

## DOWN HOME SERIES

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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 third stop, we'll be ...

# Down Home in Dayton

*Message to Leo Durocher:  
Nice towns survive  
and thrive.*



is said that he approached Gen. Sheridan several times, asking him to rescind the order. The general was slow to relent, but finally Col. Wildes' pleas were honored. The town itself was spared, although some 28 structures nearby were destroyed on Oct. 4 and 5, 1864.

### A Link to a Landmark

Lt. Meigs' death near Dayton also gives the town a link with one of America's enduring landmarks. He was among the first men buried in the very first section of Arlington National Cemetery. His father, Montgomery Meigs, was Quartermaster General under President Lincoln and had been a colleague of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. Montgomery Meigs, embittered by his son's death by troops commanded by a man he once considered his friend, exacted his revenge by choosing Mrs. Lee's rose garden in Arlington to start a military cemetery.

The town has its own enduring landmark — another link to another war. A 35,000-pound German cannon, captured from the arsenal of Kaiser Wilhelm during World War I, anchors Main Street as a tribute to the 116th Infantry Regimental Band. The band was formed with volunteers from town, and its members saw duty in France as medics and stretcher bearers. In recognition of Dayton as the smallest town in the United States to muster a complete regimental unit during the war, the U.S. government donated the cannon that since 1928 has doubled as a symbol of pride for the townspeople and as an inviting, over-sized, imagination-stirring plaything for the town's children.

To some, the indelible link with wars seems jarring.

Early settlers in Dayton included Mennonites who oppose war as a tenet of their faith.



**The recently restored Silver Lake Mill houses LDA Creations, a decorator of china and glassware.**

When Leo "The Lip" Durocher said that "nice guys finish last," he obviously did not know about the little town of Dayton in Virginia's Rockingham County.

This is a place that owes its survival as a town to the niceness of its people.

The town officially was only 31 years old in 1864 when an angry Union General Philip Sheridan ordered every structure in Dayton — and everything within five miles — to be burned to the ground.

A favorite young officer in Gen. Sheridan's command, Lt. John Rodgers Meigs, had been killed by Confederate scouts near Dayton — and the general wanted to strike back. The order was given to Lt. Col. Thomas Wildes of the 116th Ohio Infantry Regiment to carry out.

Col. Wildes hesitated, having been impressed by the kindness of the townspeople. It





Dayton's natural landmarks include Silver Lake, with Mole Hill in the distance.



Fort Harrison, the home of Daniel Harrison, built in 1847, is now restored and listed as both a Virginia and National Registered Historic Landmark.



Janet Detamore, a volunteer at the Shenandoah Valley Folk Art & Heritage Center, positions the shuttle on a weaving loom where the late Nellie McDorman perfected the art of rug-making.

Today, all three of the historic peace churches — the Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren and the Society of Friends (Quakers) — have meeting houses here. The beautifully tended farms of the Old Order Mennonites frame the town. Their buggies form picturesque lines in Sunday morning traffic; the high-stepping horses clip out a rhythm that soothes any motorist patient enough to appreciate the slower, gentler cadence of life.

The Old Order Mennonites generally avoid the worldliness of automobiles and electricity. Yet, conflicts with neighbors favoring more modern lifestyles are limited. "We have a good working relationship"

between the town and the Old Order community, says **Rick Chandler**, Dayton's town manager for the past 12 years. "We have found ways to co-exist."

Friendly co-existence is found on another front, too.

The biggest employer in town is Cargill Turkey Products. Having the country's largest turkey-processing plant (in terms of its physical facility) in a small town would seem fraught with conflicts. And, as with any thriving

agricultural endeavor, there are days when its presence seems particularly pungent.

Yet, there is pride in the turkeys sold under the Shady Brook Farm label. The 1,400 people who work at Cargill almost equal the town's population of 1,500. Dayton's budget can rely on Cargill as a major resource — more than 88 percent of the town's water sales go to the turkey plant.

However, if a long-time resident of Dayton were to be asked about Cargill, the answer could well be a blank stare. The plant that lines the east side of Rt. 42 is still better



**Charlie Pennybacker**, owner of **Thomas' Restaurant and Home Bakery**, slides a tray of fresh-from-the-oven pies onto a cooling rack.



# If You Go...

The big event each year in Dayton is the **Autumn Celebration** on the first Saturday in October, often referred to locally as Dayton Days although it is only one day long. The 23rd annual Autumn Celebration will be held Oct. 5, 2002. Crafts and novelty items are offered for sale in booths that line Main and College streets. Civic clubs and church groups sell homemade food items. Local talent is featured at the entertainment venue. Crowds usually range from 15,000 to 20,000. Call town office (540-879-9538).

**Dayton Farmers Market**, south of Dayton on Rt. 42. Variety of shops and food. Open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

**Fort Harrison** (also known as Daniel Harrison House), North Main Street. Restored mid-18th-century home. Free admission. Open 1-4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays from May through October. Special plant sale in late April. Christmas at Fort Harrison held the Friday, Saturday and Sunday following Thanksgiving (540-879-2280).

**Shenandoah Valley Folk Art & Heritage Center**, High Street. Historical exhibits, folk art collection, map of Stonewall Jackson's famous Valley Campaign, genealogy research library. Pick up a brochure for a self-directed walking tour of historic Dayton. Open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday (540-879-2616).

**Silver Lake Mill**, 2328 Silver Lake Road. Shop for fine gifts and accessories. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday (540-879-3582).

**Thomas' Restaurant and Home Bakery**, Main Street. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday (540-879-2181).



A display of Shenandoah Valley pottery at the Folk Art & Heritage Center.

known as Rocco — or some might revert to the earlier name, Marval. The plant became part of the giant Cargill firm on Aug. 27, 2001.

