

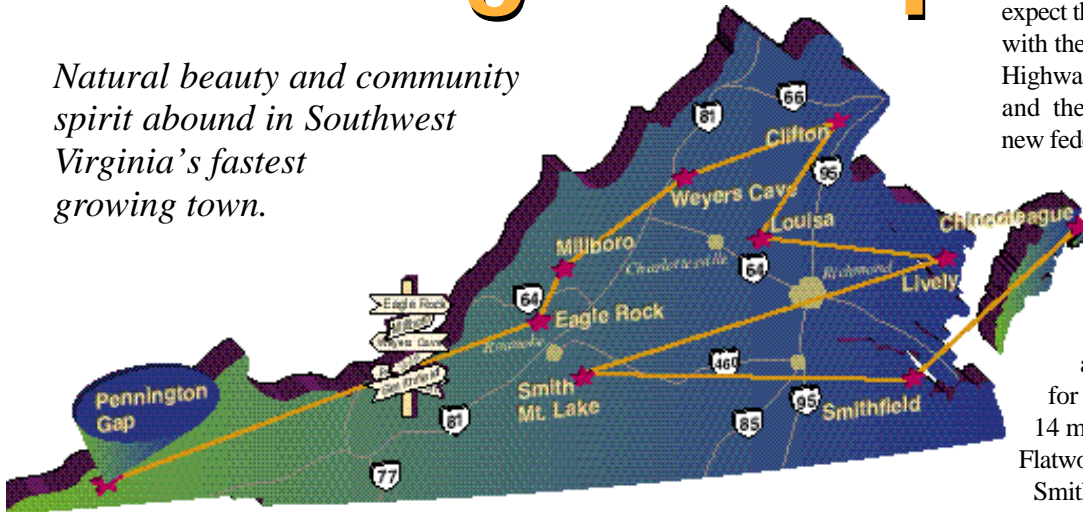
## DOWN HOME SERIES

by Louise Carver, Managing Editor  
Powell Valley News

*During the year 2000, 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 Pennington Gap

*Natural beauty and community spirit abound in Southwest Virginia's fastest growing town.*



Pennington Gap, the largest town (1.4 square miles) in Lee County, celebrated its centennial in 1992. The town erected a sign near the county hospital designating the town as the fastest growing town in Southwest Virginia.

The number of people in Pennington Gap has dropped slightly since 1992 to a current figure of about 1,900. Mayor **Jimmy Smallwood** and Town Manager **Mark Smith** expect this figure to increase with the expansion of U.S. Highway 58 to four lanes and the construction of a new federal prison about six miles south of town at Hickory Flats. Other projects include the county's first industrial park and a new airport for corporate jets about 14 miles west of town at Flatwoods.

Smith, 28, has been a resident of Pennington Gap his entire life. Being a licensed water/wastewater plant operator, he started to work for the town in August 1994, was promoted to executive director in September 1996, and has been serving as town manager since April 1997.

He said people want to live in the town for the peacefulness the area provides. "With the small population, residents just about all know each other on a first-name basis, an attribute lacking in some of the urbanized eastern Virginia areas. We provide police and fire protection, as well as water, sewer and garbage services, and we also have a very low crime rate in our area."

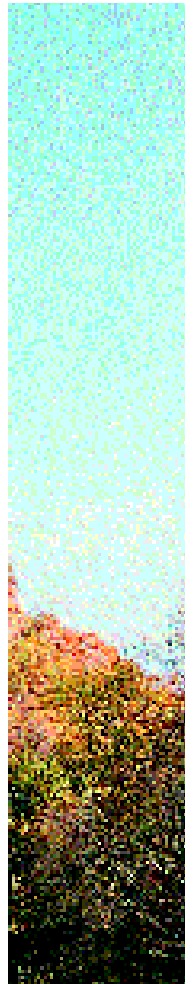
The town recently extended its boundaries in an effort to increase its tax base and is expanding its water plant two-fold to support a promise to provide water to the new federal prison.

