

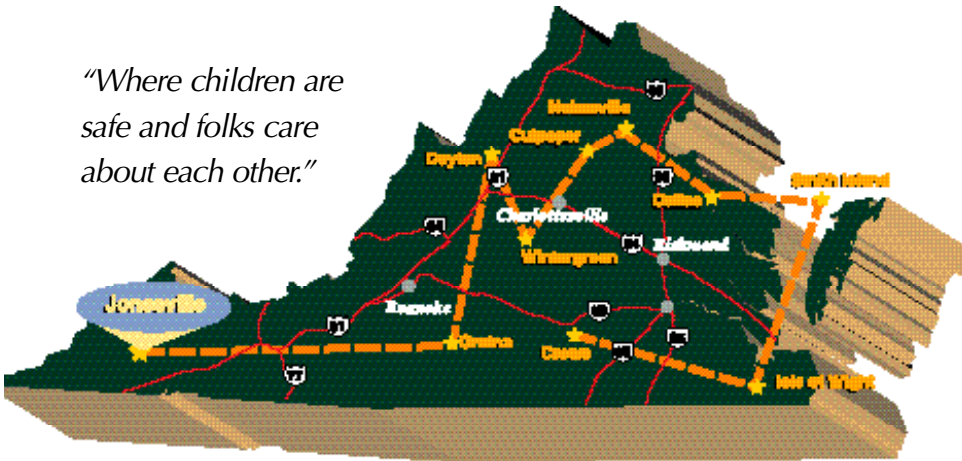
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Louise Carver
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2002, we're making our way around Virginia, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's first stop, we'll be ...

Down Home in Jonesville

*"Where children are
safe and folks care
about each other."*



RICK WATSON PHOTOS

The welcome from Mayor **Ewell Bledsoe's** Internet home page for Jonesville describes the town of about 995 people as being nestled in the mountains of Southwest Virginia, established in 1794 as the Lee County seat, and named for Frederick Jones.

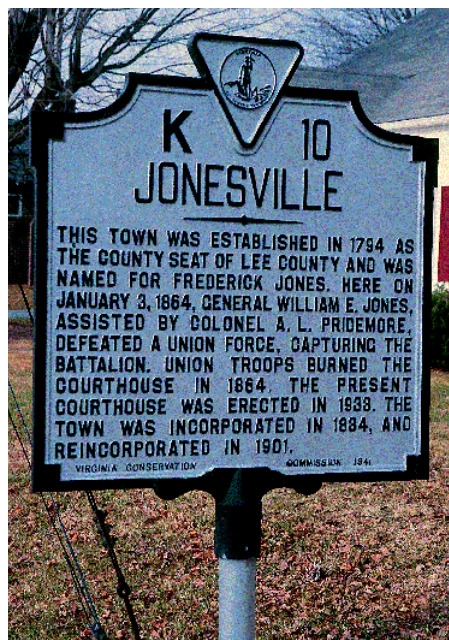
Jonesville is the second-oldest town west of Roanoke. Abingdon is the oldest.

The mayor's office is located on a hill overlooking the town in Cumberland Bowl Park. The park is a focal point for activities throughout the year, including a July 4 celebration attended by thousands, a Festival in the Park sponsored each fall by the Jonesville Woman's Club, and a "Lights in the Park" Christmas display sponsored throughout the month of December by the town and the Lee County Area Chamber of Commerce. Cumberland Bowl Park is also home to the Jonesville Senior Citizens and the American Legion's Lambert-Fleenor Bays Post 185, chartered in February 1948 and named for the first Lee County casualties in World War I.

Mayor Bledsoe, in his 14th year, seventh term, said recently that he will probably retire from office with the expiration of his term this July.

Mayor Bledsoe is a member of the Jonesville Lion's Club, which, among other activities, sponsors the town's annual Christmas parade. He is also a member of the Lee County Area Chamber of Commerce. He said he spent some time as an electrician with the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam era.

His wife, **Zelma**, is currently president of the Auxiliary at Lee Regional Medical Center, an 80-bed hospital located in the neighboring town of Pennington Gap. "After 38 years of



The renowned Camp Meeting Shed (I) of the Campground United Methodist Church, where the sides of the shed are swung open and "outdoor" services are held each spring. The church was completed and dedicated in 1943.



(Above, left) Jonesville Mayor Ewell Bledsloe (l), who also serves as the captain of the town's volunteer rescue squad, talks with fellow squad member, Cecil Robinette. (Above) Downtown Jonesville.



