EDGEMONT -- Life in Edgemont moves at the pace of cold, clear Wilson's Creek: slow and quiet.

There is no easy way to reach this place, buried 10 miles deep in Pisgah National Forest; from anywhere else.

Part of the Edgemont landscape is Archie Coffey's general merchandise store, since 1927 a community fixture and hub of activity in this northwestern Caldwell County settlement of eight or 10 families.

Part of Coffey's general store is, of course, Archie, and the post office in its rear that he has tended for 38 years. The two of them have suffered and survived bleak winters, periodic floods and bureaucratic blight.

But Coffey, 66, hung it up as postmaster last October. He still is storekeeper and notary public and forest fire warden. The store remains the post office, tax listing station, Army recruitment point and Edgemont's place of officialdom.

Until three years ago, the store had the area's only telephone.

After all the years, Coffey takes the worth of his store -- now short on merchandise and long on antiquities and junk -- and of the post office very seriously.

"Even though it may be way out in the country and a small office, it requires the same first class service of the big cities," he said.

The white frame store with its false front, wide planked floors, flapping American flag and raised metal ceiling was washed down the creek in the big flood of 1940. Coffey retrieved it, lodged against a tree, and set it back on the same site.

The rear-partitioned post office has been part and parcel of it all.

"In other words, to stay a country store," Coffey said, "you have to have the post office. I still believe in it. I don't think all this consolidation and all is always that good."
Post offices in neighboring communities have not fared so well. The one at downstream Mortimer and another in the Globe section were shut down as the areas they served dwindled.

Floods -- in 1895, 1916 and 1940 -- have helped decimate places like Mortimer, which with big logging operations and later a cotton mill once had a population of some 600.

By 1960, three people lived there. Following an 800 percent increase, 27 persons registered for the 1970 census.

Almost since people started living on that part of the creek, Edgemont has attracted mostly tourist cabins and summer vacationers. Fourteen cabins were washed away in the ’40 flood and the tourist hotel closed, but Coffey maintains the population has remained stable.

"Edgemont has always made a comeback, but after 1940, Mortimer failed to," he said.

The Depression of the 1930s – Coffey then was assistant postmaster to his brother Robert – was not the worst thing the store has contended with, Coffey said.

"The Depression wasn't that bad," he said. "At that time people here just didn't go to town. ... The general store, years ago, why anything they wanted, you had it. It was kind of like a department store is now."

Operating country stores and postmastering runs in Coffey's family. His daddy and brothers Robert and Spencer have an accumulated 115 years doing both, Coffey figures, at stores in Gragg, Edgemont and the Globe.

The mail takes on added importance in a community the size and location of Edgemont. That dates back to the teens and '20s, which Coffey remembers, when it was brought to town by horse and buggy each Tuesday and Saturday at 3 p.m.

"The main point is the people would gather for the mail on Tuesdays and Saturdays," Coffey said. "It was like the Army, like mail call.

“It brought the whole community together and it was something to look for." And, he remembered, if church was the weekly site of prayer, the mail call was the place to take out pent-up frustrations with frequent fisticuffs.

The mail was later brought in by a one-way train route that passed through Edgemont and Mortimer every other day. That line was ended in 1939. A star route carrier out of Lenoir now delivers the gray canvas mail bag each morning to Coffey's store.

Folks don't move into or out of Edgemont very much anymore, due in good part to the fact that most of it is federal land.
Exceptions are Wayne and Brenda Beard, who moved into a creekside cabin last fall looking for something from the back lanes of memory.

Brenda, since Coffey’s retirement as the post office’s officer-in-charge, may become Edgemont’s new postmistress. She has applied for the job and should know the results within weeks.

"You know, you love to talk about how you'd like to go to the mountains and live off the fat of the land," she said. I felt like I'd like that . . . I'd always liked Edgemont."

So Brenda quit her job as a teacher at West Caldwell High School and the couple moved from downtown Lenoir to upcreek Edgemont.

It was a place Mrs. Beard had come to often while growing up. She now staffs the Post office officially, for three hours each morning, filling the 40 or so “call mail” glass-fronted boxes at the store and sorting mail for another 40 delivery box patrons.

Edgemont residents of half a century ago waited on the mail twice a week. For excitement, Mrs. Beard and her Charlotte-based salesman husband join other weekend couples for hikes through the pressing forest.

But her other memories of the village by the creek brought her back, she says.

“Ask anyone and they’ll tell you: Edgemont hasn’t changed a bit.”
Coffey Leafs Through His Own Mail While Canine Companion Relaxes

Archie Coffey Sits At His Cluttered Desk In The Office Area Of Edgemont’s Prime Visitors’ Center, The General Store
Coffey’s Store In Caldwell County Was Salvaged From 1940 Flood Damage

Store Window Reflects Menagerie Of Items Found Among Clutter

Post Office At Rear Of Store Provides Mail Service To Isolated Mountaineers