

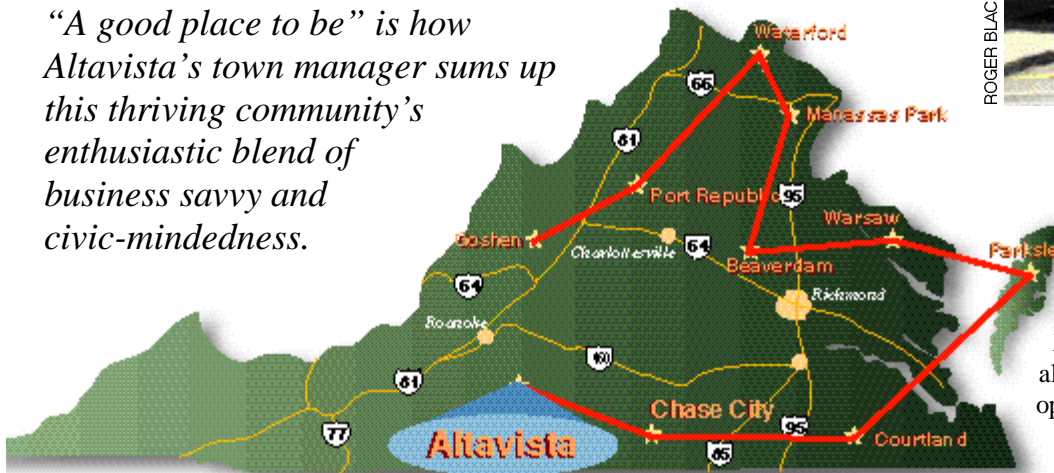
## DOWN HOME SERIES

by Betty Gilliam,  
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Altavista Journal

*During 1999, 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 tenth and final stop, we'll be...*

# Down Home in Altavista

*"A good place to be" is how Altavista's town manager sums up this thriving community's enthusiastic blend of business savvy and civic-mindedness.*



ROGER BLACKSTOCK PHOTOS



Altavista is a relative newcomer to Virginia. Henry Lane and his two brothers, John and C.W., realized the development potential in 1905, when the Virginian railway was building a new line in the area. Since the Southern was already established here, they saw an opportunity to create a new community at the junction of two major rail lines. The Staunton River also enhanced possibilities for successful development.

They obtained a contract to construct 32 miles of Virginian track through this section of the state and purchased 2,000 acres of land for \$10,000, using proceeds from the sale of Henry's farm in Albemarle County. A year later, the three brothers planned and mapped out the town.

Henry was a trained engineer. By 1907, he had laid the streets and installed water and sewer mains and poles for lights and telephones. Sidewalks were built (from wood), shade trees were planted, and a steel bridge was constructed over the river. In addition, the whole town was zoned.

The town was identified as "Altavista" because that was the name of Lane's recently sold farm. All of this planning was done before the first house was built. In 1907, Henry gave the choicest lots away free to all who would agree to build a house using specified standards. He also gave away the site for a cotton mill (now BGF Industries, Inc.) and land for 50 homes for employees. He negotiated special rates from the Virginian.

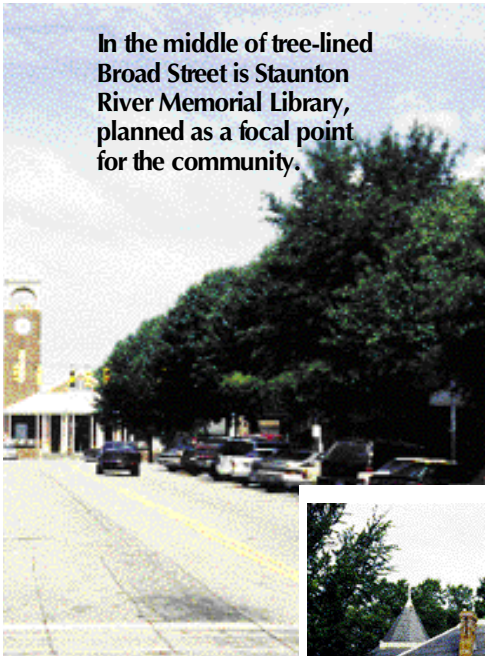
By 1910, the town had grown to include a bank, a foundry and iron working plant, a brick and tile-making plant, a newspaper (*Altavista Journal*), six or seven retail stores,



