This out-of-commission boat is an anomalous Granum landmark. The brick edifice behind it is the Town Hall.
A THIRTYSOMETHING MAN climbs out of his car, careful not to damage the interior with the tiny metal blades on his heels. Wearing chaps and cowboy boots in addition to the spurs, he saunters over to the post office, passing the café next door to it. He is a welder by the name of Tim Smith.

Inside the café, a patron leans closer to his companions to share the latest about Smith. A while back, the story goes, Smith rode his horse into town and left it hitched to a tree while he went drinking. The theory is that he wanted to avoid drunk-driving charges. Here in Granum, Alberta’s smallest town, everyone knows everyone. Especially pub-goers on horseback.

When the chuckles die down, attention shifts back to the food. Mayor Mike Sherman recommends the dragon burger, the hottest item on the menu, and doesn’t flinch as he savours his extra jalapenos and hot sauce. Donna Barnes, a lifelong resident of Granum, chooses the ever-healthy liver and onions. Her husband, Doug, a farmer and fellow lifer, opts for a hamburger sandwich. John Connor prefers a milder variety of burger. He grew up in Glasgow, immigrated to Alberta in 1969, then chose Granum as the place to retire with his wife in 2005.

Granum, population 428.

Harvey Dimm, lifelong Granumite.

A dragon burger of lesser fury sits before me. I’m a Calgarian, here to explore Granum, population 428. It’s around 2 in the afternoon on a sunny Friday, and none of my companions is in a particular hurry to get anywhere else. Although the pace in Granum is noticeably slower than in Calgary, I’m still munching on my burger long after everyone else has finished.

In Alberta’s smallest town the sky is blue, without a trace of smog. Railway Street is the main road, with a gas station, bank, town council building, public library, Drop-In Centre, post office and the Black Dog Saloon & Long Branch Inn. These are Granum’s employers. Many residents leave town to work in the oil patch or on a farm or in one of the surrounding towns. Thirty-six business licences were issued in Granum this year, one to the owners of the little golf course that lies on the other side of town near Highway 2. It’s surrounded by new homes and the skeletons of several soon to be finished. Between Railway Street and the golf course are more homes and one of the smallest but most advanced schools in Alberta: thanks to a $3-million grant from the

It’s 2 p.m. on a sunny Friday, and none of my companions is in a hurry to get anywhere else.
federal Network of Innovative Schools program, the school is fully wired, its classrooms furnished with “smartboards” instead of blackboards. A grocery store and hospital are 18 kilometres away in Claresholm.

Large Lethbridge is 72 kilometres southeast; booming Calgary is 142 kilometres north. Granum has hit its own growth spurt, which has brought higher housing prices and road and sewer concerns. But it will take more than this to erase the small-town spirit. Granum’s worst problems? Paving Railway Street and connecting water to new lots.

“There’s no hippies. I mean, it’s not a place for any dope dealers or anything, because people know each other and everything,” says old-timer Harvey Dimm. “Every once in a while you see on the news there’s some house that had 200 plants growing in it. I’d be so surprised if Granum did have one of those.” Now 79, Dimm has farmed at Granum all his life, except for a five-year stint in the US Air force during the Korean War. He’s watched people come and go, the town boom and almost bust, and right at this very moment is dead happy with where Granum’s at. He says he welcomes one and all to Granum and hopes to see further development of the land on the outskirts of town.

BLACK DOG SALOON OWNER Lorri Rondeau elaborates on the story of Tim Smith, the thirsty cowboy. Late last fall, Smith trotted into town, tied his horse to a tree across from the post office and went into the saloon. By 10:30 p.m. he was ready to head home. Rondeau and a waitress were leaving at the same time. Smith offered to walk them, since their homes were on his way. Despite her fear of horses, Rondeau climbed into the saddle and the horse took off. She made small talk to ensure it didn’t break into a gallop and was impressed with its navigation skills. “It took me to the corner then took a right then got to the next corner and took a left. He was headed home. He knew exactly the way to get home.” Before the horse could continue across the highway and back to its corral, Rondeau took the lead. “I pulled on the reins a little bit and said, ‘This is my house,’ and turned him up my driveway.”

Rondeau has lived in Granum her entire 30 years, minus six months. Those six months were spent 18 kilometres away in Claresholm, and it was all the time she needed to realize that she belongs here.

“For me, I’m not much of a city person. Got a couple of young girls, wanted to raise them in a community where it’s more personal,” says Rondeau. When she was young, Rondeau delivered the newspaper to three-quarters of the town; then, she could have gone up and down each street and told you who lived in what house.

