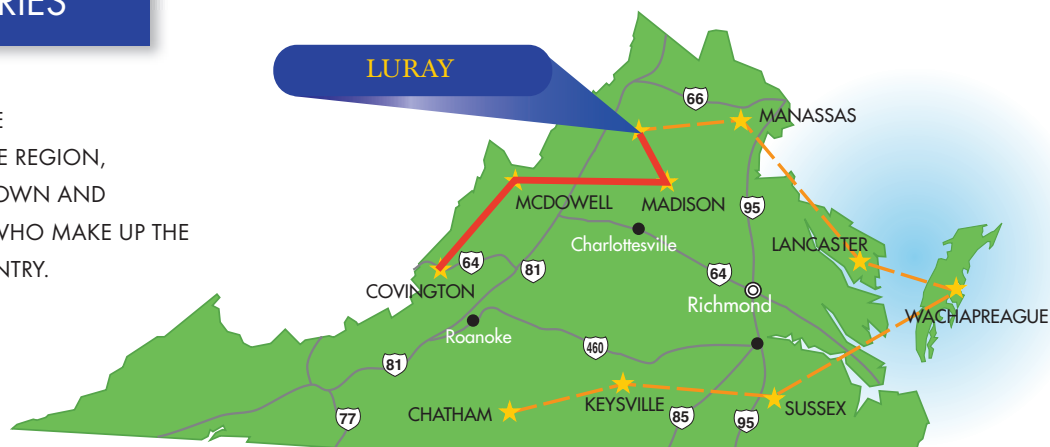


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2008, 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 FOURTH STOP, WE'LL BE ...



DOWN HOME IN

LURAY

BY ROBIN COUCH CARDILLO, CONTRIBUTING WRITER • PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROBIN COUCH CARDILLO, UNLESS OTHERWISE CREDITED

WITH A GROWING ROSTER OF NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED SITES AND EVENTS, THE SMALL TOWN OF LURAY IS GETTING BIG-TIME ATTENTION.

When outdoor enthusiasts **Howard** and **Andy Thompson** hiked to a peak in the Massanutten Mountains one weekend in 1997, they looked down at the valley below. The young Northern Virginia couple stood speechless. The land was lush, sparsely populated, peaceful. It was Luray. And at that moment, the Thompsons decided this town in the central Shenandoah Valley was the place they eventually would live. By 1998, they had purchased a home for their weekend use on the outskirts of Luray, and in 2003 they moved forever from the Washington, D.C., suburbs.

Today, the Thompsons own and operate Evergreen Outfitters, a busy shop in downtown Luray that specializes in high-end hiking and camping gear.

"The pace of life here and in the entire Shenandoah Valley is so much more in step with Andy's and my overall 'laid-back' style," says Thompson. "But at the same time, Luray has made fantastic progress since we first visited more than a decade ago. It's changing, adding wonderful amenities."

Evergreen Outfitters joins a growing list of new businesses in town that cater to visitors and locals who pursue an active but balanced lifestyle. It's a surprisingly comfortable pairing of the old and new, the fast and slow, the rural charm and cosmopolitan buzz.

ON THE FRONT BURNER

Luray **Mayor Ralph Dean** knows the feeling. He's been Luray's top official for 27 years and has guided the town through many changes.

For instance, the town currently is busy with five major development initiatives, including an \$850,000 overhaul of several sidewalks and streets to spiff up the downtown buildingscape; a \$7-million upgrade of the sewer system; and safety improvements to the water filtration plant that carry a \$4.5-million price tag.



Completed in 1833, the Page County Courthouse is on Virginia's Historic Landmarks register. • INSET: Luray's downtown historic district offers all the amenities a visitor could want. In the background stands the Luray Singing Tower, a 47-bell carillon that was a gift to the town from a local businessman. Only 180 carillons remain in North America; very few are in free-standing towers surrounded by public park land, as is Luray's. Recital times vary from April through August and on holidays.

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 4,896

LAND AREA: 4.5 square miles

FOUNDED: 1812

ELEVATION: 800 feet on average

FACTOID: Luray's Mauck Meeting House is both a Virginia Historic Landmark and a National Historic Landmark. Built in the 1770s, the building originally was the Union Church of Hamburg, constructed of large pine logs and chestnut shingles. Today, area Mennonites gather at the Meeting House every first Sunday in August for their a cappella Harmonia Sacra. The Page County Heritage Association, which helped restore the building, calls the house "acoustically perfect."