The annual Uncle Billy's Day festival is held the first weekend in June at Staunton Riverfront Park, where people of all ages enjoy free activities, including professional entertainment and fireworks. In June 1999, the 50th anniversary of this event was celebrated, drawing more than 15,000 people.



In the middle of tree-lined Broad Street is Staunton River Memorial Library, planned as a focal point for the community.



a water-works plant, an electric lighting plant, and 50 residences. In addition, a new \$30,000 hotel was being built within walking distance of the railroad station.

Even then, the community was termed "unique," a reputation that has solidified over the years. The *Altavista Journal's* premier edition, Oct. 23, 1909, offered this description: "Altavista is in a class by herself, a city that is different, different from any in Virginia, from any in the South, from any east of the Mississippi."

The town was incorporated in 1910. Two years later, John Lane purchased an old packing-box plant at an auction for \$500. He suggested that his son, Edward Hudson Lane, then 20 years old, come to Altavista and start making cedar chests. Originally known as the Standard Red Cedar Chest Company, the business reorganized in 1922, and the name was changed to The Lane Company, Inc. Since then, products and acquisitions have grown, along with the company's reputation

**Altavista Town Council and the town manager meet monthly to oversee governmental affairs and plan for the future. (L-R) Robert Jennings, Ron Coleman, Ed Shelton, Town Manager Bryan Foster, Rayetta Foster, Tennyson Mann, Mayor Rudy Burgess. (Not pictured, Don Henderson.)**



**Avoca Museum is the town's historic landmark. Pictured are volunteers and shoppers at the annual yard and bake sale held in August.**



**Serving on Altavista's police force are 11 officers and Zoff, the town's K-9 unit. (L-R) Chief Tommy Neal, Don Arthur, Jimmie Brown, Paul Smith, Andy Hicks, Chris Brooks. (Not pictured, Captain Steve Hutcherson, Sgt. Jerry Rowland, Ken Walsh, Calvin Rowland, and Mike Wolfe.)**

For many years, Lane was the primary employer in Altavista, providing jobs for as many as 1,300 people. However, thanks to E.R. "Red" English (1914-1998), additional industries located in town. Red was a leader in the state chamber of commerce and the driving force behind local economic development, long before other communities realized the significance of purposeful marketing.

As a result of Red's efforts in the 1960s, Universal Electric Company, Inc. and Piedmont Manufacturing Company, Inc. decided to build plants in Altavista, creating new jobs and expanding the tax base for the town and Campbell County. Since then, both have changed ownership. Now operating as A.O. Smith Electrical Products and Schrader-

as a leading national manufacturer now owned by the Furniture Brands International conglomerate.





Bridgeport, respectively, each employs approximately 300 people.

The original cotton mill has continued to operate, with changes in ownership over the years. In 1988, Robert Porcher, a French industrialist, purchased the plant when he acquired Burlington Glass Fabrics Company, Inc., a division of Burlington Industries, Inc. Now known as BGF Industries, the local plant employs 700 people.

In 1972, Red and his son, Ralph, were instrumental in convincing Abbott Laboratories to build a major manufacturing and distribution facility in town. Altavista's plant, Abbott Laboratories/Ross Products Division, makes infant and adult nutritionals and has become a mainstay in town, providing employment for 700 people as well as serving the community in a variety of roles.

Another company, Timken, built a bearing-manufacturing plant on the outskirts of Altavista in Campbell County's industrial park in 1991. Since then, several major

**First Saturday Trade Lot (right) has been a monthly tradition since the town's founding. Started by "Uncle Billy" Lane, the flea market draws people from all over Virginia and North Carolina. The Altavista Area YMCA Athletic Center (below) was built in 1994, complete with gymnasium, racquetball courts, aerobics room, indoor track, and fitness center. Director Steve Jester, pictured in the fitness center, has administered the YMCA program since its inception in 1971.**



expansions have been completed at the plant, where 350 people are now employed.

