

DOWN HOME SERIES

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Again in the year 2003, 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 Grundy

This Southwest Virginia community is moving mountains for its future.



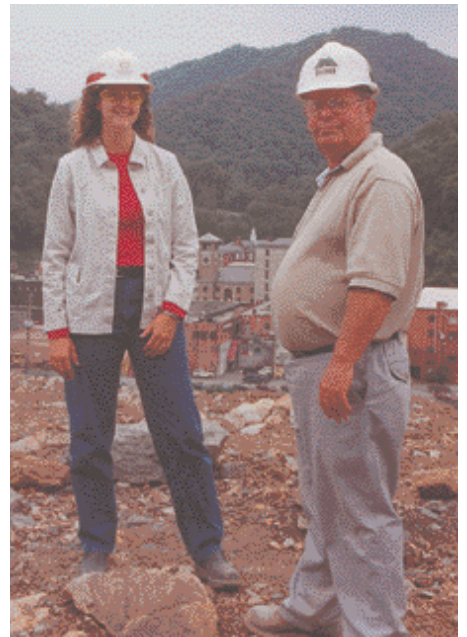
Lasting change often takes innovative thought and sometimes, it seems as if the change will require moving mountains. In Grundy, it's taken both. However, the "moving mountains" part is more than just a cliché ... it's reality as this small town of 1,275 pulls

together to pull down a mountain and, in the process, to re-invent itself.

With help from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) and a forward-thinking town government, Grundy is literally moving mountains — rock-by-rock



CATHY ST. CLAIR PHOTOS



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Grundy Project Engineer Lisa Morgan and Bizzack, Inc., Superintendent Jim Hawkins stand atop the redevelopment site highwall with present-day Grundy in the background.



This shot of Grundy's Riverside Drive shows the proximity of the town today to the Levisa River. Historically, the river has caused catastrophic flooding in the town approximately every 20 years.

and a truckload of dirt at a time — to escape the threat of flooding. The process will also allow the community to grow and prosper once more. Grundy is building a new town.

Nestled in the Appalachian Mountains in the far southwest corner of Virginia, Grundy lies in the heart of Virginia's coal-fields, just a few miles away from West Virginia and Kentucky. Among its claims to fame are Appalachian author Lee Smith, who grew up in Grundy, and nearby Breaks Interstate Park, often referred to as the "Grand Canyon of the South."



The highwall cut at the Grundy redevelopment site will serve as the backdrop for the “new town.” The Levisa River is pictured in front and a bridge accessing the 13-acre site is on the right.

Founded in 1858, Grundy was named after Sen. Felix Grundy and features rugged terrain with steep mountains and narrow valleys. It is that terrain and the town’s susceptibility to flooding, from run-off and the swift-moving creeks and streams that flow into the Levisa River, that in 1998 led the town into a cooperative agreement with the Corps of Engineers and VDOT to move Grundy to higher ground.

Situated along the Levisa River, Grundy is the Buchanan County seat and the county’s main retail center. Flooding has virtually wiped out the town’s retail center almost every 20 years. After the catastrophic flood of 1977, businesses that had been flooded repeatedly chose not to renovate or reopen in a spot that would surely be flooded again. As a result, Grundy’s trade center suffered serious deterioration. The Grundy Flood Control Project that is now underway came about during a study of how to reverse that trend and protect the town from flooding.

Now, new life has been breathed into

A view of current-day Grundy from high atop the redevelopment-site mountain. In the foreground is coal found on the site and recovered during construction. The historic courthouse is in the center of the photo (clocktower). Between the site and the town are Rt. 460 and the Levisa River.



The Appalachian School of Law opened its doors to students five years ago. Jeremy Davis (below, center), who left North Dakota to take the reins as ASL’s new dean, says the sense of community in Grundy was a big part of his family’s decision to move here.

this town as its residents and those in surrounding Buchanan County await its rebirth, which signs indicate is fast approaching.