Town Police Chief Kermit Wallen describes Jonesville as "the quietest town within the state."

living in big cities, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else but Jonesville," the Mayor said. "I think Jonesville is one of the best, safest, cleanest towns in the county due to the good employees we have, the police department and the maintenance crew (**Preston Sword**, superintendent).

The mayor spends a great deal of time serving the community as captain of the Jonesville Volunteer Rescue Squad. The squad was organized in 1994. He has been captain since 1996.

Evelyn (Gibson) Mason and her husband, Jack, live in the oldest house in Jonesville.

The Battle of Jonesville took place January 3, 1864. Confederate General William E. Jones, assisted by Colonel A. L. Pridmore, defeated a Union Force and captured the battalion. Union troops burned the courthouse, located in the heart of Jonesville, in 1864 and the present courthouse was erected in 1933, the town incorporated in 1884 and re-incorporated in 1901.

A re-enactment of the battle is sponsored by the Lee County Area Chamber of

Commerce, the Lee-Piedmont Chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the 37th Infantry each June. The action takes place on a nearby farm, with thousands of people attending the event to experience first-hand how the battle was won and to view artifacts, clothing, foods, and more, relating to the area.

Quietest Town in the State

Despite the enthusiasm for the annual battle, however, the farming town of





Thousands of people attend the annual reenactment of the battle of Jonesville.

If You Go...

Information about Jonesville is readily available at Mayor Ewell Bledsoe's office in **Cumberland Bowl Park**, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, phone 276-346-1151; and at the office of the **Lee County Area Chamber of Commerce**, phone 276-346-0553, in the Lee County Courthouse.

Tim Long, Lee County's community development director, has great enthusiasm for expanding the county's business and industrial base. His office number is 276-346-7766.

The **U.S. Highway 58** four-laning improvements through the state, a new airport under construction five miles west of Jonesville, and a new federal prison, USP Lee County, opened for public view November 19, are expected to expedite growth in the county and its towns.

Two radio stations, WJNV in Jonesville and WSWV in Pennington Gap, join *Powell Valley News* in providing news and public services.

The Chamber directs tourists to various activities, including the **Cumber-**

land Camp National Historical Park, about 37 miles west of Jonesville, where a pinnacle overlook offers a view of parts of Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee.

A brochure, developed in 1998, features pictures of a restored log house at **Natural Bridge**, winter at the restored **Hensley Settlement** atop **Stone Mountain** in the national park; phone 606-248-2817 for information about shuttle schedule and fees.

Natural Bridge, a karst structure carved from limestone near the **Cedars Nature Preserve**, on Route 662, 2.1 miles west of Jonesville, is located in the same vicinity of the **Andrew Still Memorial Park**, which commemorates the birth of the founder of osteopathic medicine.

The **Powell Mountain River and Valley** were named for Dr. Ambrose Powell, one of the explorers who accompanied Dr. Thomas Walker

This plaque marks the grave of an unknown Civil War soldier. A memorial service is held each year during the first weekend in June as part of Civil War Day.

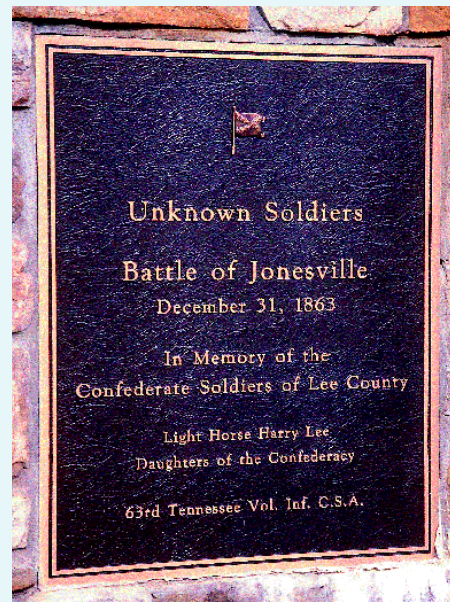
through the area in 1750. The river flows through the Jonesville area and is described as "one of America's greatest places," where opportunities are available for fishing, canoeing, camping, swimming, hiking and horseback riding along the scenic stream.

In early June each year, "**Race Unity Day**" is held in Leeman Field in Pennington Gap to celebrate human diversity, with music and food offered (phone 276-346-1151, mayor's office).