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAGE NEWS & COURIER



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MIMSLYN INN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Luray's antiques business is booming. One local boutique shares quarters with a toy train shop. • The recently renovated Mimslyn Inn is a showstopper. The elegant mansion with two restaurants and a spa already is drawing national accolades. • The Luray Hawksbill Greenway attracts all ages. The four-mile walking and bike path is a showplace for native flora and fauna. • For 27 years, Mayor Ralph Dean has led Luray through major changes. He says, "It's only getting better."



Luray also is in the early stages of renovating the town's historic train depot, thanks to a transportation enhancement grant. When complete, the quaint depot built in 1908 will house the county's Chamber of Commerce, the Visitors' Center, and a museum of local artifacts.

But perhaps the most visible ongoing project is the fourth phase of construction of the Luray Hawksbill Greenway, a four-

mile walking and bike path that attracts all ages. It's an obvious source of pride for the community. The beautiful trail meanders past butterfly gardens, colorful murals (some painted by local youth), and native flora and fauna. It even encircles a cattle pasture, whose bovine residents randomly glance up to watch passersby.

As the Greenway crosses Main Street into the center of town, it follows the flow

of the Hawksbill Creek, a narrow waterway that's noteworthy in its own right. On the night of August 9, 1956, the famous train photographer O. Winston Link set up his equipment along Route 340 in southern Luray to wait for the perfect shot of a Norfolk & Western locomotive crossing the Hawksbill while locals splashed in the water below. He was documenting the final days of steam operations on the

IF YOU GO...

Regardless of the time of year visitors decide to stop in Luray, they'll find plenty to do, from sightseeing among the historic jewels to dining at upscale eateries to antiquing on the main drag. The warmer months offer more opportunities for hiking in the Shenandoah National Park or canoeing, tubing, and fishing in the Shenandoah River. Children also are thrilled with swimming and camping at Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park and visiting the residents at the Luray Zoo and Reptile Jungle, where the zookeepers' noble mission as a "rescue zoo" is to care for unwanted exotic animals; today, more than 250 incredible creatures call this zoo home.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Festival of Spring May 10, 2008

Local foods, arts and crafts, the inaugural "Dog Disc" contest, duck races.
Sponsored by the Luray Downtown Initiative
<http://www.luraydowntown.com/festivals.html>

Farmers Market

Saturdays from May through October
Everything from food to plants to artwork and, yes, accompanied by live music.
www.lurayfarmersmarket.com

3rd Annual Luray Triathlon August 16 and 17, 2008

More than 1,200 participants are expected this year for an internationally recognized race. The fun starts with a swim in Luray's Lake Arrowhead followed by biking and running along scenic country backroads. The event is organized by EnduranceWorks LLC and the Town of Luray.
<http://enduranceworks.net/luraytriathlon.html>

LODGING/DINING

58 West Café

A fun kind of eatery (and bakery) with Internet access.
58 West Main Street
(540) 743-5949
www.58westcafe.com

Artisans Grill

Scrumptious food in a relaxed, bistro-style environment.
2 East Main Street
(540) 743-7030
www.artisansgrill.com

Brookside Restaurant & Cabins

Their hamburgers are famous locally, made with beef straight from a nearby farm, served with crispy homemade potato chips.
U.S. Highway 211 East
(540) 743-5698 or (800) 299-2655
www.brooksidecabins.com

Dan's Steak House

The place locals go when they have a taste for great steaks.
8512 U.S. Highway 211 West
(540) 743-6285
www.restaurant.com/danssteakhouse



PHOTO COURTESY OF YOGI BEAR'S JELLYSTONE PARK

One of Luray's little-known treats for younger visitors is Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park, featuring a campground, swimming pools, and a waterslide.

The Mimslyn Inn

Elegance and hospitality beyond the imagination. Spend the night or just dine here.
401 West Main Street
(540) 743-5105
(800) 296-5105
www.mimslyninn.com

Shadow Mountain Escape (cabins)

Timber-frame cabins sit on beautiful woodlands that border the Shenandoah National Park and are 15 minutes from the Shenandoah River. What else can you ask for?
1132 Jewell Hollow Road
(540) 843-0584
www.shadowmountainescape.com

Uncle Buck's

When it's time for simple, Southern fare.
42 East Main Street
(540) 743-2323

RECREATION

BB&T Center for the Performing Arts

Most shows are locally produced featuring a troupe of local performers – and playing to sold-out crowds. Check the Web site for events.
1 East Main Street
(540) 743-3311
www.performingartsluray.org

