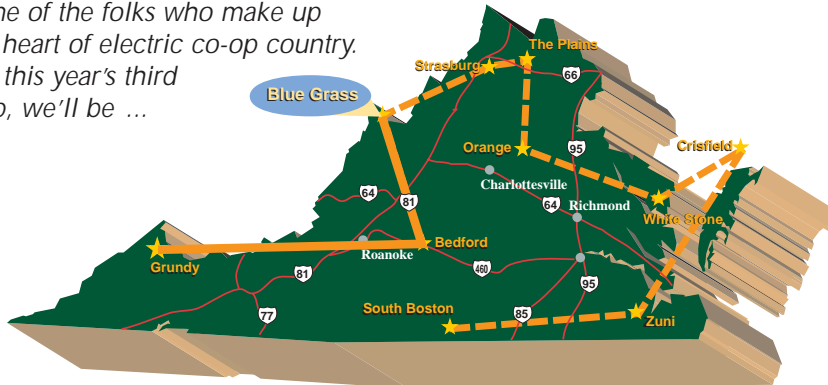


DOWN HOME SERIES

by Suzanne Simmons,
Contributing Writer

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 third stop, we'll be ...



Down Home in **Blue Grass**

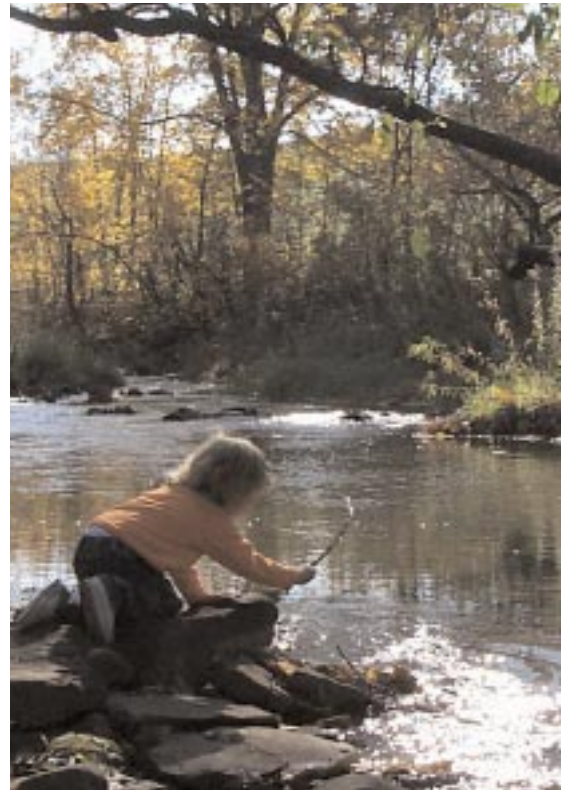
Pristine and remote, this Highland community is a little piece of heaven.



There's no easy way to get to the town of Blue Grass. It sits at an altitude close to 3,000 feet in a fertile Virginia valley surrounded by mountain ridges. Narrow roads wind lazily through the mountains and down the valley. A tumbling stream — the South Branch of the Potomac River — parallels one route and deepens into trout-rich pools a mere seven miles from its source.



Fall foliage frames the Blue Grass United Methodist Church at the edge of town. The South Branch of the Potomac River is the perfect place to play on a warm afternoon.





If you're looking for shopping malls or neon lights, Blue Grass isn't your town.

Entering the Blue Grass Valley from the north, one passes through a gap overshadowed by an imposing sandstone outcrop — the Devil's Backbone. And it is in the shadow of the Backbone, where routes 640 and 642 intersect, and the South Branch deepens between steep hills, that the village of Blue Grass was founded in the early 1800s.

Named after the valley's lush bluegrass pastures, the town was originally called Crabbottom, a slight adjustment from an even earlier valley name — Crabapple Bottom.

A Place to Relax

If you're looking for shopping malls or neon lights, Blue Grass isn't your town (although there is one small red-and-blue neon "Open" sign in the general store window). However, if you're seeking a friendly place where the air is clear and the fish are jumping, Blue Grass is just the ticket.

