

The man who
really has
everything

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Even without an inventory, it's easy to believe Horsfall Variety Store in Lansing, Iowa, carries more than a million items. Paul Horsfall Jr.'s motto is that if he doesn't carry an item, his customers don't need it.

He's got it all

If you want it, Horsfall's will have it

LANSING, Iowa—If variety is the spice of life, then the Horsfall Variety Store is full of eternal bliss. The store contains nearly 1 million items, from rubber jar seals to plastic Rubik's cubes.

And did I mention 100 different spices, including adobo seasoning, fennel seed and turmeric?

Or instant nectar for hummingbirds, available year-round?

Only a hummingbird could comfortably navigate the 30-inch aisles of the store on 300 Main St. in downtown Lansing (pop. 1,200). The store is a block west from the sandstone bluffs of the Mississippi River, about 35 miles southwest of LaCrosse, Wis.

Lansing is in the heart of Allamakee (pronounced *Al-ah-mah-KEE*) County, one of the most dramatic stretches along the river. Horsfall's Variety Store abuts Mount Hosmer, a 104-acre city park located atop a 450-foot bluff from which visitors can see three states—Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

The store is owned and operated by Paul Horsfall Jr., who was reared 35 miles west in Decorah. His father managed a department store in Decorah, and he helped out at the store when he was a kid. He just didn't care for the decorum in Decorah.

"We had to wear ties and stuff like that," said Horsfall, 45. "I liked a casual atmosphere, so when this store became available, I went for it." The Horsfall family has had a riverfront summer home in Lansing since 1959.

Horsfall bought the store in 1975 from Leo S. Krieger, 81, who had run Krieger's Variety Store for more than 40 years.

The first thing Horsfall did was expand. "Retail changed where you gotta be a one-stop shop," said Horsfall. "We carry rubber jar rings, sprinkler tops for pop bottles and the old shelf paper with the edge that folds down."

"In a town the size of Lansing, if you sell shoes only, there might be a day where nobody buys a pair of shoes. But if you sell thousands of items, there's going to be something that people need. The big stores don't carry anything in depth because they don't want high turnover. The key to our success is selection and low turnover. For the most part, if we don't have it, they don't need it."

Like more than 50 types of heavy hairnets. Or more than 100 metal cookie cutters.

Horsfall runs his business with the acumen of Sam Walton. He pays attention to merchandising trends, such as the need to buy stuff in massive quantities. Wearing a gray flannel shirt and baggy blue jeans, Horsfall explained, "In the old days you could buy what you needed and you wouldn't get hurt price-wise. Now, to get a decent price, you have to buy a lot at one time. But you only have so much space."

Indeed.

The variety store encompasses only 3,800 square feet. Horsfall owns another 6,000-square foot building down the block at 360 Main St. that sells fabrics, clothing, towels, rugs and more than 50 kinds of mini metal cookie cutters (two for \$1). But Horsfall's is not as cluttered as Horsfall's Variety Store. "We have such narrow aisles here that when we get a truck

shipment, we use the other building as a warehouse," said the 280-pound Horsfall, who negotiates the aisles with ease. "It's what makes us a close community, getting by your friends and neighbors in the aisles."

The jam-packed variety store is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday and Saturday; until 6 p.m. on Friday, and noon to 4 p.m. on Sunday. A customer stood at the counter. She was buying a set of batteries.

"Enjoy the sunshine," Horsfall said.

And while it was a sunny and balmy 75 degrees outside, you wouldn't know it from inside the store. The light coming through some windows was obscured by stuff; shades covered other windows.

How could Horsfall tell if it was sunny?

"We just had a delivery," he answered. "I saw the light outside. And you barely can see a crack of light coming through." The variety store carries more than 1,000 sunglasses, most of them \$3.99.

One of Horsfall's most unusual items is a 1940s metal mend-et (\$2.69), which is used to repair holes in pots and pans. Horsfall said, "Mend-ets are basically out of the past."

"Our best seller is stamp needlework to embroider. The big stores just want to carry the fast-selling patterns. We try to go for things people can't get anywhere else. Even though there's a slow turnover, it gives us a monopoly. They have to come to Lansing, Iowa, if they want the big selection of quilt

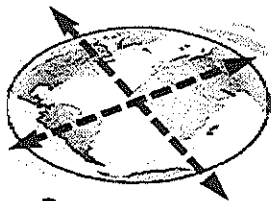
blocks, pillow cases and tablecloths to embroider." Horsfall has a staff of five, including himself and his wife, Dorothea. He conducts inventories in his mind and he generally remembers where he keeps stuff. "Basically, it's where I put it the last time," he explained. "I keep things in the same place for the most part. Once in a while we shift things around because of seasonal merchandise. Then it gets crazy. There's three levels to most of the shelves and there's two or three items per pegboard hook because of our close quarters."

Horsfall wouldn't admit it, but he began to look faint. The variety store draws customers from the Chicago area, especially in summer and fall. Longtime Chicago folk singer Bonnie Koloc lives in the area, and I stumbled across the variety store several years back while visiting Chicago club owner Bill FitzGerald, who used to have a summer home in Lansing.

But most customers come from neighboring towns such as Decorah; Sparta, Wis., and LaCrosse, Wis. Nearly 20 people wandered through the store during my Thursday afternoon visit. Horsfall said 16 of them were from out of town. There isn't a Wal-Mart within 35 miles of Lansing. "These days when people go shopping, there's a tendency to go on an *outing*," Horsfall said. "You get a day off, you want to pile in the car and just go for a ride. Thank goodness the Mississippi River leads to Lansing, Iowa."

STORE HOURS:

Monday	9-5
Tuesday	9-5
Wednesday	9-5
Thursday	9-5
Friday	9-5
Saturday	9-5
Sunday	12-4



Detours

with Dave Hoekstra