

■ DOWN HOME SERIES

The year 2012 marks the 15th anniversary of *Cooperative Living* magazine's popular DOWN HOME feature, so we're revisiting the communities we profiled in 1997, the first year of the series. On this third stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

NEW CASTLE

by Meg Hibbert, Contributing Writer

If people traveling through the Town of New Castle don't slow down to enjoy the pace, they might believe the area has more creeks, cattle and mountains than people.

Craig County residents like it that way.

There's not a single traffic light in the entire county. New Castle, population about 180, is the only town. It's the epitome of "small town USA," as one resident proudly puts it. There are two banks, three restaurants, a compact library that grew out of a Girl Scouts' project and an active historical society.

New Castle town council member Tommy Zimmerman says he didn't always appreciate the small-town qualities.

"Sometimes when I was younger, I thought people knew too much," he says. "As I've gotten older, I think it's a good thing. People look after each other," says Zimmerman, whose grandfather, Alfred D. Zimmerman Sr., built a big brick house in New Castle in 1918 near where the drive-in-theater was located.

Much of the original downtown's lots remain as platted 100 years before that. Main Street and Walnut behind it make up the New Castle Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places.

Like his fellow town council member, Mayor Bucky Johnson also moved away with his family for a while and is glad to be home again. "New Castle is a small town with a Mayberry-type feeling. I like the fact that everybody comes together, and cares about each other," says Johnson, who has been mayor for 11 years. And he loves his church, New Castle Christian, where his father, the Rev. Ernie Johnson, is pastor.

New Castle has withstood occupation during the War between the States — and population and economic changes.

Gen. David Hunter's Union troops plundered the courthouse. You can still see axe marks left by soldiers who tried to chop up the railings in the courtroom to start a fire to burn down the building constructed in 1852.

A Confederate statue erected 100 years ago guards the courthouse's front lawn. There's a loyal membership in the Sons of Confederate Veterans, as well as Daughters of the American Revolution, Veterans of Foreign Wars and the New Castle Garden Club.

Jane Johnston is one of the people who knows more about the history of New Castle and Craig County than just about anybody else. She's passionate about local history and is the author of several of the "In and Around" histories published each year by the Craig County Historical Society.

The Confederate statue guarding the Craig County Courthouse in New Castle will be 100 years old this year.



GWEN JOHNSON PHOTOS



AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: New Castle includes about 180 people; there are 5,190 in Craig County.

LAND AREA: The town covers .16 square miles.

ELEVATION: 1,352 feet

ORIGINS: The original town of New Castle was platted in 1818 and incorporated in 1873.

FACTOID: In the 1800s, residents believed New Castle would be "the Pittsburgh of the South" because of the potential for mining iron ore deposits.

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1. The town of New Castle and the mountains surrounding it can be appreciated from the Overlook on Rt. 42, Cumberland Gap Road.
2. Craig County people stay close to the land. Cattle graze in pastures on Sinking Creek.
3. Fishing for stocked trout is fun for all ages of fishermen on Barbour's Creek.

She was born a little way from New Castle in Happy Hollow, a dot on the map off Rt. 311 between Simmonsville and Level Green Road, explains Johnston, who has lived all but six years of her life in the county.

"My husband was from here. His grandmother gave us the land, and we built this house 48 years ago," she says, referring to her husband, Ben, who died 14 years ago. When asked where she lives, Johnston replies simply, "It's the brick house on Rt. 42 at the top of the mountain with the gorgeous view."

Most everybody knows where everybody else lives in New Castle, or who used to live in those houses.

"Until very recently, people went by tree stumps and rocks when giving directions," says Gwen Johnson, no relation to the mayor, who moved to New Castle from the big city of Richmond 12 years ago to be near her daughter and to watch her grandchildren grow up.

"People weren't used to street names and

house numbers" before the 9-1-1 dispatching system was put into place four years ago. She lives downtown in apartments converted from New Castle High School. Craig County High School, the middle school and McCleary Elementary School are located outside the town.

"Most people would give just about anything to live in a place like the town of New Castle," Johnson adds. "I like it because it's rural and rustic and the people are wonderful."

The entire county has 5,190 people. More than 80 percent of the people own their own houses. People live on family land or land with family ties.

