

# The Right Brew in Senoia

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Regardless of who coined the movie-making phrase “lights, camera, action,” it’s all but certain it wasn’t thought up in little Senoia. But don’t be surprised if “on location in Senoia” becomes commonplace in film industry jargon in the years ahead. In fact, this little Coweta County crossroads, which has known its share of ups and downs in a nearly 150-year history, is on the rise again, thanks largely to movie makers filming more than 24 motion pictures (and, more recently, television series) amidst its beautiful turn-of-the-20th-century homes and quaint downtown.

With a stellar lineup that includes *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *The Fighting Temptations* and even—gasp!—*Drop Dead Diva* and *The Walking Dead*, Senoia has taken advantage of its yesteryear look only 30 minutes south of Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. The local film studio, formerly Riverwood Studios, is now part of the much larger Raleigh Studios and its far-flung divisions in places like Hollywood, Manhattan Beach, Baton Rouge, Budapest, and Atlanta.

Granted, movie making isn’t the only impetus for Senoia’s recent growth, but as local business owners David and Suzanne Pengelly realize, it’s been a major factor. The Pengellys were actually ahead of the curve when they opened a locally prominent corner coffee shop in 2000, the now expanded and rechristened Senoia Coffee & Cafe. Along with the many newer restaurants and shops in town, business is booming thanks to tourism.

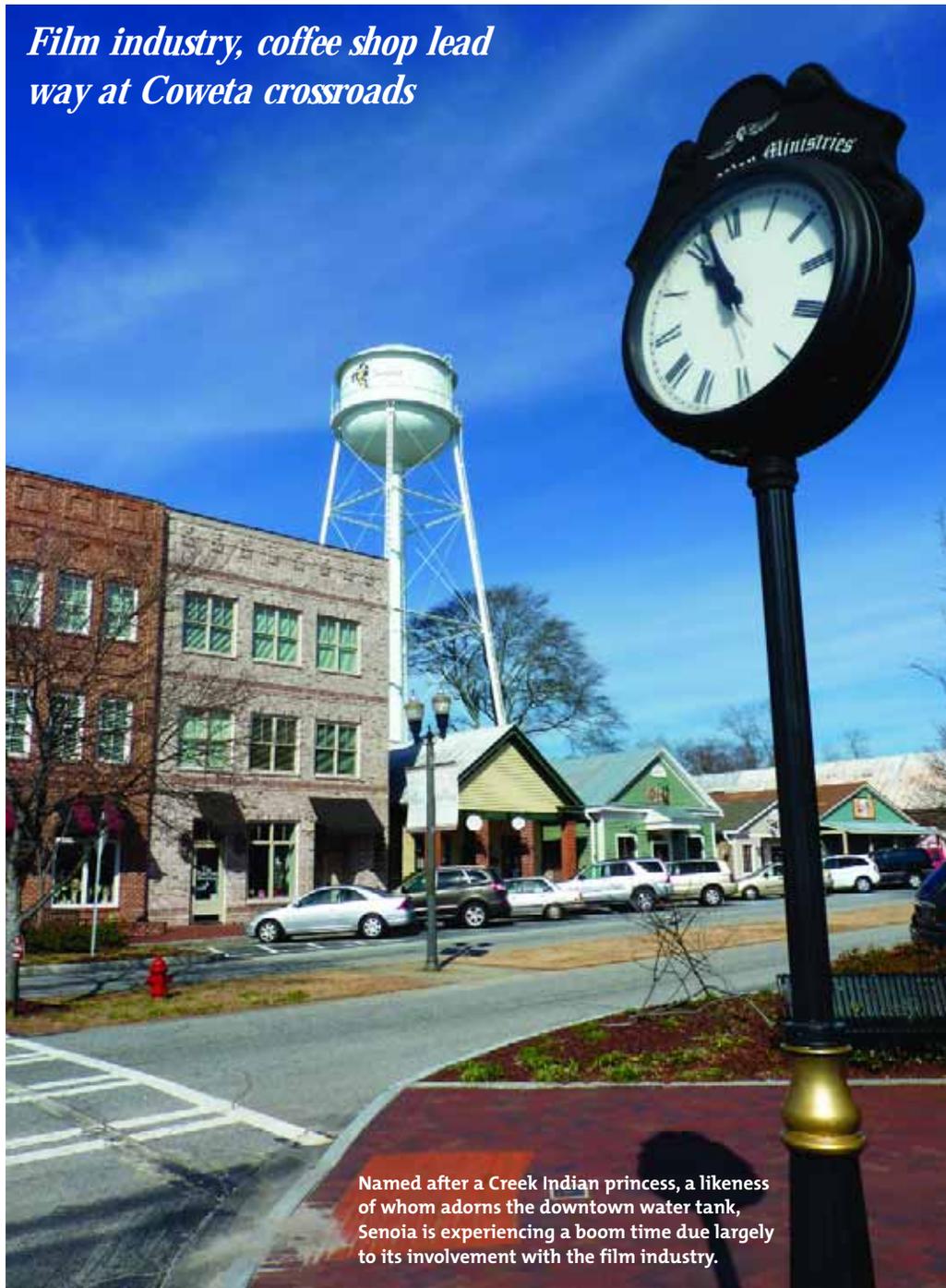
More than 25 specialty shops and seven restaurants call Senoia’s Main Street home, and new construction has produced such attractions as back-to-back Southern Living Idea Houses (a modern, multi-story brownstone and refurbished 1830s farmhouse), as well as golf cart paths reminiscent of nearby Peachtree City, a stylish new library, and a picturesque new lakeside park. For the more historically inclined, there’s a timeless old-buggy museum at the center of town, the historical society museum, and