In Blue Grass you can relax while fly-fishing the stocked waters of the South Branch, or take a slow drive through the valley — the perfect cure for what ails you.

The valley is renowned for its wildlife and wildflowers and is a mecca for birders, who come to view eagles over Snowy Mountain and shrikes in the crab apple thickets. Hiking and bike trails are found in nearby national forests and Lake Moomaw in neighboring



One can look down on Blue Grass from the cemetery behind town.



George Mullenax's store was one of the busiest places in the Blue Grass Valley on a Friday night in the 1950s. Today, it stands empty.

Bath County provides swimming and boating recreation.

It's a Simple Town

Blue Grass was built to suit the industries in the surrounding valley — farming and logging. It is one street wide and its main street is lined with no more than 25

Three of the long-time Blue Grass residents sit a spell on the porch of Country Convenience. Pictured are: Dale Puffenbarger, whose father ran the store in the 1940s; Randolph "Bub" Wagner; and Charles "Tang" Rexrode.





David Kiser has moved back to his family farm, Greenstream, where he spends his days and nights with his wife Betty tending their livestock.

undertakers, a tinning shop, two blacksmith shops, a garage and taxi service, and a theater.

Folks would gather in town every evening to catch up on the news. Groups of children played kick-the-can in the street or swam in the swimming hole behind the mill. The soda shop served up ice cream floats and the restaurant had oyster suppers. There was a large brass band that played at picnics and on Saturdays one could watch a movie in the theater built over the garage.

Today, folks watch television at home or travel over the mountains to see the latest movie or shop at the mall, but Blue Grass still remains at the center of valley life.

Today there's one general store that sells just about anything you might need. Across the street, farm and logging machinery are repaired at **Carl Hull's** machine and welding shop, and just up the road, **Wilt Simmons** runs a body shop.

A thriving and friendly country bank, The Blue Grass Valley Bank, has been on Main Street since its doors opened in 1915. It moved once — to a more modern building and now a small lending library is in its original building.

The Blue Grass Post Office sits at the edge of town, in a brand new building, right across the street from the county's largest private employer, Highland Data Services.

The data-entry firm is in the former Blue



The Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, in the nearby hamlet of New Hampden, is one of two active churches in the area.

Grass school that closed its doors to students during the county's school consolidation in 1971. The Blue Grass Ruritan Club bought the school building in the 1980s and it is the place where residents gather for reunions, club meetings, wedding and baby showers, and yard sales.

There are two active churches still near Blue Grass. The Good Shepherd Episcopal Church is a mile down the road in the hamlet of New Hampden and The Blue Grass United Methodist Church, constructed of stone quarried from the Devil's Backbone in 1923, sits between New Hampden and Blue Grass.

The Town's Center

Linda and **Junior Kimble** manage the only store in Blue Grass — Country Convenience. You can't miss it; it's the largest building in town — a three-story white building with a porch running its length that you can almost touch if you put your hand out the window as you drive by.

In good weather the 10-foot-long wooden bench on the porch is never empty. Folks sit there to eat their breakfast, lunch or supper;

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Junior and Linda Kimble greet visitors with a smile at Country Convenience.

If You Go...

Advertised in the 1920s as the "Gem of the Alleghenies and the Little Switzerland of America," Highland County looks much the same today as it did then. With less than 3,000 residents, the county is known for its spectacular mountain terrain, pristine mountain streams and vistas. Even today, in the 21st century, if you visit the town of Blue Grass, be prepared to enter a world removed from the hectic hustle and bustle of most eastern communities.

Highland County was formed in 1847, combining land from the adjoining counties of Bath (VA) and Pendleton (now WV). Once the hunting grounds of the Shawnee, Highland's fertile valleys were first settled by Scotch-Irish and German immigrants in the mid-1700s.

