

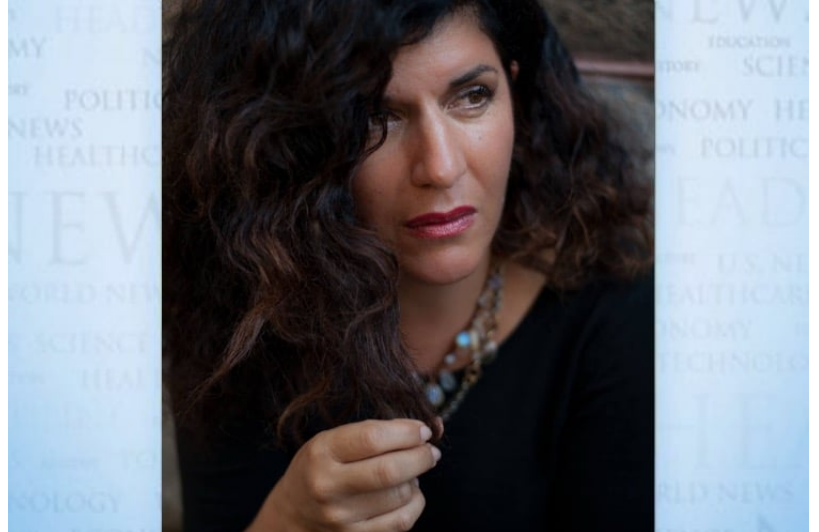


Written by [Salena Zito](#) on July 11, 2023

## The General Store That Cultivated a Community One Friday at a Time

LANSING, North Carolina — Nestled in the rolling farmland in Ashe County is a tidy white-clad building whose wistful charm beckons you to stop. It's the kind of place you may only spot if you set your navigation app to avoid highways. And even if you're trying to make good time down Silas Creek Road, you will find it impossible *not* to stop here.

Across the very top of the storefront reads "Phipps General Store," accompanied by signs for Schwan's Ice Cream and one noting that it is the Silas Creek United States Post Office. All around it are barns and postcard-perfect farmland. It is only upon closer inspection that you learn this is now the *former* post office and that the store is closed. Or is it?



Salena Zito

You probably wouldn't be surprised at this point to learn that Phipps General Store holds a secret.

Every Friday night, this store, which has been shuttered since 1953, opens for the sole objective of forming a community of musicians and music lovers from all across Ashe County — from all over North Carolina, in fact, and even from nearby Virginia and West Virginia.

They come here with their banjos, guitars, fiddles and mandolins to play old-time music and bluegrass. The musicians, along with anyone else who comes to sit a spell with them, keep time, sing stories, form friendships and bond with each other.

Sounds pretty magical, which is exactly what it was for Justin Fowler, who lives about two hours away in Mooresville, North Carolina, and who has long wanted to make this trek to participate.

Last weekend he finally did.

The 37-year-old Wilkes County native, who grew up just down the mountain from Lansing, said he started playing the fiddle two years ago — specifically old-time fiddle. Sadly, he didn't really have a chance to play it in a jam session where he lives.

"So I have to seek those jams out and generally head back home and the surrounding areas where it's more prevalent," he said.

When he first heard about the Phipps General Store music, Fowler said he knew he needed to get up there to experience it. "Diving into the world of old time, you find all kinds of different regional styles, and having Ashe County roots, I wanted to find that sound and experience as a way of staying connected," he said, explaining years ago his family originated in Ashe County.

"I was visiting my parents for the weekend and finally decided to make the drive up the mountain for



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the music, and I'm glad I did," he said.

Rita Scott owns the general store and lives behind it on the farm where her mother, Robertine Francis, was raised. She is also the founder of the weekly jam sessions. She says she started the sessions in her living room, but they ended up becoming so popular she moved it to the vacant store founded by her grandparents J.R. and Lessie Phipps in 1923.

"They ran a dairy, and she was the postmistress in a section of the store. When my grandfather died in 1953, the store soon closed," she said.

However, both the inside and outside remained frozen in time, reflecting the graceful efficiency of every small-town general store in 1920s Appalachia.

Scott said she came up with the idea of bringing the store back to life — it had sat as storage for farming equipment for 54 years — but could not have done it without a lot of help from friends.

"There were few places in the county to get together with others to play. And a need was there and the store was there, and with the help from friends and neighbors, the store was brought back to life and we started the jam in 2007, and it's been going ever since," she said.

Because of the remoteness of those who call Appalachia home, music and storytelling was a way to form communities, but also keep them together. It began as a way for artisans who had to put in long days of work on farms or worked as mechanics, coal miners or other jobs to gather after a hard day of work — sometimes at a farm, a general store or a machine shop — and display their musical abilities.

Just in the way that Phipps General Store does, anyone with an instrument can show up and start jamming. It doesn't matter if you are self-taught, have just learned or are a master at your craft. The point of what happens here is passing along the songs and stories and forming a community — and more importantly, keeping those melodies and stories alive for the next generations.

On the upcoming Friday, Scott said she and her fiddle would be joined by her boyfriend, Greg Troxell, who will be playing bass and guitar. The coffee will be free, but the memories and experiences will stay with you, whether you are there to listen or jam, long after the doors close at 10:30 p.m.

The people who come by Phipps find by the end of the evening they have experienced something very magical. Their feet will have tapped, fellowship will have formed, and a new fabric in their lives has been stitched together with people they likely would have passed zipping down a highway or flying over in a plane. And those stories they never knew existed will linger with them long after the strumming, singing and picking have stopped for the night.

*Salena Zito is a CNN political analyst and a staff reporter and columnist for the Washington Examiner. She reaches the Everyman and Everywoman through shoe-leather journalism, traveling from Main Street to the beltway and all places in between. To find out more about Salena and read her past columns, please visit the Creators Syndicate webpage at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).*

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