a bed and breakfast hotel that once hosted Margaret Mitchell interviews of Civil War veterans for *Gone With The Wind*.

Zombies, the back-from-the-grave creatures so much a part of *The Walking Dead* storyline, are now a part of Senoia history and its mystique as surely as Chief William McIntosh’s mother, Senoya, a Creek Indian princess that the

town was named for in 1864. In those days, as the end of the Civil War neared, the locals managed to build a high school. The town was officially incorporated in 1866, and completion of the Savannah, Griffin, & North Alabama Railroad a few years later ushered in a period of prosperity as commodities like cotton and peaches were shipped to mar-

## *Film industry, coffee shop lead way at Coweta crossroads*



Named after a Creek Indian princess, a likeness of whom adorns the downtown water tank, Senoia is experiencing a boom time due largely to its involvement with the film industry.



Senoia's original wooden Nolan Grocery was the precursor to the brick building that now houses Senoia Coffee & Cafe. In 1927 the outside of Senoia's Nolan Grocery was redone in brick, the same exterior the Senoia Coffee & Cafe retains today.

ket. Although unsuccessful in its bid to become the county seat (a distinction that Newnan still claims), Senoia (pronounced Suh-NOY by locals) continued to prosper through the turn of the century and beyond, as represented by an assortment of historic structures that now compose a district on the National Register of Historic Places.

Years of abandonment and neglect through the mid to late 1900s had Senoia known for its menagerie of classic old homes and not much else. Then the Pengellys happened upon the town in 1992 and joined the Senoia Historical Society. David, an entertainer, and Suzanne, an agent for entertainers, were living in Atlanta and had recently purchased a horse farm in Coweta County. While planning to make the horse farm

their getaway, they gradually grew more attached to the nearby town.

In particular, they saw the possibilities in a unique brick building just beyond the railroad tracks as travelers approached town from the south. Its unusual placement in the curve at the end of Main Street prompted the Pengellys to turn it into a commercial establishment, despite the fact that only three other businesses at the time called downtown Senoia home. They bought the property in May 1999.

As a result of his extensive travels abroad, David had acquired an interest in coffee and European style coffee houses, which became the genesis of a new business idea and what to do with their Senoia investment. After training in the art of roasting coffee and getting then-

Georgia, the Senoia Coffee Company was up and roasting and people were coming.