In addition, Moore's Electric & Mechanical has built its headquarters complex in town. With an ever-growing statewide clientele, the company's decision to maintain an Altavista home base was made by owner, **Dale Moore**. "Altavista has been great to me, and I wanted to keep the company here," he says about the 225-employee business.

Another hometown business, Mid-Atlantic Printing, is thriving in Altavista. **Charles Edwards**, president, is the son of the late Pauline Edwards, who owned and operated the *Altavista Journal* until 1990 when it was sold to Womack Publishing Company, Inc. Mid-Atlantic now owns a subsidiary in Charlotte, N.C., and has established a customer base that extends north to Maryland and south to South Carolina. More than 70 people are employed at the local plant which has undergone several expansions in the past ten years.

Keeping up with its progressive economic-development reputation, the town has purchased a tract of land and developed an industrial park where two companies have located and a shell building is under construction, financed with a \$400,000 loan from Southside Electric Cooperative and grants from Campbell County and Region 2000.

This diverse and extensive employment base has contributed to Altavista's uniqueness. "We are blessed with good jobs," says Mayor **Rudy Burgess**, who was born and raised in Altavista. "It's pretty impressive

## If You Go...

Travelers on Rt. 29 will pass Altavista approximately 18 miles south of Lynchburg and 40 miles north of Danville. Spend a night at Comfort Suites (804-369-4000) or Castle to Country House bed-and-breakfast (804-369-4911). There are good "home-cooking" restaurants, and Altavista's authentic Irish pub, An Claddagh.

**Avoca Museum** is open for weekend tours (804-369-1076), and the estate will be decorated for Christmas.

A year-round resort, **The Merritt Hutchinson**, is under development in Lynch Station on the outskirts of Altavista. Comprised of nearly 1,000 acres, the resort is scheduled to open in May 2000. Accommodations for guests will include rooms ranging from standard to deluxe to luxury suites and apartments. A formal restaurant will be located at Charter House, the main facility which also houses an indoor swimming pool, ballroom, atrium, and fitness center. A casual-dining restaurant and lounge are planned for the Equestrian Lodge, which will also house a conference center and meeting rooms.

Tennis courts will be available, as well as horseback riding, canoeing, fishing, golfing, hiking, bicycling, and skeet and trap shooting. Call 804-385-4185.

Thomas Jefferson's summer home, **Poplar Forest**, is an easy 20-minute drive from Altavista (804-525-1806). Patrick Henry's last home and burial place, **Red Hill**, is a convenient 50-minute drive to the east (804-376-2044).

To the north, **Appomattox** offers a wealth of Civil War information and memorabilia at the historic landmark where General Lee surrendered (call 804-352-8987). From Altavista, Appomattox can be reached in 45 minutes, driving along scenic Rt. 24 which carries travelers through **Rustburg**, picturesque seat of Campbell County government.

For water lovers, **Smith Mountain Lake** is a real treasure. Boating, fishing, overnight accommodations, swimming and camping all are available at this recreational area where more than 500 miles of shoreline in three counties (Campbell, Pittsylvania and Franklin) are dotted with impressive homes. Again, the lake is an easy 40-minute drive from Altavista. For information, call 1-800-676-8203. ■

when people find out we have more than 5,000 people working here and only 3,700 people living in the town limits.”

**Dick Arruda**, former manager at the LG&E Westmoreland cogeneration power plant, says Altavista is a wonderful place to live and raise a family. “We moved here in 1991, from Beulah, North Dakota, a town of 2,000 located 85 miles northwest of Bismarck. We had lived in small towns all our lives, but never did we feel so welcomed and at home as we did in Altavista. It seems like everyone opened their arms to our family.”

