

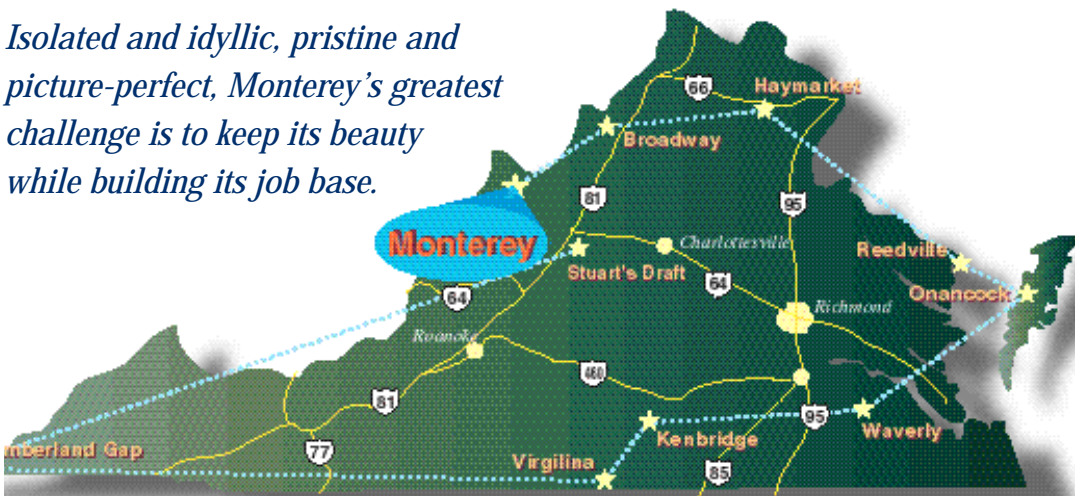
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Richard G. Johnstone Jr., Editor

During 1998, we'll again make our way around Virginia, 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 *Magical* Monterey

Isolated and idyllic, pristine and picture-perfect, Monterey's greatest challenge is to keep its beauty while building its job base.



RICHARD JOHNSTONE PHOTO

East of Monterey, from Route 250.



BILL SHERROD PHOTOS

On a frosty, bracing January night in this valley town deep in the Allegheny Highlands — almost 3,000 feet above sea level — those sounds you hear are the wind, right? Ooooouuu. Aaaaaaahhh. Wooooooo.

Or maybe, just maybe, it's not the wind at all, but echoes, skipping endlessly up and down the valley, bouncing off the mountains like buckshot in a long steel drum. You know, echoes of the awe-struck, soft sighing sounds made each year by visitors as



"If we don't have it, you don't need it," say owners of H&H Cash Store (l). Unofficial town historian Nick Beverage (above) on his farm at the edge of town. Businessman and elected official Robin Sullenberger (below, l) says, "We need to develop job opportunities for our kids."



Highland Glastone owners Jackie Stephenson and Van Hower display their work.



"In Monterey, one person can make a difference," says chamber president Debra Ellington (above). According to B&B owner Beth Ann Pierce (r), Monterey's weather creates opportunities to "curl up by the fire with a good book."



they descend Jack Mountain from the east and then, rounding a bend, watch Monterey magically unfold before them. All those white clapboard houses and tin roofs and church steeples nestled snugly into a green valley. A picture postcard of a town. And as Route 250 becomes Main Street, all of a sudden you don't feel like you're in Virginia anymore. At least not the Virginia of the 1990s. More like the Old Country, circa 1900. And, in a charming, very comfortable sense, that's exactly where you are.

This town of 222 residents is special for lots of reasons, most of them obvious as you stroll the sidewalks of its few tidy, tree-lined streets. It's the county seat and business center of Virginia's highest and least-populous county, Highland. Then there's its residents' legendary devotion to civic duty and volunteerism, which enables such a tiny locality each March to stage The Highland Maple Festival, hosting over 50,000 visitors in what has become one of the largest annual celebrations on the East Coast.