The **Jonesville United Methodist Camp Meeting** is held each year in early August, phone 276-346-2293; a **Festival in the Park** each fall provides arts and crafts in the Bowl, phone 276-346-2335.

The **Cedar Hill Country Club**, an 18-hole golf course, is open year-round with a club house, swimming pool and tennis courts available, phone 276-346-1535.

Located on U.S. Route 58A near Jonesville, between Jonesville and Ben Hur, **Hillcrest Lanes** offers multi-lane bowling, with a video arcade, and deli-



Jonesville, located in the western-most county in Virginia, bordering Kentucky and Tennessee, is described by Town Police Chief **Kermit Wallen** as "the quietest town within the state, especially to be the county seat."

Wallen, a native of Lee County, born in St. Charles (population currently 159), the coal-field area of the county, has lived in Jonesville

25 years and has served 21 of those years as police chief.

Wallen said the town has no major criminal activity. He said the police department and the town work together to promote a safe, "wonderful" town. "I think people would look forward to living in a place like this," he said.

Points of interest listed by the Lenowisco

Planning District Commission include Cedar Hill Country Club, Cumberland Bowl Park, Cumberland Bowl Amphitheater, Civil War Cemetery, Natural Bridge, Jonesville Cemetery and the Gibson House.

Evelyn (Gibson) Mason and her husband, Jack, live in probably the only house in Lee County listed in the State and

catessen, phone 276-346-3795.

Lee Cinema, having a modern movie theater with two screens, is only 15 miles away in Dryden, phone 276-546-3988.

Lee Regional Medical Center, a drive of nine miles from Jonesville in Pennington Gap, offers 24-hour service, phone 276-546-1440.

Lee County Sheriff **Gary Parsons** oversees a crew of 45 employees. The office is located in the courthouse, phone 276-346-7777.

Jonesville has more than 50 businesses, doctors, churches, restaurants, auto services and more, and is near two state parks, **Wilderness Road State Park** in Ewing, phone 276-445-3065 and **Natural Tunnel State Park** in Duffield, phone 276-940-2674.

Other area activities include special events at the national park, such as a **wildflower walks, falling star extravaganza** (in August), tours of **Cudjo's Cave** and other caves; **Gathering on the Creek, Stickleyville**, late June, phone 276-546-1337; **Thomas Walker Old Fashioned Fun Day**, phone 276-445-4683; **Tobacco and Fall Festival**, phone 276-346-0553; and **Cumberland Horse Association** events, phone 276-546-2568.

Jonesville Motor Court, located on Route 58 on the edge of the western corporate limits of the town, phone 276-346-3210, has 20 comfortable rooms, with cable television (children under 12 years free), and is operated by **Depak Patel** of India. **Jean Burchett**, manager, said the motel is clean, very quiet and family-oriented, with many people returning as they visit local relatives. The **Convenient Inn** is located in Pennington Gap and can handle additional tourists in peak seasons, phone 276-540-5350. ■

National Registers of Historical Places, with the presentation made in 1992.

The three-story stone house is presently located on 62½ acres (reduced over the years from about 85 acres) on the western edge of Jonesville, with the original smoke-house still standing and a family cemetery overlooking the property.

Construction of the house was started about 1824 and finished about four years later by Benjamin Dickenson. The house was purchased from Dickenson's heirs by Andrew Milbourne. Evelyn said her grandfather, Michael Brown Wygal, about 1860 or '61, bought the house from William E. Wynn in 1919 and handed it down to Evelyn's mother, Bonnie Wygal Gibson. Evelyn, who inherited it in 1976, said the house has been in the family for 82 years. The house was known as the Dickenson-Milbourne house for years.

Oldest Business

The oldest business in Jonesville is Lee Farmers Cooperative, Inc., which was started by a small group of farmers 61 years ago in the basement of the county courthouse, taking orders for experimental fertilizer for the Tennessee Valley Authority and helping with the feeder-calf sale in the fall each year.

Farmers also pooled crops of wool and strawberries for markets in Ohio and Georgia.

The current retail store, managed for the past 10 years by **J. C. Wade**, and located in the bend around the courthouse for 50 or 51 years, was started by Jonesville resident **Garland Ely** (an Army veteran) in 1950.

The co-op is affiliated with Southern States Cooperative in Richmond and has 700 active members.