Dick and his wife and three children quickly settled into the community, getting involved at the local YMCA and taking on leadership roles in civic organizations. He served as president of the Altavista Area YMCA board of directors and the Altavista Area Chamber of Commerce, and was active in the Rotary Club and the vocational advisory council for the local high school. Dick also coached baseball, basketball and soccer at the YMCA.

“We will always feel like Altavista is home,” he says. “It was really hard to leave. The town just gets better and better. There’s so much support for everything, and so many people willing to give their time and money to improve the quality of life.” The Arrudas moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, several months ago after he took a job at another power plant.

**Stan Goldsmith** served as Altavista’s town manager for 20 years, from 1977 until 1997, when he accepted a position as program manager for Virginia’s Region 2000, a cooperative economic-development program for four counties and the City of Lynchburg. “The more you get to know Altavista, the more you realize how giving the people are. What’s been accomplished is due to the generosity of those willing to give of their time, money and experience.

“When we started hosting our annual volunteer-recognition dinner, we identified more than 400 people who were contributing to the community in one way or another. I felt from the very beginning that Altavista is a ‘can-do’ town. Whenever a need is identified, someone always finds a way to make it happen.”

### **Community Spirit Helps Build Park**

Examples of that “just-do-it” attitude are evident at Staunton Riverfront Park, developed with private donations and state grants. Dedicated in June 1994, the park is a popular spot for walkers and joggers, as well as boaters who take advantage of the convenient docking ramp. An attractive gazebo

and pavilion are available for picnics and reunions, and cement picnic tables line the walking path. Children can enjoy the modern playground, constructed by volunteers, and fields and courts are accessible for basketball, volleyball and baseball.

A focal point at the park is the Booker Building, originally built around 1910 to house a foundry business. Renovation of this building was one of the final park projects, creating a perfect place for large gatherings. A roof was built on the outdoor stage this year, to accommodate performances during the annual Uncle Billy’s Day celebration.

### **A First-Rate Festival**

Hosted the first weekend in June by a committee of dedicated volunteers, the annual Uncle Billy’s Day celebration is named for W.G. Lane Sr. The 1999 festival marked the 50th anniversary of this event which was started by Jaycees who wanted to attract visitors to the community.

The festival has grown in size and reputation and is now considered one of the best in Virginia and North Carolina. Professional entertainment, children’s activities, crafts, exhibits, and more, are offered free to the public. Outstanding fireworks are presented by trained local volunteers. Funding for the celebration comes from contributions and the sale of concessions and T-shirts.

### **A Good Place to Barter or Banter**

Certainly a unique trademark for Altavista is the First Saturday Trade Lot. In 1910, W.G. Lane Sr. originated the first bartering event for farmers wanting to trade their animals and tools. From those roots, he operated a monthly trading market for men only. To make sure there was something for everyone, he asked merchants for clothing, home furnishings and farm implements to put up for auction.

When he no longer operated the trade lot, various individuals continued the tradition which is now widely known as a diverse flea market where everything can be purchased, including vegetables and animals. This event is held every first Saturday. Proceeds from vendors’ rental fees are used by the local band boosters, who also earn money at their on-site concession stand.

Another source of pride for the community is the local YMCA. Known throughout the state as the “best small-town YMCA,” Altavista’s program started in 1971. **Mrs. B.B. “Minnie” Lane** spearheaded a group of local leaders who planted seeds for the original YMCA. “Everyone told us we were too small to have a successful program,” she

recalls. “But, we knew we could do it, especially with strong leadership.”

**Steve Jester** was hired as the first paid director, and he still holds that position. Under his direction, the YMCA has grown into a 3,000-member organization that oversees athletic programs for all ages. YMCA leagues attract youth living in a 15-mile radius, with programs going on every season.

### **A Model YMCA**

Soon outgrowing the small building on Franklin Avenue, Jester and local volunteers raised \$200,000 for an addition which was completed in 1972 and included a state-of-the-art indoor pool. After realizing the need for quality child care, the YMCA added a \$300,000 child-development center, again using donations from individuals and businesses. The YMCA’s program was quickly recognized as a model, and the local staff was called upon to develop similar child-care programs at four satellite locations throughout Campbell County.