Bank Street Books

Advice from Chamber of Commerce Director Karen Riddle: If you're a history buff, stop at Bank Street Books within your first 24 hours in Luray. This downtown shop carries all the local history books.
201 West Main Street
(540) 843-0690

Lake Arrowhead

Want a peaceful canoe or paddleboat ride? Luray's Parks and Recreation Department runs this 34-acre lake in a 134-acre recreation area. It's open from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day.
(540) 743-6475

Luray Caverns

Dubbed "the most popular caverns in Eastern America."
970 U.S. Highway 211 West
(540) 743-6551
www.luraycaverns.com

Luray Zoo and Reptile Jungle

Snakes, snakes, and more snakes – as well as lots of other exotic animals and a petting zoo.
1087 U.S. Highway 211 West
(540) 743-4113
www.lurayzoo.com

Mama's Treasures (Antiques)

Start antiquing here for some fashionable finds.
22 East Main Street
(540) 743-1352

Mural Tour

Local artists showcase their talents in more than 20 building-sized murals throughout town. The Luray Downtown Initiative provides a "Mural Tour" brochure to guide visitors on an artistic treasure hunt.

Shenandoah National Park (headquarters)

3655 U.S. Highway 211 East
Luray, VA 22835
(540) 999-3500
(800) 778-2853
www.visitshenandoah.com

Shenandoah River Outfitters

Everything you need to enjoy the Shenandoah River.
6502 S. Page Valley Road
(540) 743-4159 or (800) 6CANOE2
www.shenandoah-river.com

Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park

A best-kept secret, it's a waterpark and campground the kids will love.
2250 Highway 211 East
(800) 420-6679
www.campluray.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Luray-Page County Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center

46 East Main Street
Luray, VA 22835
(540) 743-3915 or (888) 743-3915
e-mail: information@luraypage.com
www.luraypage.com

Town of Luray

P.O. Box 629
45 East Main Street
Luray, VA 22835
(540) 743-5511

N&W Railway (www.linkmuseum.org). Prints of the well-known photo, called “Hawksbill Creek Swimming Hole,” and one other shot orchestrated by Link in Luray hang in the town’s Visitors’ Center.

\$35 ONCE, \$35 TWICE, SOLD

Luray was founded in 1812 when the General Assembly designated 10 acres of land spanning from the Hawksbill Creek to Court Street as the town of Luray. A group of local relatives was named trustees of the property, and lots were quickly auctioned for prices ranging from \$35 to \$140 apiece. All of these original deeds were dated September 14, 1812.

Mayor Dean admits there’s an ongoing debate about the origins of the town’s name. One school of thought says Luray takes its moniker from Lorraine, France, the homeplace of the parents of W.S. Mayre, one of the town’s founders. Another group believes it’s a wordplay on the name of Lewis Ramey, a local blacksmith and early property owner who was nicknamed Lu Ray. And a third group swears Luray came from the Native American word for crooked waters, “Lorrain,” in reference to the Hawksbill Creek’s semi-circular bending as it meets the south fork of the Shenandoah River.

“Personally, I think it was named after Lewis Ramey, the blacksmith,” Dean adds his two cents. “There’s a mural of Ramey, painted in the 1930s, inside the Luray Post Office. So I’m convinced.”

With a population of nearly 5,000, the county seat of Page County is nestled between the Blue Ridge and the Massanutten mountains. The area probably is identified most easily with the Luray Caverns, a nationally recognized tourist attraction that has welcomed millions of visitors over the years. (Get the inside scoop on this and other Virginia caves in this month’s cover story on page 18.) But “the town where the caverns meet the sky” has even more to offer.

Luray boasts such historic sites as the White House and White House Bridge just west of downtown along Highway 211. An integral part of Stonewall Jackson’s Valley Campaign, the bridge was burned before dawn on June 2, 1862, within hours of Union soldiers’ attempt to use the route to thwart Jackson’s plan to escape to nearby Front Royal. Locals say the event marks the beginning of General Jackson’s two-week span of victories throughout the Shenandoah Valley.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF ENDURANCEWORKS LLC/AARON SCHWARTZBARD



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHADOW MOUNTAIN ESCAPE

TOP LEFT: The 3rd Luray Triathlon, an internationally recognized event, takes place in August. Last year, more than 1,000 participants began the triathlon with a swim in Luray’s Lake Arrowhead. • LEFT: Townspeople estimate more than 200 cabins are tucked away on the outskirts of Luray, and the demand for cabin lodging is growing. Here, Shadow Mountain Escape’s “Butterfly Loft” is a peaceful retreat year-round.