Geographically, Highland is made up of five major valleys bordered by ridges with 10 streams of note flowing out of Highland to form the headwaters of the James and Potomac rivers.

"No mosquitoes, tramps or fevers — Home of the buckwheat cake and maple syrup — fat cattle and blue grass," touted an early 1900s flyer advertising this county with the highest mean altitude east of the Mississippi. And visitors still come to Highland County to enjoy outdoor recreational activities, to take a moment to slow down and smell the roses or to eat buckwheat cakes and maple syrup.

In the winter, folks enjoy the snow and solitude. In the summer, the lack of humidity is perfect for hiking, and in the fall, the hardwood forests crowning the valleys put on a spectacular foliage show — bright reds, oranges and yellows coat every ridge.



Ginseng Mountain Store is an old country store at the Fork of the Waters, where you can shop or lodge.

But it is in spring, when the trees are bare and the valleys and hillsides have yet to green up, that Highland gets the most visitors. For the past 30 years springtime in Highland means the **Maple Festival** and visitors by the thousands drive over the mountains during the second and third weekends in March to sample the county's sweet maple fare.

During the Maple Festival, the maple sugar camps are open and you can visit them in each corner of the county. A list of festival events and directions to the camps can be found on the Highland County Chamber of Commerce Web site at <http://www.highlandcounty.org>.

If you come to Highland County for maple syrup during the off-season, you can still visit some of the camps — **The Sugar Tree Country Store and Sugar House** on U.S. 250 in McDowell and **Southernmost Maple Products** in Bolar will be open, as will the **Maple Museum** on U.S. 220 one mile south of Monterey. The museum is a replica of an old-time "sugar house" and exhibits the methods of making maple syrup.

There are no shopping malls or movie theaters in Highland County, but there are many things to pique a family's interest. If you like to shop you won't be disappointed.

In Highland there's a store for everyone's interest. Country grocery stores are found in Blue Grass, Monterey and McDowell. In downtown Blue Grass, there's **Country Convenience**, and just north of town on U.S. 220 is **Rexrode's Country Store**. Both stores are chock full of just about anything you may need, and they also feature fresh sandwiches and desserts.

On U.S. 220 just south of where it intersects with Route 642 is **Ginseng Mountain Store**. This original country store is full of country crafts and hard-to-find gift items. For information on the many other stores in the county, visit the chamber Web site at <http://www.highlandcounty.org>.

And if you are looking for a place to spend the night close to Blue Grass, **Ginseng Mountain Lodging** has spacious accommodations upstairs over the store. It's a two-bedroom apartment with a fully equipped kitchen and dining/living room. A fly-

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but mostly folks sit there to catch up on what's happening up and down the valley. If you want to find out what makes Blue Grass tick, spend a little time sitting on the porch.

When Junior was 15 and lived in the house next door to the store, there were four stores in town. Now, with just one store, Junior and Linda are busy. They open the store early — breakfast sandwiches are ready by 6 a.m. Six days a week they stay open until 9 p.m. On Sundays they're open from noon to five.

Blue Grass Farming

At 84, **Eugene "Gene" Rexrode** still farms full-time, raising cows and calves and a few sheep. Gene began farming a few miles south of town. Then, when his youngest son



One of Highland's oldest farmers, 84-year-old Eugene "Gene" Rexrode hails from Blue Grass Valley pioneer-settler stock. His wife Ava is a relative newcomer, moving to the area 50 years ago from Europe.

was in high school, Gene and his wife **Ava** bought his grandfather's farm on the edge of Blue Grass.

Along their driveway, behind the old high school, a few geese congregate and a blue heron wings lazily skyward, disturbed from its foray in a trout run. The run is fed by the large spring pouring out of the cave-peppered hillside behind the Rexrode home, right next to the shop where Gene's grandfather Minor Simmons built caskets (he was one of two undertakers in Blue Grass in the early 1900s). Another building not far from the workshop, now the sheep shed, once housed Minor's hearse.