In 1994, a new fitness center and gymnasium were completed and a second level was added to the child-care building. This \$3.5 million project again was funded with private donations. The YMCA also depends on local contributions to supplement its \$1.7 million operating budget. The Town of Altavista supports the YMCA with on-site maintenance and annual allocations to cover utilities.

The fitness center features a high-school-sized gymnasium, racquetball courts, an aerobics room and locker rooms, and the second-story fitness center, track and business offices. “People are always coming to Altavista just to see our YMCA,” Jester says. “They can’t believe what we have here.”

Always looking to the future and remaining committed to a debt-free position, the YMCA has steadily built up an endowment fund that now exceeds \$2 million. The staff includes over 100 people.

### **“Our Water Systems Can’t Be Beat”**

Altavista also is a recognized leader in utilities and services. “We’ve got the best and highest-quality plants of any community in Virginia,” Goldsmith assures. “Our water and waste-water systems can’t be beat.” Improvements and upgrades are ongoing. Currently, water-plant capacity is being increased and the town is implementing an innovative infrared system at the waste-water treatment plant.

Campbell County and the town signed a cooperative agreement this year to extend water lines into Altavista, from the county’s

plant on Otter River near Evington. This extension, which will run along Rt. 29 from the Rt. 24 intersection, will provide additional water for growing industrial needs in the Altavista area, as well as much-needed residential and business access along the busy Rt. 29 corridor.

Over the past 15 years, more than \$15 million has been spent on town utilities, including completion of residential sewer lines for all houses. The town council currently is looking at a \$3 million renovation and construction plan for the government buildings on Seventh Street. A new fire station is included in that package, to make room for a growing brigade of engines and equipment. Last year, the volunteer department purchased a \$400,000 truck complete with the latest equipment.

### **Avoca a Showplace Museum**

The town's tourist attraction, Avoca Museum, is a stately Queen Anne-style home built on property originally granted in 1740 by King George II to the father of Col. Charles Lynch, a Revolutionary War hero. The first home burned in 1879 and the second succumbed to fire in 1900. The current home became a showplace for Central Virginia in 1986, when it opened as Avoca Museum.

Included on the property are the main house, a brick kitchen dating to the early 19th century, a farm office building currently under renovation, and a smokehouse and milk house. In 1981, a year after it was designated as a Virginia Historic Landmark, the property was deeded to Altavista. In 1987, an Indian museum was added to exhibit artifacts found in and around Altavista.

The years 1991-92 were a watershed for Avoca. The Lane Company, in collaboration with *Country Living* magazine, completely

redecorated the main house, excluding the chamber room and kitchen. Rentals of the first floor for social events increased and continue to provide revenues for the museum.

The Altavista Area Chamber of Commerce is actively involved in promoting the community's retail and industrial businesses. The office is located in the renovated train station, another landmark also used for community events. **Hank Frazier**, director, operates the office weekday mornings.

The Chamber's Retail Committee has developed a successful Shop Altavista 1st campaign and meets monthly to plan special events and promotions throughout the year. Thanks to this committee, banners are now displayed on light poles in the downtown area, welcoming visitors and inviting local shopping.

### **Altavista's on the Move**

Town Manager **Bryan Foster** says progress is continuing for Altavista. "Our residential sewer lines have paved the way for new-home construction. I've been here two years, and in that time 15 single-family homes have been built. In the previous five years, only one or two were built."

A new strip mall was built on Main Street this year, bringing four new businesses to town. CVS Pharmacy opened a new store several months ago.

Foster is optimistic about the future. "I see nothing but positive changes on the horizon," he says. "Altavista is a good place to be." ■

*About the author: Betty Gilliam is editor and general manager of the Altavista Journal, where she has worked for the past 20 years. Although she's not a native, she considers Altavista to be home. She has three grown children and is active in community affairs.*