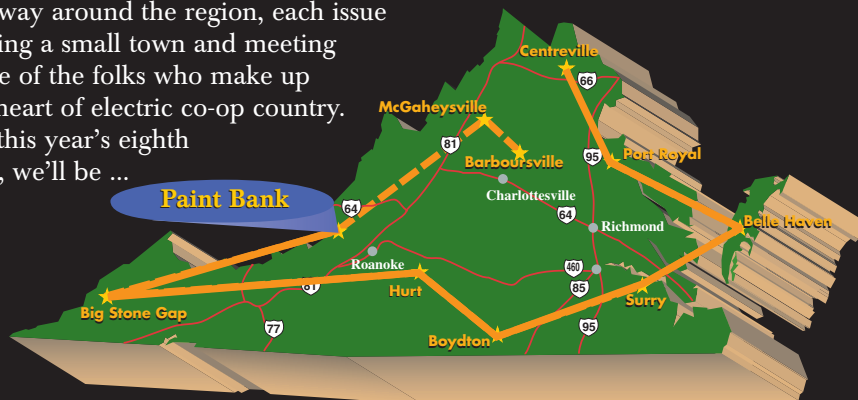


DOWN HOME SERIES

Mikell Ellison, general manager of Paint Bank's restoration project, hangs the popular T-shirt denoting "END OF THE WORLD 9 miles, PAINT BANK 12 miles."

Again in the year 2005, 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 eighth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN PAINT BANK

by Gwen Johnson, Contributing Writer

A diamond in the rough, Paint Bank is a different world, a step back in time that most can only imagine or read about in novels. Hidden away in the Allegheny Mountains between Potts Mountain and Peters Mountain in Craig County, the tiny town boasts more buffalo than it does people. Folks there say it is

located about three miles beyond the ends of earth, where the stars shine brighter than anywhere else in the world.

Yet right in the middle of acres and acres of National Forest land, this community has far more to offer than meets the eye. People are coming from all four corners of the U.S. to hunt wild turkey, white-tailed deer and



AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 148

LAND AREA: 35.15 square miles

CHARTERED: 1851

ELEVATION: 1,945 feet

FUN FACT: On a peak day, birders at Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory, atop nearby Peters Mountain, can view hundreds of migrating hawks.

even bear. Trout fishing is another sport that draws people to the area. Potts Creek, which runs through the town, is stocked each year with over a quarter-million rainbow trout from the local fish hatchery.



The Paint Bank General Store located on Rt. 311 is the hub of activity for the town and has been for nearly 100 years. Born and raised in Paint Bank, Ray Linton, now 77, says things have changed since he was a boy.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF GWEN JOHNSON



Paint Bank native Helen Baker, 92, remembers spending the night at the lodge (above) in her younger days when it was the train depot for the town. (Left) Circa 1863, Tingle's Mill is on the restoration list. It is unusual in that the water feeds from the top of the wheel instead of the bottom as with most grist mills.

Settled around 1700, history has it that the Cherokee Indians who lived here used red clay from its banks to make their pottery and war paint. Later, the clay was used by settlers to make paint as well as bricks, and thus the town's name, Paint Bank. During the Civil War, the off-the-beaten-path community became known as the "Union hole,"

a place for deserters and resisters. It was close to this area that Union General David Hunter fought his most difficult battle, a confrontation involving two of Craig's highest mountains, on his trek from Lynchburg, Va., to Sweet Springs, W.Va.

Around the turn of the century, Paint Bank became a bustling railroad town whose

economy was closely tied to iron ore and manganese mined by the Virginia Iron, Coal & Coke Company. Daily rail service not only brought in freight, but passengers as well who came to enjoy the seven mineral-springs resorts located in the county.

There was also a busy grain mill built in 1863, known as Tingle's Mill, which is still

Paint Bank, located in the far northwest corner of Craig County close to the West Virginia line, is drawing people from across the country to its peaceful locality surrounded by mountains that serve as a barrier against the world's stresses and strife. The **General Store** is still the hub of activities for the small town, just as it was nearly 100 years ago. Its new **Swinging Bridge Restaurant and Mercantile** features home-grown bison, Highlander beef and

down-home "smack-your-mama" cooking using local recipes. The **Depot Lodge** has a peripheral guest room in the old **Red Caboose** located behind it. A charming bed and breakfast, both serve as a respite from the world's noise, and the only bright lights around are the stars.

Tingler's Mill, circa 1863, though not operational at present, is on the restoration list. It is located behind the General Store. To the left of it up on the hill is **Humphrey's Chapel**, built in 1914 with timber from the sur-



rounding forests. A rope chain is used to ring the cast-iron bell every Sunday for service. Completing the triangle, across the road from the chapel is the **Post Office**.

A short walk from the Depot Lodge is the 13-room **Lemon Hotel** that once served as lodging for railway passengers.

Paint Bank Fish Hatchery, one of three state-operated cold-water hatcheries, is located on the edge of town. Run by the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries, it produces over a million and a half trout

standing today, although not operational. The mill, made of hand-stacked locust logs, is unusual in that the water is overfed instead of underfed, as is the case with most mills.