Today, as owner of the saloon, she still has her finger on the pulse of Granum—but with the increasing rate of that pulse,
she may miss a few beats here and there. Out of five siblings, Rondeau is the only one who stayed in Granum. She lives with her two daughters and their father across the street from the house she grew up in.

It’s late Friday afternoon, prime drinking time in Calgary, but the only patrons in the Black Dog are a couple of gamblers sitting at VLTs. Pool tables sit behind a divider and a dart board hangs on the far wall. Rondeau takes a moment to reflect on the changes she’s seen in Granum. She speaks over the blaring country music. “It almost seems like there’s a little more of a city attitude than a small town attitude ‘cause we have so many people coming from the city. It’s not quite as friendly as what it used to be—but that’s only until you get to know the people, I find.”

If you’re after coffee rather than beer, the Drop-In Centre is the place to be. At the front, crib boards and cookies are arranged on tables of various sizes. To one side is a small library of books and films (a new addition to the centre), juxtaposed with the massive pool tables at the back, which have been there for ages. As hostess of the centre and director of Family & Community Support Services, Cynthia Howkins has an insider’s view of Granum. The Drop-In Centre is the social hub of the town, with weekly games nights and a monthly potluck. When it first opened, the centre was for seniors only, but with the town’s changing demographic it has adapted to meet the new demand.

“A lot of the elderly residents are—well, some are passing away and some are moving into care facilities, into nearby centres like Claresholm and Fort Macleod. They’re selling their homes and younger families are moving in,” said Howkins. Now all ages are welcome in the Drop-In Centre. Last year they even had a program for toddlers.

MAYOR MIKE SHERMAN runs a one-man sales and marketing company that does contract work for businesses in Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Taber, Brooks and Cranbrook. “Mayor in a small town is basically a volunteer position,” says the 64-year-old.

“I get paid 25 bucks a meeting and there are two meetings a month—so you add it up, okay?” Sherman has kept the keys to Granum in his pocket for the last six years and he was deputy mayor for three before that. His wife, Maria, runs Maria’s Nook, a crafts and scrapbooking business out of their garage, now converted into a studio.

A father of four, Sherman loves to joke; he has a big smile and a hearty handshake. A little less than six feet tall, he’s dressed today in khaki pants, dark brown loafers and a forest green jacket. His deep voice booms when he laughs, which he does often.

Sherman started and finished grade school in Granum, then left to study commerce at the University of Washington. After graduating, he began a career in the pharmaceutical industry that took him to Vancouver, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Calgary. After a decade in Vancouver, Sherman decided to sell his company, and he and Maria moved back to Granum in 1996.

“I got fed up with the traffic. I always liked this small town,” he explains. “People are attracted to a small town. They don’t want to fight the traffic on Deerfoot anymore.”

The streets are peaceful—in Granum, “congestion” only means a stuffed-up nose. Down the main street you may see up to 10 cars, but most of them will be parked.

“I want to take my dog for a walk and get a quart of milk,” says Sherman. “I don’t have to worry about drive-by shootings.”

Beyond these obvious perks, Granum has a unique character and history. It evolved from the village of Leavings, where cattle were loaded onto trains to start their journey to eastern markets. On February 31, 1908, it was renamed Granum—Latin for “grain.” Like a tiny kernel in a large stalk, the town is snuggled into the vast southern Alberta landscape. For two years it remained a village, until inhabitants requested that it become a municipality, which it did on November 7, 1910. Almost a century later, Granumites toyed with the idea of reversing this action, but found it more beneficial not to rock the boat.

Indeed, there is only one boat in landlocked Granum. It sits in a field on the east side, a majestic anomaly. A pastel blue and white deck supports a 10-foot mast with no sail attached. Beyond the boat the landscape is mainly farmland.

With the Porcupine Hills to the west and plains stretching out in every other direction, Granumites have a sweet view. Calm falls with the rays of sun. Mayor Sherman calls this “the land of the big sky” because no mountains block your view.

“We’re very proud of the fact that Granum is just busting at the seams right now,” says Sherman. At a mere 1.79 square kilometres, the town is quickly running out of land to build on. Sherman predicts that very soon they will have to seriously consider annexing land from the municipal district of Willow Creek. For now, the gas station doubles as a little convenience store, but Sherman would like to see a grocery store come to town. An increase in population would bring more government grant money and tax revenue. Services and facilities could be expanded as more cash flows in.

As Tim Smith got out of his car and clinked across the street in his cowboy gear, his visible mix of old and new perfectly embodied that same mix in Granum.

With rapid development and a population that is growing younger, Granum challenges preconceived notions of small-town life. Deep within Alberta’s smallest town, a unique character stands firm. ■