There's also its wealth of classic Victorian homes built during the town's boom period from 1890-1910, with a modern gas station/convenience store on Main Street seemingly the *only* concession to the 20th century's architecture or ethos. And, perhaps most obvious, who could miss

(much less forget) Monterey's many stunning vistas of the cottony folds in the ancient mountains that envelop and protect the town.

It's such qualities that create a frequent, special feeling that comes over many visitors, a feeling of comfort and of being at home and of being in a good place. It's a feeling that one local innkeeper, **Linda Holman** of Cherry Hill B&B, calls "a Monterey moment." It's precisely such magic that makes Monterey so inviting to tourists and city dwellers, and so precious to residents. However, its residents' proud insistence on maintaining the pristine nature of the town and county also creates an additional hurdle for those who want to expand the area's economy and keep its young people from having to seek jobs on the other side of the mountains.

If You Go... **T**here are numerous lodging accommodations in and near Monterey. There's the historic Highland Inn, built in 1904 primarily to serve residents of nearby cities escaping the heat of summer. The three-story Victorian landmark has 17 guest rooms, a dining room and tavern, and offers a complimentary breakfast. Call (540) 468-2143. There are also four Monterey Bed-and-Breakfasts, each offering friendly hosts, comfortable sleeping rooms and complimentary breakfasts. They are Bobbie's, (540) 468-2308; Cherry Hill, (540) 468-1900; Curry Alexander, (540) 468-2055, or e-mail at curryalx@cfw.com; and Trimble Acres, (540) 468-1524. There's also Montvallee Motel, (540) 468-2500. A few miles north of Monterey is a B&B surrounded by trout streams and mountain vistas; call Ginseng Mountain Lodge at (540) 474-5137, or e-mail at ginseng@cfw.com. If you're really "up" (4,000 feet, to be exact) for an adventure, consider Endless Mountain Retreat Center, a family and corporate getaway facility with a lodge and cabins on top of Allegheny Mountain in western Highland. Phone (540) 468-2700, or e-mail at endless@cfw.com.

There are numerous events in Monterey in 1998 around which to plan a visit. Some of them are the 40th Annual Highland Maple Festival, held over two weekends, March 14-15 and 21-22, with tours of local sugar farms, a juried crafts show, live music, dances, the event's trademark maple doughnuts, and dinners featuring local trout as well as pancakes smothered with Highland maple syrup; the Lions' Club Street Dances and Chicken BBQ, Saturdays, July 18 and August 15, with clogging, line and square dancing, and chicken barbecue; Highland County Fair, Wednesday, September 2 through Saturday, September 5, an old-fashioned country fair with midway rides, livestock exhibitions, arts and crafts, and dog and horse shows; Hands and Harvest Festival, Saturday and Sunday, October 10-11, a celebration of area foliage with arts and crafts, clogging, music and food; and Wintertide, Saturday and Sunday, December 5-6, with a tree-lighting ceremony on the courthouse lawn, holiday music and caroling and a Christmas crafts show.

For information on any of these events, or for maps, brochures and other information generally about Monterey and Highland County, contact Carolyn Pohowsky at the Highland County Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 223, Monterey, VA 24465. Phone (540) 468-2550, fax at (540) 468-2551, or e-mail at highcc@cfw.com. The chamber's Internet home page address is www.cfw.com/~highcc/.

For more information on Highland Glastone's stained glass stepping stones, tables and trivets, contact the company at P.O. Box 205, 205 Spruce Street, Monterey, VA 24465; phone (540) 468-3000.

Or for more information on Highland County history, contact Mrs. Hazel Corbett, Treasurer, The Highland Historical Society, H-C Box 135, Mustoe, VA 24465. ■



The Highland County Courthouse in Monterey, scene of many festivals and shows throughout the year.

