

## DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2008, WE'RE MAKING OUR WAY AROUND THE REGION, 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

# COVINGTON

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DEBORAH HUSO, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

THIS "PAPER-MILL CITY" IS  
WORKING HARD TO REVITALIZE ITSELF FOR  
A NEW GENERATION OF RESIDENTS

**K**emper Murray's family has a long history in Alleghany County, which surrounds the city of Covington. Born and raised in nearby Clifton Forge, which was settled by his ancestors, Murray says, "It's nice to live in a place where you know the mayor and the commissioner of the revenue." Now a resident of Covington, Murray is also a long-time veteran of the city's largest employer, MeadWestvaco. He has worked for the company 51 years. He started as a timekeeper when he was just 18, and today serves as a foreman managing the flow of stock and additives to paper machines. "It's a good job with good money and good insurance," he explains simply.

Covington has long been known as a mill town, and not just because of the presence of what is now MeadWestvaco, the paper mill that has been here since 1900. At the turn of the 20th century, the town's population exploded as it supported an iron furnace, a tannery, machine shops, flour mills, and brick yards. Much of that industrial bustle has left Covington in recent years, however, as major local employers like Applied Extrusion Technology and Lear Corporation have packed their bags and left town, leaving a dearth of employment opportunities.

"Covington has gone through what a lot of rural communities have gone through," notes **Jack Hammond**, president of the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce. "Manufacturing jobs have declined. We're going through a lot of transition."

But Hammond, who moved to the area from Ohio to work for Westvaco in 1961, and then came back to the area eight years ago after a 14-year stint in New York City, doesn't necessarily see the decline of industry in Covington as a negative. He believes Covington has the opportunity to become a haven for small businesses and Internet-based companies. He also



Local merchants are exploring ways to revitalize Covington's picturesque downtown.



## AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 6,073

LAND AREA: 5 square miles

INCORPORATED: 1818

ELEVATION: 1,200 ft. at river, 1,500 ft. at highest point in town

FACTOID: Just west of Covington is Humpback Bridge, the only single-span covered bridge in the U.S. that is four feet higher at its center than at either end, with no middle support. Built in 1857 over Dunlap Creek, the design protects from destruction by flood.



FROM TOP: The old Covington C & O Depot has been restored and reopened as a museum. • The downtown area is home to beautiful old residences as well as quaint shops and eateries. • Lovely Falling Springs Falls is just a few miles north of town. • The Jackson River Sports Complex hosts area sports programs and has a new amphitheater.



sees tourism as a component of Covington's future since the city is located in the midst of a vast outdoor recreation area with much of the surrounding mountains owned by the National Forest. He sees Covington's location on Interstate 64 and its immediate access to CSX Railroad as positives for drawing newcomers as well.

City Manager **Claire Collins** agrees that Covington is perched on the edge of positive change. Collins, who came to Covington two years ago after serving for 14 years as county administrator in neighboring Bath County, says local merchants are working hard to revitalize Covington's picturesque downtown, and several new

shops and restaurants have opened there. "We have seen vacant structures get purchased in recent years," Collins points out. She also notes that Covington's Peebles department store, also located on Main Street, is thriving. "We see small business as the future here," says Collins. "Big industry jobs are now going overseas."





Collins points to the restoration and opening of the old Covington C & O Depot as a museum, as well as the continuing expansion of the Jackson River Sports Complex (which hosts area baseball and softball games as well as soccer programs and a new amphitheater) as signs the community is going to continue to grow, develop in new ways, and thrive. Collins says Covington is a unique place and needs to start marketing itself that way. For one, the city itself is located in the midst of mountains with a 300-foot change in elevation within city limits. Collins says the city is also working to promote its mill history and embracing its identity as “the paper-mill city.”



### A CHANGE OF HEART

Once upon a time, Covington might not have been so quick to embrace the mill run by MeadWestvaco, but things have changed a lot in the last decade, according to the company’s Environmental Manager **Tom Botkins**. He says MeadWestvaco is constantly evaluating its environmental footprint and has worked to reduce emissions, odor, and noise. The company also works to minimize its nutrient impact on the Chesapeake Bay, which is fed by the Jackson River that passes through town. Botkins says the company has managed an 80 percent improvement, for example, in phosphorous discharge, winning a Guardian of the River award from the James River Association.

MeadWestvaco’s Communications Manager **Becky Johnson**, a Covington native who once worked for the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C., says she is proud of MeadWestvaco’s recent efforts and considers the company a good corporate neighbor. It also employs some 1,300 people, more than 75 percent of whom are residents of Covington or Alleghany County. She indicates that MeadWestvaco has a positive impact on the economy of the surrounding area as well, noting that most of the company’s pulp wood comes from within 150 miles of the mill.