### Building on a Strong Foundation

Resident **Lee County Circuit Court Judge Birg Sergent**, who took office June 29, 1998, moved to Pennington Gap when he was married in 1963. He lives with his wife, Lana, above the probable path of the

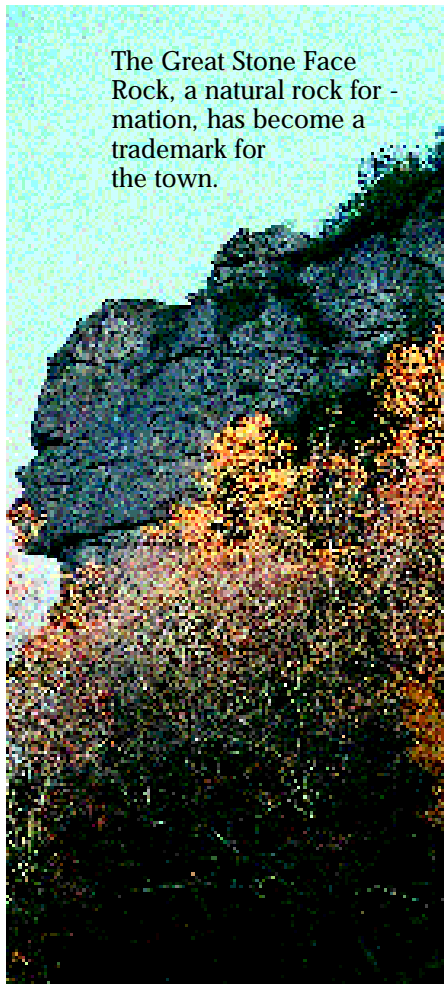


Ron Carson, left, is founder and chairman of the Appalachian African American Cultural and Community Development Center. Pictured above is current Fire Chief James Skidmore (left) and former chief Clarence Goins.

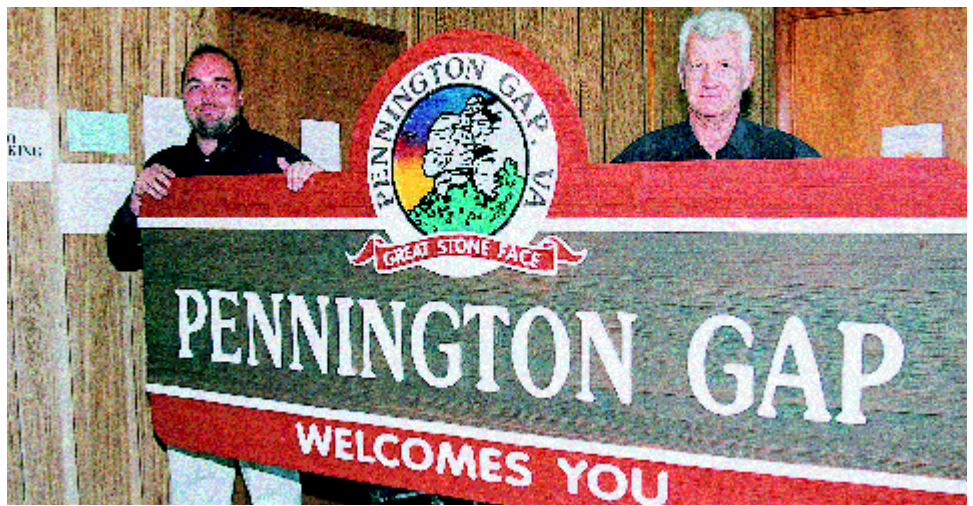




The Great Stone Face Rock, a natural rock formation, has become a trademark for the town.



RICK WATSON PHOTOS



Town Manager Mark Smith (left) is pictured here with Mayor Jimmy Smallwood.



Pennington Gap is located about six miles south of the town of St. Charles, where commercial coal mining began in about 1905. The town was mainly a shipping point for the northern portion of the county and was served by the Cumberland Valley division of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad and by Highways 421 and Alternate U.S. Highway 58.

A 90-page history of the town, published especially for the centennial observation, features stories and pictures relating the

western entrance of the planned by-pass of U.S. Highway 58 Alternate around the north side of town.

**Edgar Bacon**, the first highway commissioner from Lee County to be appointed to the State Board of Transportation, is credited for getting the \$600-million-to-\$1.2-billion project to start in Lee County, the state's most western county.

The improvements to Route 58 were started in Lee County in May 1993, and by the time it is finished, the highway will extend 500 miles to the Atlantic Ocean along the south side of Virginia.

Judge Sergent's predecessor, Judge Elijah Witt Pennington, was very active in the founding and building of the town, and, according to Sergent, some members of the Pennington family still live in the area. The town established a good water system when it was first founded by the Pennington Gap Improvement Company. The water system, Judge Sergent said, has been kept current and up-to-date.

The judge likes to live in the small town, with good neighbors, good water, good people, and says that Pennington Gap is also a

Alisha Hall, secretary for the Lee County Area Chamber of Commerce, is the first person contacted by people considering relocation to the county.

small business-friendly town with good work ethics.

Lee County was formed from Russell County in 1792 and was named for General Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee of Westmoreland. Pennington Gap was named for Edward Pennington who came to Lee County in 1790 and built a home two miles east of Dryden, after which he married and moved to the south side of the gorge to what is now Pennington Gap.