RICHARD JOHNSTONE PHOTO

standardized achievement tests, and go on to college, there are precious few white-collar or skilled jobs awaiting them back home after graduation.

But the barrier created by the mountains is nothing new. As **Nick Beverage**, unofficial town historian and retired member of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, points out, "The settlers in the 1700s followed the rivers to Highland, followed the buffalo trails by foot and horseback, which is why Monterey and the county were settled from the north and south, not from the east."

Around the middle of the 18th century, German immigrants from Pennsylvania in search of fertile land migrated down the three valleys of the South Branch of the Potomac River, settling the northern part of the county. Scotch-Irish settlers came from the south, moving along the upper James River, then up the valleys of the Cowpasture and Jackson Rivers, settling the southern half of the county.

Because Monterey and Highland County have remained so isolated, you find many rare Old-Country German names here — Arbogast and Colaw and Hevener and Hiner and Puffenbarger and Sullenberger and Sweitzer and Swecker and Swope. And lots of venerable Scotch-Irish names, too. Hooke. Lowery. McClung. Pullen. Revercomb. Trimble. Whitelaw.

The dividing line in this north-south settlement was a series of ridges covered with dense laurel thickets. The current site of Monterey was an opening in those dense woods and thickets, on the saddle between two creeks. Such an opening, positioned as it was in the protective fold of a fertile valley, made it a natural selection as a settlement. The building of the Staunton (VA)-to-Parkersburg (WVA) Turnpike in 1838 made this settlement a natural choice for county seat when Highland was created in 1847 by carving up two adjoining counties, Bath (VA) and Pendleton (WVA). Monterey is named for the town in Mexico where General, later President, Zachary Taylor gained a key victory for the U.S. in the Mexican War.

And as Highland celebrated its 150th anniversary last year with festivals and a July 4th parade, its residents both looked back proudly at its rugged frontier past — still very evident — and also looked ahead

The main hurdle to economic development, of course, is the mountains that have made and still keep the area so special. It's a sad yet sweet irony that the mountains which inspire its residents and protect Highland from modern woes — drugs,

violence, traffic gridlock — are also a barrier, a 4,000-foot-high wall which makes getting here from the east anything from exhilaratingly exciting to daringly difficult. It's yet another irony that, while most Highland students score very highly on

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hopefully yet nervously at the county's long-range future. Though some area leaders believe a modern-day settlement of the county by young professionals and retirees has just begun, the county's population has slowly declined to 2,600, after peaking in 1900 at about 5,600 residents. The town's population has been more stable, remaining just over 200 for the last century.

According to the county chamber of commerce's executive director, **Mary Ann Corbett**, the area's frontier sense of self-reliance and friendliness lives on. "The people here are so civic-oriented," she says, "with barbecues, street dances, picnics, cake walks and family reunions all taking place here throughout the year. Attractions are not the focus here — people getting together is the focus."

But Corbett herself is a case in point of the plight many young people face in trying to find employment in the county — after marrying in February, she'll resign as chamber head and move with her husband to Maryland for career reasons, though she says she hopes they can return to Monterey someday.

Perhaps no one embodies Monterey's people-oriented focus more than **Mary Sweitzer**, a widow and native of the county whose son and grandson still live in the area. Born and raised in McDowell in the county's eastern end, she and her husband moved to Monterey in 1967 when he became deputy sheriff. In a real-life twist on what sounds like a Mayberry storyline, Sweitzer says she and her mother "dearly loved to cook meals for the prisoners in the jail."

"Everybody knows Everybody"

She says such caring typifies Monterey, where "Everybody knows everybody and the youngsters grow up not knowing what it means to be into bad things. But," she adds, "there's also not much to hold the young people in terms of jobs. We're so far from railroads (there are no rail lines in the county) and it's so tough for trucks to get over the mountains, it makes it hard to attract industry."