FROM TOP (L-R): MeadWestvaco staff members Kemper Murray, Becky Johnson and Tom Botkins. • Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce president Jack Hammond.  
• Virginian Review publisher Horton Beirne.  
• City Manager Claire Collins.



With the exception of Wal-Mart, however, there are no other large employers left in Covington besides MeadWestvaco. Local newspaper owner and editor **Horton Beirne** sees that as problematic. "This was a thriving community in the '50s. But there's no new industry here to speak of, so young folks have to leave." Beirne's grandfather started the *Virginian Review* in 1914, and the paper has been in the family ever since. Beirne says he stayed in the business mainly because that's what he grew up in as a child, remembering how his father always took him to the newspaper office when he was a boy.

But even though he loves the area, Beirne worries about Covington's future, noting that the city has lost 600 jobs in the last two years. "It will turn around one day," he says, "but I don't know if I'll see it. We haven't turned the corner yet. We have to change our mindsets from industry to tourism."

One local business that's drawing in a fair share of out-of-town visitors is Aldena's Arts and Crafts, situated across the street from the Jackson River Sports Complex. Opened in 1999, and run single-handedly by Covington native **Aldena Craighead**, the massive store features an unbelievable supply of holiday and home décor items, covering more than 8,000 square feet. "I love this stuff," says Craighead of her varied inventory. And her customers do, too. She says she has regulars who come from as far away as Texas to shop at her store. She attributes her success to lots of advertising and hard work. "My shortest day this week has been 13 hours," she says.

Craighead says she's had to go over a lot of hurdles to make her business grow and believes that businesses like hers are the future of Covington if the city will make the local business climate friendlier. "We need to make changes in the area for businesses to survive here," she says.

## FUTURE PLANS

Collins says the city is working in that direction with plans for a streetscape project on Fraser Avenue and hopes of promoting the work of local artists and crafters to draw more tourists into the downtown area. "We're taking steps slow and sure to reinvigorate the city," she says, noting how so many families have continued to live and work in Covington generation after generation.

A lot of that devotion to the city has to do with the area's high quality of life. Native Tom Botkins understands: "Here if you wave at someone inadvertently, they wave back." ■

## IF YOU GO...

The **Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce** on Main Street in Covington is a good place to get an introduction to Covington and the surrounding area. Open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., the Chamber of Commerce has brochures and maps on the surrounding area and is located in the midst of Covington's downtown business district, which is home to a variety of unique restaurants, shops, and antique galleries. Among them is the **Renew Wellness Shoppe** on Main Street, which is the only place in town where one can get a sandwich and a massage all in one place. On Court Street, visitors can browse shelves of books about the region and by regional authors at **The Book Keeper**. The newly restored and opened **Covington C & O Depot** on Maple Avenue houses the offices of the local historical society and has exhibits on local history.

Downtown Covington is a great place to grab lunch or a great dinner as well. There are many unique restaurants hidden here and there along Main Street and on the side streets. **The Main Street Shoppe**, run by sisters Josephine O'Rourke and Lucrezia D'Arpa, serves up fine Italian dishes in a historic building that was once a clothing store. On Riverside Street, the **James Burke House Eatery** has a variety of deli sandwiches, salads, and baked potatoes for the lunchtime crowd. At the **Court Street Restaurant**, one can get dinner for under \$6.

Covington is located in the center of a beautiful mountainous region that is home to a variety of recreational opportunities, including fishing, boating, and camping at **Lake Moomaw** in the **George Washington National Forest** as well as



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at **Douthat State Park**. Just a few miles north of town is a famous local landmark — the lovely cascade of **Falling Spring Falls**, a 200-foot waterfall, and just west of town is historic **Humpback Bridge**. Avid hikers will enjoy the 17-mile **Jackson River Trail**, which runs from Covington to the Coles Point Recreation Area at Lake Moomaw.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce  
241 W. Main Street  
Covington, VA 24426  
1-888-430-5786  
[www.ahchamber.com](http://www.ahchamber.com)

Alleghany Highlands Arts Council  
450 W. Main Street, Suite 201  
Covington, VA 24426  
540-962-6220  
[www.alleghanyarts4all.com](http://www.alleghanyarts4all.com)

Covington City Hall  
333 W. Locust Street  
Covington, VA 24426  
540-965-6300  
[www.covington.va.us](http://www.covington.va.us)

Douthat State Park  
14239 Douthat State Park Road  
Millboro, VA 24460  
540-862-8100  
[www.dcr.virginia.gov/state\\_parks/dou.shtml](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state_parks/dou.shtml)

George Washington National Forest  
Rt. 2, Box 30  
Hot Springs, VA 24445  
540-839-2521  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/warmsprings> ■