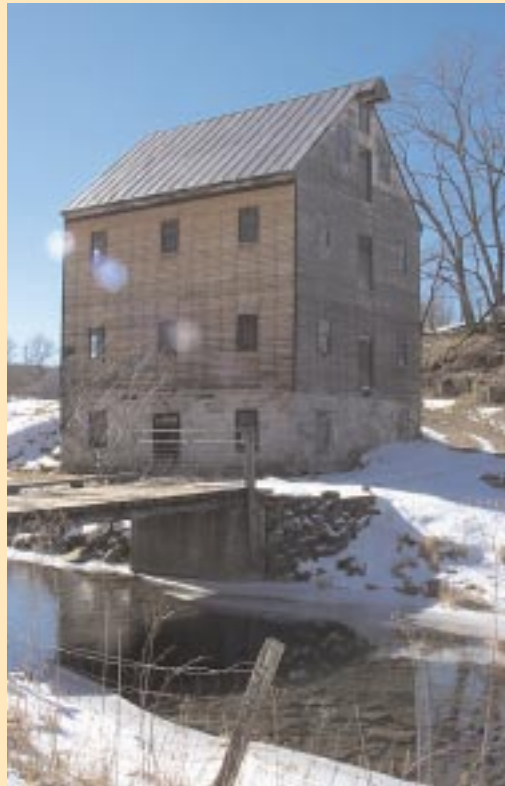
Ava met Gene far from Blue Grass during his stint in the service, returning to the valley with him 50

fishing package on the South Branch is also available. Call (540) 474-5137 or (540) 474-3663 or e-mail ginseng@cfw.com.

On your way to Monterey to shop, be sure to stop at one of the county's main attractions, the **Virginia Trout Company** (about one mile south of the intersection of U.S. 220 and Route 642 on U.S. 220). Here you can see and feed the trout being raised in pools fed by one of the largest springs in Highland County. You can also fish for your dinner or buy fresh frozen or boned trout.

Once in Monterey, if you're looking for a place to sit and eat, there's **The Highland Inn** on U.S. 250 (Main Street), where you can dine in the Inn's dining room or in the more casual surroundings of the **Black Sheep Tavern**. **High's Restaurant** on Main Street is the town's oldest restaurant and serves home-cooked meals, homemade pies and fresh bread. **The Maple Restaurant** on Spruce Street specializes in rainbow trout, country ham and homemade baked goods, and **Royal Pizza and Subs** at the corner of U.S. 220 and U.S. 250 serves pizza and deli-style sandwiches, soups and salads.

If you want to spend the night in Monterey, there's the **Montvallee Motel** (www.montvalleemotel.com), a 1950s style family motor inn, and **The Highland Inn** (www.highland-inn.com), an 18-room grand Victorian hotel built in 1904 and lovingly restored. There are also several wonderful bed-and-breakfast establishments — **Bobbie's Bed and Breakfast** (bhefner@intelos.net), one-half mile west of Monterey, is part of a working sheep and cattle farm. **Cherry Hill Bed and Breakfast** (secrets@cfw.com) overlooks the town of Monterey one block off of Main Street. **Fern Cottage** (www.ferncottage.com), located on Cloud Hill Farm, overlooks the Jackson River Valley three miles south of



The Rexrode mill in New Hampden ground flour for the Blue Grass community.

Monterey on U.S. 220, and **The Mountain Laurel Inn** (mtlnbnb@cfw.com) is a restored, turn-of-the-century Victorian B&B on Main Street. And this is just a sampling of available lodging. There are more fine establishments in Highland and surrounding counties.

When you're staying in Monterey be sure to pick up the *Monterey Walking Tour*, *The Scenic Driving Tour*,

and *Virginia's Western Highlands Trail Guide* at the **Highland County Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center**. Or call (540) 468-2550 to get your copies.

