up. All those cars make Athens look a little

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J. Mike Alexander has a business in Athens and plans to move to the town.

busier than it actually is.

Right across Athens-Boonesboro Road from the Shorts' place sits a low, concrete block building with a wide overhang that had been empty for a while. Dontavis Hocker is renovating the former restaurant and store for his new restaurant, Sandra's Cafe, and Athens' residents are watching hopefully, dropping in to see how the project is going. Adair Hoskins was one of them. He wandered in one late September day.

"I'm curious," Hoskins began. "I just live around the corner."

Hocker launched into a description of his restaurant — his mother, Sandra, will do most of the cooking and make comfort and soul food, as well as hamburgers and other staples. They plan to serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Hoskins brightened. "It will be nice to have a little restaurant right here," he said.

Most everyone in Athens would agree. At the least, the café will give locals a place to gather and farmers a place to fill up with a home-cooked meal. Hocker, though, has larger aspirations. He's lived in Athens nearly a year; he sees its potential.

"I want to get this café opened and bring this town back," he said. **KM**

UNOFFICIAL MAYOR'S OFFICE

The Athens Service Center does more than fix cars. In a town with no city hall, post office, or general store, it's become "like the mayor's office — it's where everything happens," said J. Mike Alexander, whose office is next to the service center.

In this unremarkable metal garage just past Athens' four-way stop, locals gather to gab with father-and-son mechanics Charlie and Cotton Short and their landlord, friend, neighbor, and part-time employee Charles Miracle. They sit in broken-down, wheeled office chairs around a desk covered with paperwork. Sometimes there are doughnuts; sometimes, coffee.

Amid a generous bit of good-natured ribbing, there's a substantial chunk of inspired human kindness and community service. In some ways the Shorts' place has become Athens' unofficial United Way.

Take, for example, the fundraising efforts following the deaths of two locals who spent their retirement "working" at the center. Cotton points out worn spots on the wall, where Edmond Stone and Bobby Eades leaned back for afternoon naps between their chores around the garage.

Stone and his wife, Mary, died with little to nothing. "Charlie put up a jar here and collected money and bought them a headstone," said Charlie Short. "They set it last week."

When Edmond died, the Shorts and Miracle took to the phone to raise money for his \$9,000 funeral expenses.

"We started calling people; he was born and raised here," said Charlie Short. Among the generous donors were members of the nearby Iroquois Hunt Club; Edmond had long allowed them to ride their horses across his small farm.

"You'll be surprised what people

will do out here," Miracle said. "It is a tight community."

The Shorts have helped motorists whose cars have broken down on nearby Interstate 75 and have done repairs free for neighbors who didn't have the money to pay them. They are thankful to have the means to assist.

"We help anybody we can," said Cotton Short. "We are blessed to be able to do that," said Charlie Short.

For Miracle, helping others — especially neighbors — was a concept introduced early. More than 50 years ago, people in Athens helped his family when his brother died. One neighbor canvassed the community, collecting money to bury Miracle's brother; the local grave digger did his work for free. "I'll never forget," Miracle said. Another Athens resident, the late Ed Guilfoil, helped Miracle get his start and become a successful service station owner. "I owe him and I owe him and I owe him," he said.

About 15 years ago Charles Miracle built the metal garage on a lot he owned, to bring Charlie Short and his car repair business from Lexington to Athens. The men joke about their complex business relationship. Charles Miracle is the Shorts' landlord and employee. Said Miracle, "I told them, 'Boys, I'm going to have to raise the rent on you a bit.'" Charlie Short laughed, "Yeah, and when he raises the rent, we just lower his pay."



Cotton and Charlie Short run the Athens Service Center.