



# THE KERKHOVEN Banner

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The cafe business has been a rough one in the small town of Sunburg, and the pandemic certainly didn't help matters. Vicky Daniels is the latest in a litany of operators who have tried to make a go of it, but the business just wasn't enough to stay open.

## CLOSED AGAIN: Vicky Daniels takes her last order at Sunburg cafe

by Cormac Dodd

Vicky Daniels departed from Sunburg, the town where she was raised, at the age of 18 and returned at 65, opening Ms. Vicky's Cafe.

In Alaska, she had lived in dry cabins at the edge of a non-maintained rural forest on 80 acres, but she wanted to give restaurant ownership a go--so she pinged back to Minnesota, first to the cities, then to her native Sunburg.

The cafe facility in Sunburg, a modest eatery open from 6:00 a.m to 2:00 p.m., with a liars-dice-style coffee and breakfast contingent, has been through a raft of owners since 2002.

Unfortunately, Daniels is the latest. Ms. Vicky's Cafe served its last dish Sunday, February 20th, bringing on an early retirement she had not counted on, leaving her with termination fees and a steady swell of other payments.

Daniels had the multi-sided misfortune of unveiling a business shortly before the pan-

demic that laid plights aplenty on restaurant owners.

"We were doing well that first summer, but we had one thing against us and that was the pandemic," Daniels said.

Cafe, restaurant and bar owners faired badly during the pandemic--harsh impacts were more pronounced in restaurants than in perhaps any other sector -- not least of which businesses that were new when the pandemic struck and sent markets reeling.

The year 2020 witnessed more than 110,000 restaurant closures. Seventeen percent of restaurants would be permanently shuttered after 2020, according to the National Restaurant Association, and there is no way of identifying restaurant closures, formerly hubs of merriment and go-to haunts for various communities, the pandemic has wrought.

Many posted losses as people stopped eating out (those who, in the first place, could afford it) restaurants moved to take out, and it was impossible to pay employees.

Local, mom-and-pop eateries struggled mightily, but so did industry giants.

Inflation ran away. Before the pandemic, five gallons of fryer oil cost \$19 dollars but that cost has increased to \$58. Fifteen dozen eggs were \$13 prior to the pandemic, rising to \$24.

Despite the pace of inflation, up to 7.9% in February, many restaurants experience consternation about the potential loss of customers and so have kept prices as low as possible to dissuade consumer disenchantment, even when inflation is at its highest since 1982.

If restaurant industry stalwarts struggled to marshal their eateries through unprecedented industry turbulence, imagine the difficulties new restaurant owners faced. What's more, a larger operation has a slew of shift managers, owners and other executives to weather dark periods.

At Ms. Vicky's Cafe, Daniels employed her granddaughter, Jani Skogstad, 21--a

perennial face who labored in a number of roles in the cafe, including waitressing--and several other locals in the eatery that, before closing, served klub, and seasonally lutefisk and rommegrot, a sweet pudding, in what is largely a Norwegian community.

Daniels, though blessed with a hard-working staff, faced many of these challenges alone. And despite the bucolic character of the economic community of her eatery, she absorbed the same financial assistance as those in urban centers.

Shoring-up support of a financial sort for eateries plagued by the pandemic, Kandiyohi County and the EDC provided robust and sustained support for those impacted by a state-mandated closure, a five-month use of Gov. Tim Walz's emergency powers at the height of coronavirus-related deaths in the state. Once that money began to look lean, Daniels knew she was in trouble, watching

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Vicky Daniels, shown in the kitchen of Ms. Vicky's Cafe in Sunburg. --submitted photo

## With no illusions of grandeur, township boards do the nitty-gritty necessary for their people

by Cormac Dodd

The cardinal responsibility of a rural township board is the myriad of roads that wend through nearly 1800 such districts in Minnesota.

The roads bisecting Kerkhoven Township are a source of pride for Eldon Benson and Eric Turnquist, the treasurer of 17 years and the chairman of the board respectively. They are often complimented on smoothness and driveability, the result of persistent blading.

"We usually get good feedback and try to take care of rough patches the best we can," Benson said. "Do you know what a washboard is?"

The bare-bones committees go to work on projects such as culvert repair and other civic functions using some state funding and taxing authority to focus on what is absolutely integral: keeping cars on the road through highway repair, ensuring roadway signage is adequate, etc. To this end, townships have a history of pairing with city councils to accomplish certain projects of mutual necessity, such as op-

erations of ambulance and fire departments.

Town boards are a near-ancient form of government, though still a vital one, with the first in the U.S. begun in 1787. Today, in this area, township business transpires with almost total invisibility... unless of course there's a big issue.

The Kerkhoven Township Board governs from within the walls of a former rural schoolhouse, half a dozen miles northwest of Sunburg.

"It's about the only form of government where you can set your own taxes," said Bill Broberg, chairman of Pillsbury Township.

Pillsbury Township, which

serves the area surrounding the city of Kerkhoven, has pushed along the completion of several major projects in recent years and intends to continue to serve the community.

In 1997, during a winter

mythologized in the collective memory of locals for its harshness, Pillsbury Township spent \$11,000 in the month of March, one of the high-cost months in Pillsbury Township Board expenditure history, in

the service of road safety.

Pillsbury Township is also host to many gravel roads that require routine maintenance. The total for 2022 is \$92,000, a number that assumes meaning in view of the cost of of a

tarring a mile of road--one or two million.

There is no town hall associated with Pillsbury Township. Meetings are held at Broberg's house half a mile from Kerkhoven. The annual meeting was last week, for which 14 community members were present --including the board of five.

"When I first joined and attended a meeting in Benson, they

told me the only way out is in a pine box," said Broberg, jesting about the slight turnover in elected officials. Broberg himself has served since 1988.

There are 1790 townships active in the state that still practice grassroots governance. Township board members, it is generally thought serve despite only slight recognition and minimal compensation.

The oldest form of government in Minnesota appears destined to continue, running into 2022 in style, conservative in its spending of meager funds, still often run out of retired country schoolhouses that offer cinematic views of the countryside.

On March 8th, thousands across the state celebrated Township Day--in a flourishing of state pride, for the tradition has always had traction here.

Township governments were brought from Europe. They were how settlers had ordered civic life in the old country and feature prominently in regions that hone and

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Kerkhoven Township Hall -- like many in Rural Minnesota, is a former country schoolhouse.

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