A year ago, work began to take down the mountain along the Levisa River across from Grundy, creating a benched vertical highwall that will serve as the backdrop for the new town and a relocated Norfolk Southern Railroad track. In front of it,



overlooking the river and Buchanan County's historic courthouse (built in 1905 and expanded in subsequent years), the new town will be built. A flood ring-wall will be built along Slate Creek, which drains into the Levisa in the heart of downtown, to protect the courthouse, one of the few buildings to be left in the old section of town. Other buildings along current-day Main Street will be razed and relocated to the new town site in the 10 or so years it takes to complete the project. And on the old town site, a new four-lane road will be built to make travel through the area easier and at the same time to fulfill a VDOT promise to work toward the completion of a four-lane U.S. Route 460 to Kentucky.

The project has created a lot of excitement in town and in the county, especially for newly elected Mayor **Willard Owens**, and for Town Manager **Chuck Crabtree**, who has watched the mountain-moving effort from the vantage point of a wall of windows in his office.

"It's not often you have a town built in the late 1800s and early 1900s get the chance to build for the technology age," Owens says. "It's unheard of."

And while it may be unheard of, it's happening. Corps of Engineers contractors Bush & Burchett, of Allen, Ky., and Bizzack, Inc., of Lexington, Ky., have been on the job a little more than a year,

working to move approximately two-million cubic meters of dirt and rock to create the 13-acre redevelopment site where the new town will be relocated. When the move is finished, Grundy is expected to contain not only retail and office space, but housing to help ease a shortage expe-



Buchanan County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Mary McClanahan in her office, one of the offices to be moved to the new town center.

rienced in the community since the Appalachian School of Law (ASL) opened its doors to students five years ago.

Jeremy Davis, who left North Dakota for Grundy this month (January) to take the reins as ASL's new dean, says the sense of community he found when he visited Grundy was a big part of his family's decision to move here and to accept the ASL post.

"This is an incredibly vibrant environment," he says. Davis first came to Grundy in 1999 as part of an American Bar Association accreditation team, and never forgot his trip or the community.

"Grundy is an attractive, pretty place," Davis adds. "I really liked what I saw then. It was a small law school struggling to get started and there were some really nice people able to all pull in the same direction."

Crabtree and Owens both say it is that ability to pull in the same direction, to cooperate to get the job done, that has spurred Grundy's success. Buchanan County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director **Mary McClanahan** agrees.

"This community has always stood strong in unity and has always found the strength from within to work together to do whatever it takes to keep the community's best interests at heart," McClanahan says.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Grundy Project Engineer **Lisa Morgan** says the coordination and cooperation from day-one of the project have been good at all levels.

"Everybody comes to the table and wants to do a good job," she says. "The contractor wants to leave Grundy a project to be proud of."

The new Comfort Inn and the Appalachian School of Law came to Grundy as work to finalize the agreement

If You Go...

Don't Miss the Breaks Interstate Park

Tucked away in the mountains of far Southwest Virginia, there's one place you won't want to miss if you visit Grundy and the surrounding area. In addition to a three-mile mountain bike trail projected opening in Grundy this spring and a myriad of natural parks throughout Buchanan County, there is the nearby Breaks

Interstate Park, which holds some of the most spectacular views to be found anywhere.

The park, developed in 1954 as a joint venture of Virginia and Kentucky, is often referred to as "the Grand Canyon of the South" and features the largest canyon east of the Mississippi River. It sprawls along five miles and is some 1,600 feet deep. Overlooks throughout the park provide visitors with breathtaking views of the mountains, the Russell Fork River and rock formations, including "The Towers," a twin pyramid of rock more than a half mile long and a third of a mile wide, estimated to be as old as 250 million years.

The park is located on State Route 80, about 30 minutes from Grundy. It is eight miles north of nearby Haysi, Va., and seven miles east of Elkhorn City, Ky.

In the fall, whitewater rafting is offered on weekends on the Russell Fork River. Rafters come to the park from throughout the nation during October to enjoy up to Class VI rapids. Rafting availability depends upon releases from the nearby John W. Flanagan Reservoir.

Native wildlife, trout fishing, hiking along 12 miles of trails, seasonal horseback riding, camping and picnicking are among other options greeting park visitors.