ABOVE: Following the final production of “The Foreigners” at the BB&T Performing Arts Center, a local acting troupe applauds the behind-the-scenes crew. • RIGHT: One of the most popular sites for visitors under 18 is the Luray Zoo and Reptile Jungle, where exotic animals are on display and a petting zoo lets guests get up close. • BELOW: What better way to spend a warm day in Luray than relaxing in a tube floating slowly down the Shenandoah River?



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHENANDOAH RIVER OUTFITTERS & RIVER CABINS



Another not-to-miss site is the Massanutten School, a one-room, cabin-style structure used from 1875 to 1937 to educate area youth. The school was restored and moved from its original site to a more-accessible location in Luray's Inn Lawn Park. Sixteen original double desks are inside, as well as a 100-year-old iron stove and a Civil War flag pole.

One of Luray's most celebrated historic stops is Calendine. Built in 1840, the simple but picturesque home once adjoined a general store and stagecoach shop. The William Barbee family purchased the house and set up an art studio there. Local lore reports that Barbee, an acclaimed sculptor, was commissioned to complete the frieze on the U.S. Capitol's west wing. However, when the Civil War began, he ceased his work and never completed the project.



Karen Riddle, director of the Luray-Page County Chamber of Commerce, believes most visitors come to Luray to enjoy nature and breathe in the small-town charm.

Perhaps even more significant is Barbee's son, Herbert, also a sculptor, who studied art abroad but used his local studio to sculpt Luray's Confederate Heroes Monument, a statue of a lone Confederate soldier standing at the crest of a hill overlooking Luray's downtown. It was unveiled in 1898 as a tribute to the area's fallen Confederate soldiers.

NATURE AND NURTURE

According to Mayor Dean, more than 300 acres of Luray is park land. That suits **Karen Riddle** just fine. She's the director of the Luray-Page County Chamber of Commerce, and she believes most visitors find their way to Luray looking for outdoor activities mixed with small-town charm.

"I think many visitors really want to take advantage of our natural environment, from the national park to the river to the forest," she says. "And at the same time they want a chance to relax at a slower pace."

More than 200 cabins, from rustic to luxurious, are available to rent in the area, in answer to the growing demand for pastoral getaways. ("Several of us have tossed around the idea of pursuing the title 'The Cabin Capital of the State' for Luray," laughs Riddle.)

For those who want something less back-to-nature than a cabin, the recently renovated Mimslyn Inn is a jaw-dropper. This elegant mansion with grand Corinthian columns, a wide, welcoming porch, a spa, and seven acres of terraced gardens and lawns stands on a hill on the west end of town. It's already earning national kudos as a must-visit luxury resort.

"There's really something for everyone," Riddle explains. "Couples can hike the Shenandoah National Park or canoe

the Shenandoah River, then end up back in town for dinner at a local restaurant, a movie at the downtown theater, or take in a Luray Wranglers Valley League Baseball game. Seniors can enjoy a play or concert at the BB&T Center for the Performing Arts and then head to the new Speakeasy Tavern at the Mimslyn Inn. And families can spend the day swimming at Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park or rent bikes from a local outfitter and then head to the Luray Reptile Zoo."

According to Riddle, most visitors hail from the East Coast. She sees an increasing number of "snowbirds" — retirees taking a break as they travel to and from Florida along Interstates 81 and 95 — and a booming business for family reunions, given Luray's central location along the coast.

"We're energized by all the visitors who come," she says with a smile. "In Luray, we're still very proud of our heritage and our country appeal, but we're also moving forward."

GROWING, CHANGING

As with many areas across the state, the downturn in the economy has slowed projects in Luray. According to Mayor Dean, several housing developments slated for approximately 100 acres on the edge of town have been put on hold.

But that's okay for now.

"You don't want to grow too fast, anyway," he adds, grinning.

For the last decade in Luray, businesses and individuals have focused on improving the aesthetics of the town through renovating and applying simple elbow grease.

In the next decade?

"We're only getting better," promises Dean, as he looks forward to his well-deserved retirement this summer. After nearly three decades in office, he says he rarely gets a phone call with a complaint. "More people may move to or visit Luray as the economy improves, and that's just fine. I've always believed that if you treat the people right, they'll treat the town right." ■