For its golden anniversary in 1985, *Tennessee Magazine* featured a history by former Powell Valley Electric Cooperative (PVEC) manager, **Ralph Miner**. The co-op was organized in 1938 by a group of rural people and first called the Powell Valley Electric Membership Corporation. PVEC's service area in Virginia includes Lee, Scott and Wise counties.

The current co-op building was built in 1959 and served as headquarters of the cooperative until 1991, when the headquarters was moved to Tazewell.

Miner was elected manager in 1962 and served until 1992. In his history, he told of two very bad snowstorms — one on Nov. 21, 1952 — the other in March, 1954.

The 1952 storm was the worst to ever hit the system at that time, he said, adding that at dark that night not a single member had service and only 11 employees could climb a pole. Seven crews from two other co-ops aided in restoring services.

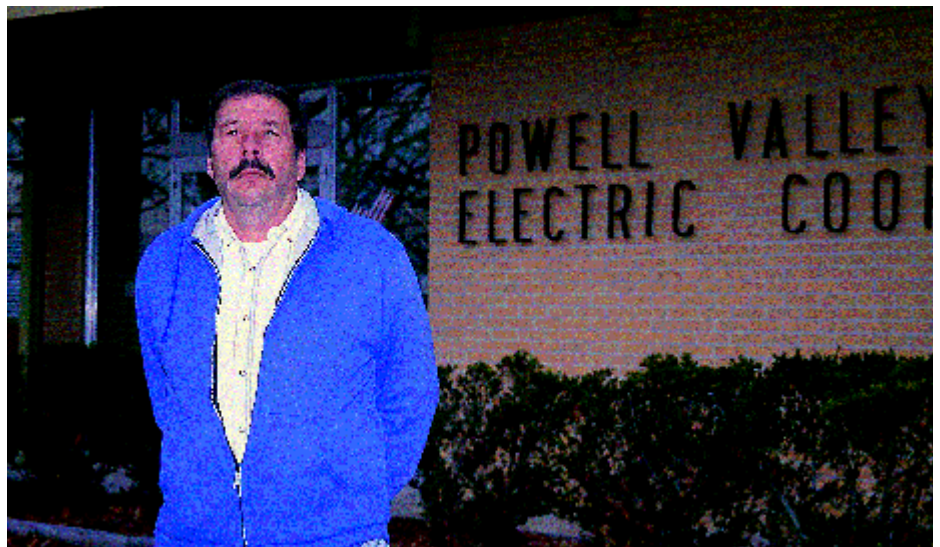
Gary Bledsoe, superintendent of outside construction for PVEC, has been an employee at the Jonesville office more than 31 years.

He is responsible for everyday construction, maintenance operations and power outages.

Bledsoe said, "We try to help all the organizations and the schools with heat pumps and Christmas decorations. We try to help the community."

PVEC's general manager, **Randell Myers**, said recently, "Powell Valley Electric Cooperative has strong ties to the Jonesville community. Not only does it provide employment and the resulting stimulus to the local economy, the cooperative is proactive in its support of economic and community development. The cooperative has been instrumental in obtaining zero-interest Rural Utilities Service (RUS) loans for Lee County, which have been used for construction and expansion of industrial buildings.

"The cooperative has also partnered with the Tennessee Valley Authority to provide assistance in the form of low/zero interest loans for economic-development projects,



Gary Bledsoe, superintendent of outside construction for Powell Valley Electric Cooperative, has been an employee at the Jonesville office more than 31 years.

including a \$2-million, one-year, interest-free loan providing interim financing for development costs related to the federal prison facility.

"The cooperative has also partnered with TVA to provide several industries, businesses and schools with technical advice in the form of energy audits and lighting recommendations.

"Most recently, the cooperative has assisted the Lee County Economic Development Authority with the printing cost for the county's new industrial brochure and for the purchase of its new marketing tool, a 3D model of the new industrial park, Constitutional Oaks.

"The cooperative lends a helping hand to projects benefiting the community. The cooperative's employees and board of directors have a genuine concern for, and interest in, the quality of life in the area."

Jonesville attorney **Joseph N. Cridlin**, second of three generations of attorneys in Jonesville, and now a retired circuit court judge, was retained as cooperative attorney March 7, 1947, to replace their charter attorney W. L. Davidson, who died from a fall from a barn he was building on his farm west of Jonesville.