In the early 1930s, when mining operations shut down, the railroad soon followed suit. Like small towns all across the country, Paint Bank's prosperity eventually succumbed to a weak economy, and the people returned to timber and agriculture once again as a means of support.

Now, thanks to a couple of philanthropists with a dream, there is hope the town's economy will once again flourish, but this time its prosperity will be the byproduct of tourism instead of mining. Four historic town structures have either been restored or will be in the near future, according to **Mikell Ellison**, who is the general manager of the restoration project.

The old depot is now the Depot Lodge, a charming bed and breakfast. Porches and decks wrap all the way around the lodge, which is built on Potts Creek facing the mountains. Here, guests can while away the hours in rockers enjoying the view. Or if they prefer, they can take a walking tour or sit awhile in the gazebo down by the creek.

If you loved the days of the old trains and all the glory that went along with them, there is an authentic N&W red caboose that has been converted into a guest room, which stands behind the lodge. Even if you remember traveling by train and sleeping in one of the old Pullman cars, chances are you have never slept in a caboose, at least not one as fine as this.

Paint Bank General Store was the hub of the town's activity nearly 100 years ago and still is today. With its old, wooden floors and

tin ceiling still intact, the store is a gathering place for the townsfolk and is the only grocery and mercantile for miles around.

"It's different from when I grew up," says old-timer **Ray Linton**, whose father used to run the Potts Valley Gulf Station back in the 1940s. Linton frequents the General Store on almost a daily basis. After picking up his mail from the old post office across the road, he drops by and sits in a rocker to read his paper and catch up on the town news.

In September 2005, the Swinging Bridge Restaurant and Mercantile will open, not only adding dining pleasure to the town's hub, but adding more space for food items and new merchandise such as brand-name fishing and hunting gear, nostalgia gifts, kitchen items, handmade crafts, quilts and much more, without changing the authentic atmosphere of the old General Store.



(brown, brook and rainbow) each year, many of which are used to stock local streams.

Maple Grove Christian Church is directly across from the hatchery. It is noted for its colorful stained-glass windows with geometric designs, almost unheard of in rural churches.

If you are visiting Paint Bank you may want to take a side trip down Rt. 311 about 16 miles to New Castle, the county seat. There you can visit the **Old Hotel**, built around 1840. It now houses a genealogy library and museum. The **County Court House** directly across from it was

built in 1852 and was ordered burned during the Civil War by the Union General David Hunter when he and his troops came through New Castle. Although this order was never carried out, railings in the Courthouse still bear marks where Union soldiers tried to chop them up for firewood. **The Lee Home**, where Union General Hunter spent the night, is also located in downtown New Castle off Rt. 311 on Rt. 42 to the left as you start up the hill. It is still in use today as a private residence. ■

From left: 1) Built in 1912, the old bell in the tower of Humphries Chapel is still used to summons townsfolk to church on Sunday mornings. 2 & 3) Visitors to Paint Bank will find cozy quarters at **The Depot Lodge**, a charming bed and breakfast housed in the restored train depot. The Depot has a peripheral guest room in the old Red Caboose out back.



With a décor accented by wood, timber and glass, an authentic hanging bridge taken out by a flood serves as its focal point. A huge rock fireplace provides a backdrop for the bridge, which is suspended from second-floor moorings. Intricately hand-carved newel posts adorn the unusual staircase that will delight and thrill not only hunters and fishermen, but all who visit the restaurant.

The menu will feature down-home dishes. “These dishes are so good that you want to smack your mama because she doesn’t cook like that anymore,” explained Ellison with a laugh. “We are making them from recipes we’ve collected from the locals.”

But what will make the restaurant really unique is the addition of Highlander beef and bison meat, home grown, of course. Paint Bank’s Hollow Hill Farm is home to about 200 bison and Highlander beef cattle.

The meat, which is shipped all over the country, will also be used in the restaurant. Homemade pies, cakes, breads, and desserts will top off the menu.

For those who like to dine outside, glass doors open onto a big back porch overlooking Potts Mountain. There, dining as well as some of those local recipes have already been put to the test. A July 4th celebration found the porch filled with long tables of that “smack-your-mama” food at one end and the Craig County Boys bluegrass band at the other end – a winning combination to say the least.

Although there are only six rooms in the Depot Lodge and a guest room in the red caboose, a limited number of private luxury log cabins are being built in the woods out of sight. “We don’t want the area to become commercialized,” Ellison com-

mented. “We want to keep it as colloquial and simple as we can.”

Available within an hour or so from the community are white-water rafting, skiing and hiking. There are also several towns close by for those who enjoy antique shopping and sightseeing.

While visiting Paint Bank, you might want to stop in New Castle and visit the Old Hotel, which houses a genealogy library and museum, and the old Court House built before the Civil War. Its bell, which was made at the same foundry as the Liberty Bell, is still rung today on special occasions.

Although trains no longer bring people to Paint Bank, modern highways make it easily accessible from almost any direction, including from Roanoke off I-81 and from White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., off I-64. ■