Some 82 units are available in a park

for the town project was ongoing. Plans to build the 55-mile Coalfields Expressway from West Virginia through Buchanan County and Grundy and into neighboring Dickenson County before its terminus in Pound in Wise County, as well as plans for a new municipal airport tied in with the expressway project, have further added to a brighter outlook for Grundy's future.

As Crabtree puts it, "success breeds success."

The groundwork for that success was laid 10 years ago in 1993 when town leaders recognized the decline in Grundy's economy and decided to do something about it. At the same time, they addressed another concern, that of giving youth in the community a reason to come to town. The town government took matters into its own hands and with VDOT's cooperation, built a state-of-the-art three-cinema movie house on the little-utilized third floor of an existing parking building in the center of town, then renovated another building downtown to create a teen center to give area youth a place to call their own.

"That was really the first phase of it all," Crabtree says. "There were people out there who said it won't work, but after the second year, we were the number-one-watched theater."

The theater also gave the town something infinitely more valuable as it made plans, moving forward on the flood-control project.

Now, it had the ability to track, by zip code, who its patrons were and where they came from. It gave town leaders an idea of what they might expect for businesses locating in the "new Grundy." What those statistics proved was that the theater was attracting people from the three-state area.



Mayor Willard Owens, left, and Town Manager Chuck Crabtree on the roof of the town office with what's left of the mountain that has been moved in the background.

As a result, agreements were signed and work began in July 2001 to literally move the mountain to make a new Grundy possible. By late spring 2003, the site is expected to be ready, and then the process of putting up buildings on the site will begin. In the meantime, Crabtree says, fiber-optics and water-and-sewage infrastructure will be constructed in the new area.

Grundy expects to regain a large por-

tion of the estimated \$50 million in trade leakage now going out of the town as retail shoppers go elsewhere, according to Crabtree.

Already, some success in that arena is evident as an empty shell building originally constructed to house industry, is renovated and turned into a new retail center for businesses being impacted by the project before the new town-center space is ready.

Other plans include a higher-education precinct, combining the efforts of already successful Southwest Virginia Community College's branch campus and new programs offered by Virginia Intermont College that make a four-year degree possible in Buchanan County.

"There's not one thing that makes Grundy a success, it's a combination of all the things we're working on," Crabtree says.

The key to its future, Crabtree adds, is successful development of the new town center. "The Grundy project shows that a small, rural community with help, vision and working together can move mountains."

Owens agrees, noting that Grundy's opportunity to design and shape its future is one-of-a-kind.

"We've got a golden opportunity now," Owens says. "People talk about once-in-a-lifetime chances — this is the chance of 100 lifetimes." ■

motel on site, including a two-room suite built on the rim of the canyon. Cottages are also available for rent. A conference center can accommodate up to 250 banquet-style, with four meeting or banquet rooms available totaling 5,595 square feet.

The park also has a restaurant, the Rhododendron Lodge, featuring a glass wall overlooking the mountains, and outside balcony views, as well. The restaurant is open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. A gift shop boasts quality gifts and regional crafts.

A swimming pool, open during the summer months, and a seasonal boat dock offering pedal-boat rides on Laurel

Lake provide additional recreation outlets. Bass and bluegill fishing is also found at the lake. Fishing licenses may be purchased at the park's visitor center.

Picnic shelters are located throughout the park, and a campground is open from April 1 through Oct. 31 annually. Some 122 tent sites are available with full hookups, electricity (with 40-amp service for RVs), water and sewer. An attendant is on duty 24 hours a day and sites are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Hiking trails are interspersed throughout the park and range from easy walking to moderate to difficult. Hiking trail maps are available at the visitor center,

lodge registration office, campground and front gate. Mountain bike rentals are also available with two miles of trails in the park for bike enthusiasts.

An amphitheater also serves as the site for nature programs, bluegrass music, plays and gospel music, especially during the summer months.

For more information about the park, its offerings and accommodation rates and availability, interested persons may write: The Breaks Interstate Park, P.O. Box 100, Breaks, Va. 24607 or call (276) 865-4413 or (276) 865-4414. A toll-free reservations line is available at (800) 982-5122. ■