Cridlin served the cooperative until March 1961, when he resigned his duties after being appointed circuit court judge for Lee and Scott counties. He was replaced by his brother, **Clyde Y. Cridlin**, six months later.

A PVEC member since 1957, when he moved to the country near Jonesville, Judge Cridlin said the Cooperative, when new, gave customers diagrams of what electrical services they would need.

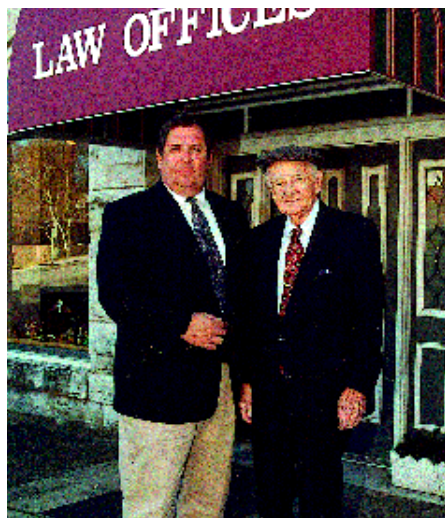
Jonesville is also home to retired General District Judge **Glen M. Williams**.

When PVEC built its office in Jonesville, a fuss erupted about whether the rural co-op could service the town, but the established Old Dominion Power Company held the town, with agreements made to allow PVEC to serve its own facility, according to the judge.

Judge (J. N.) Cridlin's sheepskin adorns the lobby wall of his son **George F. Cridlin's** office in downtown Jonesville, along with that of his father, Lee County Judge George P. Cridlin, with the family sporting three generations of judges and lawyers (George F. serving occasionally as judge). George P. Cridlin started his practice in 1901, Judge J. N. in 1935, and George F. in 1975.

Jonesville is also the home of the late attorney Edgar Bacon, who was selected to serve as cooperative attorney in 1974 and

who served as a member of the Virginia Transportation Commission. Mr. Bacon was instrumental in having started in western Lee County the 643-mile four-laning improvements to U.S. Highway 58, which are continuing to the state's coast. Route 58, through Jonesville and Lee County, has been named



(Above) George F. Cridlin with his father, Judge Joseph N. Cridlin in front of the family law office. (Below) County Administrator Dane Poe.



the Daniel Boone Heritage Trail for the pioneer credited with opening Cumberland Gap to the west. A section of Route 58 was named for Mr. Bacon.

On Jonesville's doorstep about two miles to the west is the Campground United Methodist Church, first a one-room log church built about 1794, with construction started on the present-day brick started in 1928. A sturdy, hand-hewn limestone rock wall built in 1890 stands between the church and the renowned Camp Meeting Shed, where the sides of the shed are swung open

and "outdoor" services are held each spring. The church was completed and dedicated in 1943.

Methodist services at the Jonesville First United Methodist Church were listed as early as 1840 and held in individual homes by circuit riders, with the first building, a two-story log and weatherboard church, sitting atop the hill at the junction of Palace and Institute streets.

The present church building, erected in 1885 in the shadow of the courthouse at the corner of Church and Institute Streets, has been renovated several times over the years, with an educational building and brick veneer added in the early 1950s, and changes made to the bell tower. The Lee County School Board Office now occupies the former site of the Jonesville Elementary School and is currently the number-one employer in the county, with 679 professional and non-professional personnel. The total school enrollment for elementary schools and two high schools was 3,766 as of Sept. 30.

School Superintendent **Dr. Dan Wilder**, on the job since July 1, 1998, said recently that having the school board office in Jonesville is convenient due to the business that is interrelated with County Administrator **Dane Poe** and Treasurer **Ikey Joe Chadwell**.

Hub for Local Government

Dane Poe, speaking as Lee County administrator, said recently that as the county seat, the town of Jonesville serves as the hub for local government as well as many state government offices.

"This alone brings approximately 150 government employees to town each day," he said, adding, "When you factor in the number of citizens coming to town to transact business at county offices, make court appearances, or obtain information from various state or local offices, you begin to realize the economic impact this has for the town and its merchants."

As a resident of Jonesville, he said, "Although somewhat busy and bustling during the daytime, the town transforms into a very quiet and peaceful residential neighborhood after government offices close for the day. This provides an excellent environment in which to live and raise a family.

"One needs only to drive through town on a summer evening and see the number of folks walking or visiting one another to understand the sense of community felt here. It's a nice little town where you feel your children are safe and folks care about each other." ■