Ida Myrtle Stacy, retired school teacher and charter member of the Pennington Woman's Club, has enjoyed living in the area for all of her 91 years.





remembrances of citizens back to the 1800s.

The history places prominence on a colorful poster drawn by **Randy Cox**, then age 14, in a centennial poster contest sponsored by Pennington Middle School. Randy, now 21, and an employee of the Virginia Department of Transportation, included on his poster a coal train (for industry), Great Stone Face Rock (a local tourist attraction), and stars (for the future). His theme was "Pennington Gap, Virginia — Where Old Things Are Not Forgotten and New Things Are Learned — 100 Years of this Great Town."

### Something for Everyone

The town's fairgrounds, Leeman Field, built in 1933, and for two-and-a-half decades recognized by the National Library of Congress as the World's Largest Baseball Enclosure, today remains a monument to former players like Cowboy Barker, Perle Stewart and Bill Moore. It hosts little league baseball, a community swimming pool, horse shows and events, a playground, picnic pavilions, an amphitheater, tennis courts, horseshoe and volleyball pits, restrooms and one of Virginia's longest-running summer-time county fairs (the 93rd in 1999). The fair is currently sponsored by the Pennington Gap Lions Club, chartered in 1932.

The ballfield was purchased in 1933 by the Lee Athletics Corporation, which was made up of 48 Pennington Gap baseball fans, for \$3,000. It was corralled with board fencing traded from the former Pennington High School on the west end of town in exchange for the school's use of the park. The park has since been signed over to the town.

Leeman Field, 20 acres in size, also provides storage for vehicles and supplies for the local National Guard Armory.

Monthly, March through October, the Cumberland Horse Association sponsors events at Leeman Field for children, teens and adults. Activities include team penning, exhibition classes, rodeos and speed shows, with barrel racing, pole bending, rescues, potato races and speed races.

This past New Year's Eve, the park was the site of an expansion of the Lights in the Park project which successfully debuted during the Christmas of 1998 at Cumberland Bowl Park in the neighboring town of Jonesville, the county seat of Lee County, Virginia. The Lights in the Park was spurred by outgoing County Supervisor Don Williams' visit to an area light display.

For a small fee, visitors are able to take their families through the park to view the colorful, lighted Christmas displays. The event only lasts about three weeks in December and ends with a New Year's Eve celebration on December 31. People attending this event will be able to watch a lighted ball drop from a tower as the countdown for the new year begins.

Visitors to Pennington Gap might want to participate in a karaoke sing-along at spe-

cial events held on the newly constructed amphitheater or watch a professional bull-riding event during a rodeo at the horse arena located in the park.

### Mother Nature's Special Touch

Powell River, Powell Mountain and Powell Valley were named for Ambrose Powell, one of the explorers who accompanied Dr. Thomas Walker through the area in 1750. Part of Powell River, which is 205



Visit nearby Hensley Settlement, a mountain-top "museum" of an area settled by pioneers in the 1700s.

## If You Go...

**L**earn more about Pennington Gap and attractions in surrounding areas by visiting the following sites:

The town hall, located at 131 Constitution Road (540-546-1177), is open from 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Monday-Friday. The mayor is Jimmy Smallwood.

Lee County Area Chamber of Commerce, located in the courthouse in Jonesville, is about eight miles west of Pennington Gap on U.S. Highway 58. Open 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Monday-Friday (540-346-0553).

Alisha Hall, a resident of Lee County all her life and current resident of Pennington Gap, is the first person contacted by people considering relocation to the county. She provides a narrative and brochures about the county, giving details of where to go for everyday,

taken-for-granted services such as changing driver's licenses, etc. She works in the courthouse in Jonesville and enjoys the friendly environment of the town of Pennington Gap.

Powell Valley News (in its 79<sup>th</sup> year) is located at 125 East Morgan Avenue. Contact them at 540-546-1210, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., weekdays except Wednesday (7 a.m.-3 p.m.). Publisher is Rick Watson.

The Lee County Public Library is on Joslyn Avenue in Pennington Gap (540-546-1141). Norma Ferguson is the librarian. Also available is the Rose Hill Community Library (540-445-5329), with librarian Lela Johnson.

A two-day visit to Pennington Gap will allow you time to visit local attractions and to detour to other activities of the 70-mile-long beaten path through Lee County.

The Cumberland Bowl Park in Jonesville provides a picturesque setting for the offices of Mayor Ewell Bledsoe and the town hall,



miles long and supports 330 species of wild animals, including 58 kinds of endangered or threatened species, flows through Pennington Gap.