An event not to be missed in Highland this spring is **McDowell Heritage Days** on May 3 and 4, 2003. Every other year, on the first weekend in May, the village of McDowell transforms itself and reappears as it was in May of 1862 when Confederate troops under Gen. Stonewall Jackson defeated Union soldiers in a bloody conflict. This was the first victory in Jackson's famous Valley Campaign. For more information about the weekend that will include living history re-enactments, craft demonstrations, talks, lectures and readings, visit the county's historical society Web page at <http://www.highlandhistoricalsociety.org/HeritageDays.htm>.

If you are the adventurous type, **Highland Adventures in Monterey** at (540) 468-2722 offers a variety of mountain bike excursions and caving tours for all ages. And if you want to camp or hike in Highland, there is the primitive **Laurel Fork/Locust Springs Campground** on Route 642 west of Blue Grass. This campground has a shelter for up to six, a picnic area and numerous nearby hiking trails in a mountain setting. And for a less primitive camping experience there are **Douthat State Park**, **Lake Moomaw**, **Blowing Springs**, and the **Back Creek Pumped Storage Station** campgrounds in neighboring Bath County.

And last but not least, after a day spent exploring the mountains, a treat awaits body and soul within an hour's drive of Monterey, in Bath County — the **Jefferson Pools** in Warm Springs. These segregated men's and women's natural rock pools with temperatures of 98.6 degrees are in their original 18th- and 19th-century structures and the crystal-clear water bubbles like fine champagne. ■

years ago. At first she was homesick for the city in Holland where her father ran a store.

"At father's store I saw more people in a day than I saw in a year here," she says, adding quickly, "Now I like that part of living here. And in Blue Grass everything is so green and wonderful and you don't have to go any farther than your porch to see something special. One time we even saw a bear run through the yard."

The Blue Grass Book Bank

Betty Mitchell works at her computer, trying to concentrate while two three-day-old orphan lambs nuzzle her knees.

"The joys of lambing are definitely one of the things I like about



Betty Mitchell and Brian Richardson are the force behind the Blue Grass lending library — The Blue Grass Book Bank.

Blue Grass," says Betty, who moved to Blue Grass with her husband **Brian Richardson** about eight years ago.

Lambs aren't the only things that Betty has taken under her wing in Blue Grass. When the post office moved from a circa 1915 bank building to a modern office on the edge of town, Brian and Betty purchased the old building and turned it into a lending library — the Blue Grass Book Bank.

The book bank is a place where kids (or adults) can go to read, use computers, access the Internet, and receive help with their homework. It is supported almost entirely through donations, and Brian and Betty have come up with a rather unique way of raising some of those funds.

Each year they cordially invite

My Blue (Grass) Heaven

by Richard G. Johnstone, Editor

Scene One: Spring. Middle-aged couple with young children, tired of hectic pace and claustrophobic clutter of suburban sprawl, seeks a rural weekend refuge with friendly neighbors, beautiful vistas, elbowroom.

Scene Two: Summer. Couple finds strong candidate for refuge in Highland, least-populous county in the state. Subscribes to local paper, makes regular trips to area, stays at local B&B, gets to know and be known by locals, including some real, honest-to-goodness "characters."

Scene Three: Two weeks before Christmas. Sitting at home in suburbs, husband leafs through weekly paper, *The Highland/Bath Recorder*, having copiously scanned its real estate ads for months. Suddenly, eyes widen as he sees first-time ad for "small house on 25 acres with spectacular views the Blue Grass Valley is famous for." Turning to wife, husband asks, "Honey, did we have any plans for this weekend ...?"

Scene Four: Rounding a bend in Route 644 north of village of Blue Grass, following realtor's pickup truck, couple and kids look left as Blue Grass Valley opens up for miles before them. Wow. Family's jeep turns right into drive that climbs gently for over 300 yards to modest house with siding, whose color matches the stubble of the wintry hayfield that surrounds the dwelling. As family members climb out and look north to view of Snowy Mountain, excitement grows. Soundly constructed house. Stunning views. Reasonable price. What's the catch?