Even in a small town, change is constant.

What used to be Dayton High School is now the Dayton Learning Center, an 11-year-old educational program serving about 2,000 adult learners each year. **Jim Orndoff**, the center's founding director, says the programs include beginning literacy, English fluency, computer training, small business development, and IMPACT, a family literacy program. A colorful playground next to the school keeps children occupied while their parents study.

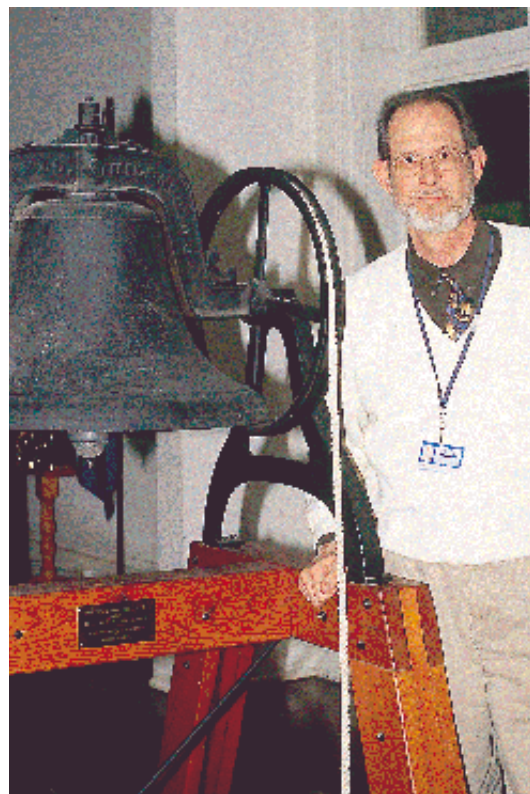
The building is rarely vacant. The Rockingham County Public Schools' alternative education classes are housed in the Dayton Learning Center, and weekends are vibrant affairs with dance formats from ballroom to contra.

What opened as Turner Ashby High School in 1956 is now the Wilbur S. Pence Middle School, serving more than 800 students in Grades 6, 7 and 8. The middle school is named for a long-time and deeply respected county school superintendent whose home overlooked the school property.

## Favorite Gathering Spots

Instead of a country store, the town's favorite meeting places are at the post office — there is no home mail delivery in town — or over cinnamon rolls and rich coffee on Saturday morning at the Dayton Farmers Market. The market, all under one roof, offers a grand assortment of items including fresh produce, a meat market, kitchenwares, dozens of varieties of cheese, books, toys, specialty gifts and international crafts.

Dayton is home to the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society and the Shenandoah Valley Folk Art & Heritage Center. The Heritage Center's permanent exhibit, "Invincible Spirit," traces the



**Jim Orndoff, director of the Dayton Learning Center, shows off the old school bell that summoned students when Dayton High School opened in 1914. The bell, which survived a two-story fall in 1920 when the school burned, now rests in a cradle fashioned from the bleachers from the former school's gymnasium.**

development of the Shenandoah Valley from pre-historic days to the present. Favorite exhibits include one on Valley pottery, complete with a reproduction kiln, and another on rug-weaving. An old-time schoolroom, with desks trimmed in iron curlicues, displays decades-old report cards and slate tablets. A wood-burning range is the centerpiece of a not-so-modern kitchen.

An electric map in the Heritage Center's meeting room traces the 1862 Valley campaign of Confederate General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.

A more recent change in Dayton is the restoration of an old mill on the banks of Silver Lake. In the building where wheat and corn were once ground into flour and cornmeal, china and glassware now are exquisitely decorated by LDA Creations for clients including museums, universities and historic sites. A special line of giftware features the Silver Lake Mill and nearby locales.

An earlier restoration project brought Fort Harrison back to life. The

stone home of Daniel Harrison was built about 1749, during a time when the major security concern was Indian raids. An underground passage is believed to have connected the house to a spring, a protection against long-term assaults.

And there's a newspaper now — the weekly *Shenandoah Journal* that chronicles not just the high school sports action, but every junior varsity and Little League contest and every school's Honor Roll.

The things about Dayton that will never change are the memories of long-time residents.

They recall the majesty of May Day on the lush grounds of Shenandoah College and Conservatory of Music, which operated in Dayton from 1875 until 1960 when it moved to Winchester and today is Shenandoah University.

They can smile with the memory of the late Bernard Roth advertising that his Main Street grocery had "parking for a thousand cars — two at a time."

They can still catch a whiff of the printer's ink from the Shenandoah Press and recall the decades when Jim Ruebush *was* the Shenandoah Press.

They can admire the reproduction antiques that Charlie Suter hand-crafted in his small shop on Mill Street.

And gratefully, they can remember, but continue to enjoy, home-style cooking at the Thomas' Restaurant and Home Bakery, a Main Street landmark that locals still call "Lottie's" — an endearing reference to the late Lottie Thomas who ruled the restaurant and bakery, often bringing the big serving platters and dishes to the diners herself. And there were no better donuts than Lottie's donuts.

### **"Just a Little Country Town"**

Long-time Dayton Mayor **Ed Bartley** reflects on the changes he's seen in the almost 50 years he's held an elective office on the town council. And he still comes back to the word "nice." "It's just a little country town. Everyone attends to his own business. It's a nice, quiet place. That's what makes this town special."

And, to bring that Civil War story into the present day: Dayton has a Meigs Lane, memorializing the fallen Union officer. It does not have any street named Wildes to honor the man who could have told Leo Durocher that nice guys are worth standing up for — even to an angry general. ■