The river, called one of America's last great places by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, provides much opportunity for fishing and other recreation such as canoeing, swimming, hiking and horseback riding along the scenic stream.

One of Lee County's most famous land-

marks is the Great Stone Face Rock seen just minutes from Pennington Gap beside the Powell River, which travels north toward St. Charles and Harlan, Kentucky. A railroad tunnel has been carved beneath the natural rock formation where, in recent years, archaeologists have uncovered pebbles they said were tumbled into the area by the Atlantic Ocean.

Pennington Gap is the center for the marketing of the county's burley tobacco, with

warehouses located in both the east end of town (Shelburne's 3S Warehouse) and the west end (Cozart's Tri-State Warehouses). The market was started in 1949, with total sales of \$9.5 million for the 1998-99 burley sales season in Lee County.

Each year during the fourth week of October, the Lee County Area Chamber of Commerce sponsors a Tobacco/Fall Festival featuring a beauty pageant, a memorial road race, music, food, arts and crafts, and antique tractors and other machines.

Starting in the 1920s with only a cart which carried the water hose and was moved about by members, the first fire department in the county was located in Pennington Gap, where some fire hydrants had been installed, but no pumps were available. When the hose was connected to a hydrant, the water pressure was so great, two or three men were needed to control the hose.

In 1987, the volunteer fire department suffered the loss of Fred Quinley, who had been a member for more than 60 years and was at the time the oldest active fireman in Virginia. His brother, Walter, served as fire chief for Pennington Gap for 30 years.

**Clarence Goins**, chief of the Pennington Gap Volunteer Fire Department from 1981 to 1989, has spent 60 of his 73 years in Pennington Gap, attending school there and working for the town for a while after his service in the U.S. Army. He has been a member of the fire department for 44 years and now serves as a safety officer.

He has never had any reason to leave the small town of Pennington Gap with its people who are easy to get along with. He said the strictly volunteer fire department, which has 20 active members, has been an asset to the town and the surrounding area. The department still has its first truck — a 1944 Chevrolet — although it's not in use now, he said.

The present fire chief, **James Skidmore**, said the department has more modern equipment now.

"In 1973 when I joined, the Pennington Volunteer Department was the only active one in Lee County," he said. "We've covered all the county, and we still provide mutual aid to all the other departments."

### Preserving History

The Appalachian African American Cultural and Community Development Center, which focuses on the preservation of rural African-American culture in mountain



Take a tour of the 22-year-old Karlan Mansion, located about 25 miles west of Pennington Gap in Wilderness Road State Park.

as well as family recreation for all the citizens.

To the west, about 25 miles, you will find Wilderness Road State Park, one of the newest in the state. Park Manager Janet Blevins, phone 540-445-3065, can provide a tour of the 22-year-old Karlan Mansion, named for its former owners and destined to be the park's visitor's center.

Another 20 minutes west will lead you to the twin tunnels, built recently to bypass the Daniel Boone Trail through the Cumberland Gap National Historical Park. The visitor's center at the park, phone 606-248-2817, can direct you to Hensley Settlement, a mountain-top "museum" of an area settled by pioneers in the 1700s.

To the east of Pennington Gap about 17 miles, in Big Stone Gap, you can visit the Southwest Virginia Museum, phone 540-523-1322. The museum is housed in a mansion originally built in the 1880s by Rufus Ayers, a Virginia attorney general, and

features the story of the exploration and development of Southwest Virginia.

During the summer months of late June to late August, the "Trail of the Lonesome Pine," Virginia's longest running outdoor drama at 35 years, is presented by the Lonesome Pine Arts & Crafts Inc., phone 540-523-2060 or 540-523-1235.

Other Big Stone Gap sites include the June Tolliver House and the John Fox, Jr. House.

The Convenient Inn, at 131 Industrial Drive, in East Pennington Gap, makes visitors welcome with 40 rooms with cable TV, a restaurant and a pool. Children under 12 stay free of charge.

While visiting in the area, you can consider camping at Natural Tunnel State Park off Route 23 near Duffield. For more information, call or write the museum at 540-523-1322, Box 742, Big Stone Gap, VA 24219. ■

communities, is located in a one-room schoolhouse in Pennington Gap, built in 1939 for the education of African-American children.

Before the school was built, the children were taught in a local church, and after the public schools were integrated in 1965, the building was used for Project Head Start and special-education classes. When the public schools vacated the building in 1990, the property was deeded to the Cultural Center.

The Center now features taped interviews with local people and a priceless collection of photographs and school records from 1939 to 1965.

**Ron Carson**, founder and chairman of the board of directors for the center, said, "Living in this small rural community, close personal relationships with your grocer, banker, pharmacist and your children's teachers are not uncommon.

