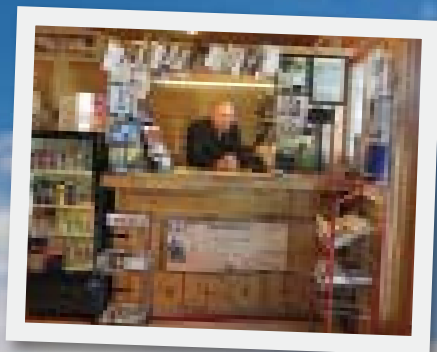


*Don Sammons owns and operates a convenience store and gas station in Buford, Wyoming, the nation's smallest town, with Sammons as its sole resident.*

# (sole) Proprietor



Don Sammons (far left) is the town's only resident and "sole proprietor" of the Buford Trading Post.





**No schools, no foot traffic** and no local word of mouth — yet the Buford Trading Post has survived, and during some years even flourished, with just one full-time employee. That employee: the owner and the town's lone resident — a dedicated industry professional whose business acumen is every bit as sophisticated as those running the largest convenience store chains.

Welcome to Buford, Wyoming, population 1. And meet Don Sammons, the town's only resident and the owner of the Buford Trading Post convenience store and gas station.

"From Buford, the nearest business is, oh, 25 miles away," said Sammons, a 60-something St. Louis native who made his way to Buford nearly three decades ago.

Located along Interstate 80 at 8,000

feet above sea level, Buford is the highest community along I-80 (which stretches from San Francisco to Teaneck, New Jersey), but whose most notable geographical distinction references its horizontal, not vertical, expanse.

"We're the smallest town in the United States," Sammons said proudly. "There are a couple of other places with a population of one, but they don't have

>

a post office; they're combined with other towns. We still have a post office, and we still show up on the map."

### How I Got Here

Located mid-way between Laramie and Cheyenne and established in 1866 during construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, Buford is Wyoming's second oldest town, which at one time accommodated nearly 2,000 residents, mostly railroad workers. Over time and as work on the railroad finished, most of the residents dispersed, to where only one family lived in Buford in 1980.

At the time, Sammons was running a moving company franchise in Newport Beach, California, but he and his wife, Teri, both yearned for a quieter lifestyle. "We wanted more space," Sammons explained, and with friends living in Cheyenne, they made the lifestyle change, moving to a small ranch three miles from Buford.

Sammons was able to transfer his franchise to Laramie, and he continued working the business until 1992, when the general store in Buford came up for sale.

"In 1990, the man who owned the Buford business died, and his wife and kids didn't want to live there any more," Sammons said. "It took me a couple of years to [negotiate] a price, and in 1992, I bought it, along with the town."

His purchase included all of the acreage within Buford, along with six buildings: the store; a 1905 schoolhouse he converted into an office; the original Buford store, built in 1895 that is now his garage and workshop; a one-room log cabin, built in 1900; a barn; and a house, where he has lived for the past 20 years.

### How Difficult Can It Be?

While Sammons was new to the convenience and fuel retailing industry in 1992, he relied on his prior business experience to help shorten the learning curve. "With my business history, it made it easier because there are operational things I knew; I just didn't know the product," Sammons said. "But it wasn't nearly as easy as what people thought."

"How difficult can it be, you buy stuff and sell stuff," a friend of mine said. But it's more complicated than that," Sammons explained. "Even though the technology has gotten easier, business in general got more complicated because of being more diversified, working closer on margins and the need to become a better businessman."

While the store Sammons purchased included fuel pumps, they were not up to late 20th century standards, which became one of his first renovation projects.

"They were very antiquated, everything was very dated," Sammons said.

"The building was from 1939, and the pumps were the real old type; you had to read the pumps with stick readings, and all of that."

Sammons began reading industry trade publications and studying operational case studies, but he always treads carefully, as he can't afford to invest in losing propositions.

"A lot of things that work in a typical c-store don't work in my facility, so I have to be very cautious," he said. "My demographic is unique because I don't have a base population, like Cheyenne or Laramie. So while [city-based retailers] might ride out market highs and lows, at least for a bit, I see trends in the economy much quicker than someone with a c-store in a town, because I have no town business, it's only commuters here."

It's a shortcoming that prompted him to create a loyalty card system in 1996(!), rewarding customers with a 20-cent per gallon savings — what he also offers cash-paying motorists. To date, he counts more than 2,500 customers among his loyalty card followers, though he concedes they're not all active.