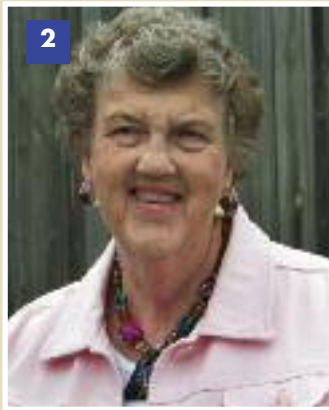
Old maps show communities where life revolved around general stores, places with names known mainly these days in memories: Captain, Maggie, Simmonsville, Maywood, Barbour's Creek, Abbott.

New Castle and the county are bisected

by Rt. 311 – the highway that connects Roanoke and winds toward Covington – and Rt. 42, which starts in New Castle, climbs the mountains and goes west through some of the most beautiful valleys and vistas God ever made. When road names and house numbers were assigned for the county's 9-1-1 emergency dispatching system, Rt. 42 was named Cumberland Gap Road. That's what it was called in 1833 when it was surveyed.

Iron ore and timber contributed to the wealth of Craig County and particularly New Castle in the 1880s. Men who made money in those industries showed it off by constructing homes typical of the Victorian era. A row of Victorian homes parallels Rt. 311. On the right up Rt. 42 is the turreted mansion locals refer to as "the Castle," where retired United Methodist pastor Randall Blankenship and his wife Barbara live.

After they moved around Virginia for 40 years, the high school sweethearts came back



GWEN JOHNSON PHOTO

ANN HARRELL PHOTO

1. About 2,000 people turn out to enjoy the annual Fall Festival in downtown New Castle on the second Saturday in October. The festival is sponsored by the Craig County Historical Society.
2. Gwen Johnson moved to New Castle from Richmond to watch her grandchildren grow up.
3. Native Bucky Johnson has been mayor of New Castle for 11 years.
4. Tranquil moments can be found while sitting on the banks of Potts Creek.
5. Snow and a coating of ice outline Webbs Mill Pond.
6. Town council member Tommy Zimmerman likes that New Castle residents look after each other.
7. Diane Givens is chairman of Craig County's tourism committee.
8. County Administrator Richard Flora appreciates the "laid back" attitude of the people of Craig County.

to New Castle in 1997 to what was the home of her parents, the late G.P. and Ethel Todd. "I'm very happy to be back with our classmates and friends," says Barbara. "It's very, very comforting to come home." Her husband loves the farming, raising belted Galloway cattle, which is a hobby, she is quick to point out. It's said the bricks for the mansion built between 1897 and 1900 for a local merchant, Nathaniel Spessard, were ordered from the Montgomery Ward catalogue.

In the late 19th century there were high hopes for the community. "New Castle was supposed to be the 'Pittsburgh of the South' because of the iron ore," explains Jane Johnston. But more plentiful sources of iron were found elsewhere and that dream died. Today Fenwick Mines is a recreational area instead of an active mine.

Although it's a different type of forestry than a century ago, the success of Sue Sublett Bostic's farm is built on trees. Bostic grew up in the county and stayed to carry on and build up the family business envisioned by her father, the late Joe Sublett, and her six older siblings. This is the 50th year of that dream.

"There's probably no other place like Craig County. I like going to the grocery store (Mick-or-Mack IGA carries just about everything) or walking down Main Street and always meeting someone you know," Bostic says. "When you're driving by, people still wave," adds Bostic, who expanded cut and cut-your-own Christmas trees to include mail-order and Internet-order Christmas trees, wreaths and garlands. In the fall Bostic's farm features pumpkins and small festivals that feature crafters and bluegrass music.

NESTLED IN THE FOREST

More than 50 percent of Craig County is National Forest. With few large employers other than Craig County Public Schools and the state's Catawba Hospital mental facility in next-door Roanoke County, most working people drive to jobs about 40 minutes away. Those jobs are mostly in Roanoke, associated with Virginia Tech in Blacksburg or over Peters Mountain toward Covington.

People describe where they live in proximity to creeks associated with areas nearest to their homes: Upper Craigs Creek, Meadow Creek, Sinking Creek, Johns Creek, Barbour's Creek. A dozen years ago the slogan on the tourism brochure for Craig County was "Virginia's Best Kept Secret."

Now tourism holds potential for Craig County. The new slogan, reflected by a sign at the county line, is "Gateway to Virginia's Western Highlands." There's an active tourism committee. Diane Givens is chairman of that.