"These mountains are full with the rich history and culture of the African-American experience in the Appalachian Region — a story yet to be told, but one which we are committed to sharing with the rest of the world.

"Living in Boston, we would travel three to four hours to the mountains of upstate New York to savor the scenic beauty of autumn — now, we are surrounded by it."

A letter dated July 24, 1975, from the State's acting commissioner of banking, **Ralph S. Jessee**, indicated that the Pennington Gap Bank Inc., organized in 1892, was the first bank in the town.

The bank opened for business April 6, 1907 and was consolidated on August 17, 1932, along with the Bank of St. Charles and Peoples Bank of Dryden under the name of Lee Bank and Trust Company, which in 1992 moved from downtown to a modern three-story colonial styled building at 600 West Morgan Avenue.

Four other banks have since followed in the town, including Black Diamond Savings Bank (1973), Powell Valley National Bank (1977), and Farmers & Miners Bank, (1979).

The Lee County General Hospital, first opened for service on September 30, 1930, took on the new name of Lee County Community Hospital when it was relocated from downtown Pennington Gap to the west end of town in 1983.

The 80-bed facility now has about 300 staff and employees and four rural clinics.

**Mayor Jimmy Smallwood** was elected to the town council in 1996, and he was elected vice-mayor by the other council members. He became mayor when the mayor-elect Cam Matlock passed away suddenly on December 6, 1998.

Born and raised in Pennington Gap, Smallwood graduated from the former Pennington High School in 1951. He lived away from Pennington Gap, in Norton, for 25 of his 67 years. He worked as a lab technician and retired as a coal miner.

But in younger years when he was on Christmas leave from Lees McCrae College in Banner Elk, North Carolina, he once worked ten days for Powell Valley Electric Cooperative, cutting right-of-way in the Jonesville area on the Tennessee line. "It was hard work, but I asked for it," he said.

Now retired, the mayor occupies some of his time with woodworking. He said recently of Pennington Gap, "I'd just like for it to be a nice place to live."

### A Look to the Future

Projects underway in Pennington Gap include the Phase I and II walkpath and bike trail in Leeman Field, the doubling of the capacity of the Water Treatment Plant, and the expansion and installation of a new water tank.

The town recently accepted a bid from Building and Structures Inc., of Wise, to expand the current water treatment plant's capacity with construction scheduled to begin this past fall.

The plant will be enlarged from a capacity of 1 million to 2 million gallons of water per day at a cost of \$3.4 million, with the funding to be \$1.4 million in grant money and \$2.0 million being in the form of a loan.

The town expects that revenue from the federal prison will be sufficient to pay the loan and will not affect the water rates for customers. The project is scheduled for completion by late Spring 2001.

The construction of a new water tank to replace the one that collapsed in May 1998 is scheduled for sometime this spring at a projected cost of approximately \$900,000 with about \$675,000 in grant funds and \$225,000 in a loan.

The tank will benefit Pennington Gap mainly, but will also help serve as a reservoir to supply the Dryden, Ben Hur and St. Charles communities, and in the future, the Smyth's Chapel area.

The town received funding from the Virginia Department of Transportation to pave the existing road and additional trails around Leeman Field by the end of 1999, and paving and lighting the railways should be started by mid-2000.

Plans are underway to restore the pavilions, restrooms, exhibit barns, tennis courts, pool, and more.

Also, construction started in the fall of 1999 on a 120-bed nursing home that will include wings for assisted living and patients with Alzheimer's disease. The 48,000-square-foot facility, Lee Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, to be located near the hospital, will cost \$3.4 million, with the total project cost estimated at \$5 million.

Between 100-110 employees will be hired initially, with two-thirds to be registered nurses, and the rest licensed practical nurses and certified nursing assistants. The total payroll by the end of the second year will be \$1.5 million, with another \$1.5 million in non-salary expenses.

By the second year, the facility, which is expected to open by late summer 2000, will generate a revenue of \$3.5 million annually.

### A Great Place to Live

The town has a web page which was built in 1998. Citizens are invited to use it to find loved ones in the area and to offer suggestions about what is liked about the town and what could make it better.

Overall, the main concern of the town is to find better ways to serve the citizens and to maintain a local-direct communication with them. According to Smith, "Sometimes satisfying customers can be a chore, but good communications is half the battle."

"We are located in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains, which provides for the utmost in scenic beauty," he added, saying, "The autumn colors here are absolutely astonishing. Many residents are living in our community who are retired and have moved to this area to get away from the frantic city life. The solitude of the mountains and the services that the town provides make living here an enjoyable stay." ■