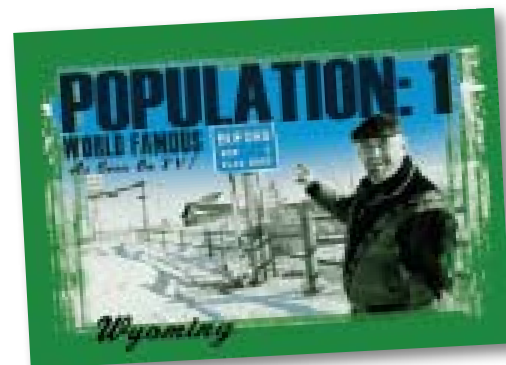
### A Good Location?

As Buford sits between Laramie and Cheyenne, Sammons receives a fair amount of commuter traffic each day between the two towns ("The highway department



*"During summer days, we'll sometimes get 1,000 people through here," Sammons said — a tremendous traffic flow, especially noting Sammons is usually the store's only worker.*

*“Next to my mortgage, credit card fees are my largest expense...I pay more for credit card fees than I do for electricity, there’s something wrong there.”*



said about 10,000 people a day commute,” Sammons said), but he benefits mostly from visitors to two state parks, both within six miles of Buford, and a national forest, which is 12 miles away.

“During summer days, we’ll sometimes get 1,000 people through here,” Sammons said — a tremendous traffic flow, especially noting Sammons is usually the store’s only worker. But he is quick to deflect any focus on what a Herculean effort tending to 1,000 customers entails.

“There are always lulls...you get 10 minutes here or there, so you check the bathrooms, you check stock,” he said matter-of-factly. “There’s no sense bringing in part-time help, because there’s only one POS anyway.”

Due to Sammons’ remote location, many distributors won’t service his store, which makes most of his days considerably longer than the store’s 8 am to 6 pm operating hours.

“On many days, I’ll get up at 5 am and head into town [Laramie or Cheyenne]. There’s a warehouse club that opens at 7 am for business,” Sammons said. “By 7:25 am, I’m out the door and I head to the bank that opens at 7:30 am to get change for the store. And then I’m back at Buford no later than 8:05.”

### **A Few Small Challenges**

And after a full day tending to customers, when the store closes at 6 pm, there is still considerable work to be done.

“Most mom and pop stores are dirty

and messy,” Sammons said. “I pride myself on having a very clean facility outside and in. I rebuilt the building in 2004 and I clean the bathrooms at least four or five times every day, as well as whenever a group leaves.”

Over the past few years, Sammons has hired part-time help to assist on days when he takes a day off — but he usually spends that time cutting the store’s grass and maintaining equipment.

Sammons said his business is down roughly 50 percent from 2009, when he grossed \$1.2 million, a lull that he attributes to the economy. (“Last year, it was \$700,000, and this year, I’m on track for \$600,000,” he said.) “The public is not traveling,” he said. “And the commuters, they’re still buying fuel, but the in-store purchases have slowed. And you can’t live on gas margins alone today.”

As a result, Sammons offers free coffee to motorists, an incentive that brings many pay-at-the-pump motorists inside, but for little more than the free coffee. “Washington, D.C., says there’s no inflation; it’s amazing the bubble it has around it,” Sammons said, before initiating a discussion on swipe fees that lasts 15 minutes.

“Next to my mortgage, credit card fees are my largest expense,” he said. “I pay more for credit card fees than I do for electricity, there’s something wrong there.”

Sammons also has to contend with highway closures that, owing to his ele-

vation, are frequent in the winter. “Each year, the road is closed about 20 or 30 days,” Sammons said, during which there is zero traffic to his store. “This year, we had one stretch of five straight days, which is real difficult.”

Sammons made a switch to branded fuel a few years ago and he has been offering E85 since 2007, both efforts to extract as large a return as possible from his pumps. While his in-store inventory parallels traditional snack and beverage favorites, he said his merchandise sales are his most significant revenue generators.

“I have a gift shop area, anything with Buford on it — postcards, t-shirts — those are my most popular items,” Sammons said. He recently overhauled his company website, which will enable browsers to purchase Buford merchandise in the near future (as of this writing, the retail element was still being tweaked).

While outsiders might look at Sammons and his Buford existence as lonely and isolating, he said his convenience store lifestyle is anything but. “I’m a people person, and I love doing this,” he said. “When people come into the store, some are happy and some are not. I just want to make sure that when they leave, they’re happier than when they came in.” **NACS**

*Jerry Soverinsky is a NACS Magazine contributing writer and a NACS Daily writer.*