She came to Craig from neighboring

Botetourt County to teach kindergarten, and married a hometown boy, Rob Givens. Twenty-seven years later, she's still in New Castle. Some of those students she had as a young teacher are now parents of the preschoolers she has at New Castle Christian Church Preschool.

Givens is proud of the way her adopted county is heading these days. "The greenway trail on the former railroad bed is being built and will provide a walking and bicycling trail between New Castle and the schools," Givens says, "and the 30th Annual Craig County Fall Festival will be Oct. 13."

The festival attracts more than 2,000 visitors to sample foods prepared by churches, admire and buy crafts, hear local bluegrass and gospel groups, and buy chances on raffles for handmade quilts and hunting rifles.

They also come to see the way things were made 150 years ago at two re-created log cabins and in old-time demonstrations on the porch of the Old Brick Hotel. The latter is the headquarters for the Craig County Historical Society and its genealogy room.

UNITING TO BUILD A DREAM

As one of Virginia's two smallest counties, Craig County has lacked some amenities residents of larger places expect, such as a public library and organized youth recreation. Volunteers in New Castle and other parts of the county pulled together, brought their own tractors and graders, cut and sold firewood and figured out other ways to build a "Field of Dreams" youth recreation complex.

The Girl Scouts' project that inspired others to get funding started a public library in Craig, which was said to be the only county in Virginia without one.

After 50 years of being able to count on Dr. Walton Mitchell as their doctor who also made house calls, the people of Craig County were without a physician until three years ago. Now the county has a modern medical center in New Castle made possible by grants and donations, and a dental center.

Craig County Administrator Richard Flora has observed changes in the county over his 20 years owning property in the county and two stints as part-time county administrator. He lives in the Hollins area of Roanoke County, but has a house and land at the foot of Sinking Creek Mountain in Craig County, where he lives much of the fall.

"It's our place of choice when it comes to hunting season," explains Flora, who hunts deer and turkey.

He appreciates the attitude of Craig County people he describes as "laid back." And Flora adds, "They don't whine, and they take care of their problems." ■

IF YOU GO...

CRAIG COUNTY HAS:

- 112,000 acres of National Forest for outdoor adventures from fishing, hunting and birding to canoeing, mountain biking, hiking and primitive camping;
- Downtown New Castle listed on the National Register of Historic Places;
- A buffalo farm and restored railroad community of Paint Bank on Rt. 311 almost at the West Virginia line. Visit the Paint Bank General Store, Tingler's Mill, and Swinging Bridge Restaurant inside the store;
- Bluegrass played by musicians who write it. Friday nights at the Locust Mountain Grill in downtown New Castle and other locations;
- New Castle International Glider Port, home of the Blue Ridge Soaring Society;
- Wilderness Adventure at Eagle Landing, an adventure camp named by *Outdoor* magazine as one of the nation's best places to work. Other seasonal camps are Craig Healing Springs, a historic gathering place for Disciples of Christ church members, and Camp Easter Seal.

CRAIG COUNTY IS ONLY MINUTES AWAY FROM:

- Popular portions of the Appalachian Trail, including one of the most photographed overlooks, McAfee's Knob off Rt. 311. Take Exit 140 off I-81 and go toward New Castle. The easy-to-moderate hike to the knob takes 3 hours, round trip.
- Close-by wineries that produce state and national award-winning wines. For more information go to www.virginiawines.org.

The Blue Ridge Soaring Society is a club operation. The club welcomes visitors to their field, which is surrounded by the Jefferson National Forest.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE'S TREES

Sue Bostic and her family – husband James, and children Jake and Jenna, make a family business of growing Christmas trees in Craig County. In fall the farm hosts small festivals featuring crafters and bluegrass music.

IN ROANOKE, ABOUT 30 MINUTES AWAY FROM NEW CASTLE:

- Virginia Museum of Transportation, with everything from steam trains to model trains, and the O. Winston Link Museum that houses an extensive collection of the famous steam locomotive photographer's works.
- Mill Mountain Zoo with a collection of exotic animals.

Brochures are available in the Visitor's Center in the Craig County Public Library at the corner of Main Street and Rt. 311, and the Craig County Administrator's Office at 108 Court Street, next to the courthouse. The Craig County Historical Society's headquarters in the Old Brick Hotel is open for genealogy research first Fridays, April through October, 1-4 p.m. For more info on New Castle and Craig County, go to www.craigcountyva.info. ■



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