Were this a movie script, the audience would be ready for the storytelling twists and turns that constitute the payoff for patiently watching the setup. The couple would buy the house and, depending on the film genre, would find out that it was a) haunted (horror movie); b) built over a polluted, abandoned mineshaft (socially relevant drama); or c) fraught with structural problems and surrounded by wacky neighbors and even wackier farm and wild animals (comedy).

Thank goodness, in our real-life case, none of these scenarios applied.



RICHARD JOHNSTONE PHOTO

We bought the house in early 2000 from an elderly Northern Virginia couple who had designed and built it 10 years earlier as a naturally cool haven from the suffocating heat of asphalt and concrete and steel that mark summertime in the DC area.

Our story may lack the bombast and conflict necessary to sell movie tickets, but steady visits to our beloved, well-built little mountain home have been our regular ticket to a renewal of spirit and mind. No computer. No TV reception. Occasional reception of the area's only radio station, delightfully quirky, all-volunteer Allegheny Mountain Radio, which shatters the tired formulaic approach of today's mega-monster stations by playing everything from Beethoven to the Beatles, Stan Getz to Ralph Stanley. But mostly, time is spent just sitting in a rocker on the sun porch and gazing at the views of green grazing land and red barns and the gentle, rippling folds of the Allegheny Mountains. Oftentimes, we feel more like we're viewing an oil painting from 1803 than a real-life landscape in 2003.

Once in a while, a newcomer moves into our field of sight in this living still life; if we're lucky, it's the circular, swooping flight of a golden eagle, a magnificent bird whose presence in Virginia is almost solely limited to this remote corner of the Commonwealth. And then there are adventures, such as sledding downhill for 200 yards over the packed snow of a luge-like course that is your drive. Or

Cool Runnings, country-style

Ethan Johnstone rockets downhill.

A Room With a View

The author's sunroom offers front-row-seat views of Snowy Mountain.

going out on a 20-degree night and watching stars sparkle like diamonds on velvet, almost close enough to touch through the cold, exhilarating darkness of space and time. Or watching a violent summer storm race up the valley, as the lagging boom of thunder closes in on the piercing crackle of lightning.

Everyone's got a favorite scene, a place where worries recede and memories grow. It may be a NASCAR track, a beach, a cityscape, or a river. My favorite scene features sheep and cattle and goats and horses as they graze languidly on the bluegrass that grows naturally in the fertile limestone of this long valley. Framing the Blue Grass Valley are the gentle contours of these ancient, rounded mountains. And topping it off is the dome formed by a brilliantly blue sky.

Heaven? It's got my vote as a better-than-middling place to spend an eternity, or two. ■



BLAIR JOHNSTONE PHOTO

motorcyclists to come to Blue Grass and camp out at their farm. Camp Night in Blue Grass has become a popular annual fundraiser featuring live music, dinner and breakfast on their working sheep farm. Motorcyclists show up in everything from classic motorcycles to sidecars and scooters to cruise Highland's roads by day and gather around a bonfire at night.

A Moment of Fame for Blue Grass

In late January, black-faced ewes are nursing lambs in the pasture at **David and Betty Kiser's** farm south of town.

Blue Grass natives who moved to the Shenandoah Valley to raise their family, the Kisers recently moved back to David's home place; a farm called "Greenstream" that sits on the banks of the South Branch. The farm is named for a fictional mountain town featured in the 1921 silent film *Tol'able David*.

Tol'able David may well turn out to be Blue Grass' greatest claim to fame. Its footage was filmed in or around the town, and just about the whole town turned out to play extras in the film. Now, long after most of the town's extras have passed on, there is renewed international interest in the film. It has been remastered and silent film aficionados regard it as the finest product of the great silent film director Henry King.

The film can be easily found at video stores or on the Internet, or if you are in Highland County in March during the Maple Festival you can watch it at the library in Monterey. But if you'd rather see the real Greenstream, just drive by the Kisers' farm on the edge of Blue Grass, where the meadows are full of lambs kicking up their heels and the sturdy white farmhouse is once again called home. ■