"It seemed like every street corner in Europe had a coffee house and I was enthralled with the way they made espresso," David remembered. "I was hooked on coffee and that was always in the back of my mind when we bought the horse farm, joined the historical society, and started getting involved in the community. The town was barely alive, but it felt comfortable and the people were so friendly. Every time we came into town, we would look at this building and wonder out loud what we could do with it."

Originally a wooden grocery built by one of Senoia's founding fathers, David Nolan, the brick and masonry structure had also been used as a meat store, cabinet shop, real estate office and even an apartment. It was in bad shape with the roof literally caving in by the time the Pengellys mustered the courage to purchase it and move forward with their plans. "Miss Charlotte Nolan, the granddaughter of the original owner, was so nice in sharing the building's history and became one of our biggest supporters, and Mayor Trammell bought into our vision for the coffee house when everybody else thought we were crazy," Suzanne continued. "She supported our idea to bury the electrical wires downtown and once we finished renovating the interior and opened, we were busy from the start. We never advertised, but I guess we were so unique—a coffee house in the middle of nowhere—that local newspapers throughout the area did stories about us. Before long, bus tours were



With Suzanne and David Pengelly as proud proprietors, Senoia Coffee & Cafe now qualifies as a local landmark in the historic Coweta County town.

stopping, the curiosity factor kicked in, and people were coming from all over.”

What they found was gourmet coffee and an expanding menu in a great atmosphere “very much like a neighborhood pub,” David admitted. “From the beginning it was a happy place where friends could meet in a relaxed setting, and for the first time in a long time, it drew people to downtown Senoia.”

So why did the Pengellys decide to give up their nostalgic creation, selling out to a local family in 2002? David explained it this way: “About two and a half years after opening, the rest of town didn’t seem to be growing and we got nervous when talk started about new development outside of town on Highway 16. At the same time we got really busy in our other jobs. But about six months after we sold it, we missed it and wished we had it back.”

In fact, they spent the next seven years watching for an opportunity to buy

the business back, which finally came in 2010, fortunately coinciding with the increase in Senoia’s movie involvement and studio-driven new development. “By that time the town had really picked up,” Suzanne stated. “At one time, all the buildings in town were owned by three people. You could rent, but you couldn’t buy. Gradually, that all changed when the film business got involved. It’s helped the entire town, especially since they started filming *The Walking Dead*. It’s brought in a lot of tourism. People want to see where it’s filmed, the actors and production people are here for weeks at a time, business picks up, and people keep coming to take pictures and experience ‘Woodbury.’”

Based on a comic book series, Woodbury (not to be confused with the real Woodbury, Georgia, in nearby Meriwether County) is the fictional town where *The Walking Dead* takes place. Much of downtown Senoia is converted

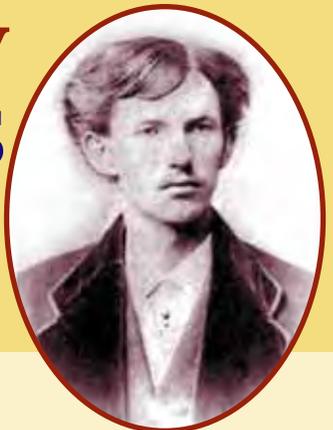
to that other place whenever filming is underway. The props come out and access is limited, but even though traffic is rerouted and parking becomes a premium, the shops and restaurants stay open and once again Main Street becomes the set for another, much anticipated season of flesh-eating zombies.

Their presence is only the latest in Senoia’s film heritage, a prime location for the Georgia Department of Economic Development’s Film and TV Production Division and cover material for the state’s latest official travel guide. And while actors and tourists continue to come, the coffee continues to brew at historic Senoia’s now-famous coffee shop, the one that’s been and continues to be at the center of it all.

*F. Martin Harmon is a freelance writer and recently retired as public relations director of Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation. He resides in Senoia.*

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