Generica: Land of the Same

By John Clayton

I used to travel on business occasionally, and these travels rarely took me to exciting urban locales such as New York, Miami, or Chicago. I was more likely to be in Omaha, Nebraska; Bloomington, Illinois; Jackson, Mississippi; or Columbus, Ohio. There is nothing wrong with any of those places, and the people were wonderful, but, with the exception of their older central cityscapes, they all looked the same. At some point, we always ended up on a Route 1-type of highway lined with the same restaurants and retailers we saw everywhere else. Home Depot, The Italian Garden, Best Buy, Outback Steakhouse, WalMart, Denny’s, TGI Fridays, you could go on forever. My traveling companions agreed—if you dropped down out of nowhere, you could be anywhere. Nothing, absolutely nothing was unique or distinctive about where you were. One fellow introduced me to what is now a familiar label, if not an epithet: Generica. The United States of Generica reigns supreme.

With the closing of Selby’s Market and the Organic Market, and the general decline of the Poolesville business sector as undeniably confirmed by the empty storefronts, I find myself thinking more and more about the sprawl of Generica.

The town itself is thriving. There are beautiful new residential developments, many churches are healthy, and clearly the government is doing just fine, evidenced by the impressive new town hall and a steady stream of lively publicly-sponsored activities on Whalen Commons. Thank goodness for that. Events on Whalen Commons and in the other public areas around Poolesville get people out of their homes and maintain an important sense of community, to say nothing of providing a local newspaper with a steady stream of human interest photographs for publication.

It is not clear to me or to perhaps anyone else what the future holds for the not-all-that-little town of Poolesville, with a population destined for 6000. Several people have shared their thoughts with me on current business trends, for lack of a better phrase, and you know who you are and will recognize some of your observations. Are people going to shop here, regularly, as part of their weekly routines, or will this just be a bedroom community where people shop on the way home from somewhere else? A hop across White’s Ferry to Leesburg, or a drive down Route 28 to Darnestown and Germantown, and you are in Generica. Maybe that’s good enough.

Once, some time ago, I read a story about a popular District of Columbia bar that was closing. The owner was interviewed and said there was a steady stream of people coming in who told him how much they loved the bar, how sorry they were that it was closing, and how its demise would leave a regrettable hole in their community. His response was, “Who are these people? Where were they when I was trying to make a go of it?” Perhaps we all like the idea of places like Selby’s Market and other stores being in our town more than we feel compelled to shop there to keep them alive, where we might pay more for a smaller selection than we would elsewhere. That is not necessarily bad, but it is a choice, and there are consequences.

The Town of Poolesville government and the Poolesville Area Chamber of Commerce work hard to keep business thriving. There are even attempts to make it more of a tourist destination, which would bring more shoppers to town to hopefully support some business ventures, and even provide some supplemental support to our local restaurants so that the rest of us can have a Bassett’s or a Cugini’s to enjoy at other times.

One prominent local businessperson suggested that most people just don’t care. They live here, but they don’t shop here. They don’t vote in town elections, and they don’t go to town meetings. It’s nice to have a grocery store, an organic market, a pharmacy, a hardware store, some specialty stores and a few quality restaurants in town, but it doesn’t really matter. It’s a great place to live, and Generica is just a hop skip and a jump away. We can live out here, and still shop like everyone else. It’s really a pretty good deal, unless you think it’s more than just nice to have a viable business district in the town where you live, and you don’t mind losing something unique and distinctive.