Sweitzer also typifies Monterey residents in the way work and volunteerism and community blend together into a patchwork quilt of busy days and nights. She writes a column on local people and

happenings for the weekly newspaper, *The Recorder*, works as assistant manager at non-profit community radio station WVLS, and does volunteer work for more than half a dozen community groups.

Not surprisingly, Monterey's residents — and those of Highland County as well — tend to be over age 50, stable, a mix of natives and come-heres who love the scenic, slow-paced rural quality of life. One of the most pressing needs for an aging population, obviously, is health care. Town leaders feel the area has become even more attractive to retirees since a new facility, the Highland Medical Center, opened 16 months ago. Two Richmond groups — the Virginia Primary Health Care Association and the Theresa Thomas Foundation — each provided \$75,000 toward the \$400,000 cost of building the center, which sits on donated land on the southern edge of town.

The brick, 1½-story center has x-ray equipment, basic emergency facilities, and can do limited lab work, all capabilities the area didn't have before. **Bobbie Hefner**, a local businesswoman, chaired the center's board during the years of fund-raising and early construction. "Monterey's a unique place," she says. "This medical center has required the dedication and work of the whole community."

While Monterey now has a modern medical center, it doesn't have a full-service grocery store, dry cleaner or pharmacy. And though many visitors are charmed by the town's lack of national chain businesses, the absence of such stores can pose convenience problems for residents. And it's in filling that gap that H&H Cash Store has flourished for decades as a cozy anachronism. "We're a general merchandise store," says **Jack Herold**, who's owned the Main Street landmark for 40 years. "You don't find many old country stores like this anymore."

Herold, who runs the store with wife Gaye and grown sons Michael and Kenneth, says one of the store's slogans over the years has been "If we don't have it, you don't need it." And looking at the floor-to-ceiling collection of merchandise and miscellany of all sorts proves his point: "We offer everything you can think of," he tells a visitor proudly, "from cutting glass and repairing storm windows and screens, to carrying men's and children's clothing,

to selling groceries, hardware and shoes."

One of those faced with building the area's economic base is native **Robin Sullenberger**, area cattle farmer, Monterey-based realtor, and member of the county's board of supervisors. He is also president of the Shenandoah Valley Partnership, a regional coalition which was able last fall to procure a \$353,000 economic development grant from the state for the Western Highlands region — including the counties of Highland, Bath, Rockbridge, Augusta and Rockingham. Most of the region is served by two electric cooperatives, BARC and Shenandoah Valley.

"Compatible" Economic Development

"This grant should infuse some enthusiasm into our area, and get us thinking about and doing things we might not have otherwise been able to do," Sullenberger points out. "We need to find economic development opportunities compatible with our environment and our lifestyle."

Sullenberger believes a good fit for the area would be "small high-tech industries without high transportation needs, with a lot of skilled jobs. We need to evolve and give opportunities for our kids to come back home, to have something they can aspire to. Our best fit for industrial development is probably self-generated."

One of those "self-generated" businesses in Monterey that has already created four part-time jobs is Highland Glastone, owned by area residents **Van Hower** and **Jackie Stephenson**. The business, which operates out of a former retail store on historic Spruce Street, had its first full year in 1997 making a unique product: stepping stones inlaid with one of over 20 or so nature-oriented original designs in stained glass. Each stepping stone — and the business now also makes tables and trivets — is hand crafted by the staff artisans, and marketed through trade shows, fine craft festivals and Stephenson's Monterey shop, The Personal Touch.

Stephenson and Hower believe their business is an example of a good economic development fit for the area. "Cottage industries are part of the solution to unemployment in Highland County," notes Stephenson, who serves as chairman of the county's industrial development authority. Hower adds, "We don't want the pollution,

the smokestacks, the four-lane interchanges or the crime rate of other areas. We have nice, decent, trusting people here, and we want to keep that special quality of life.”

Beth Ann Pierce, owner of Curry Alexander B&B on Main Street, points out another of the area’s peculiar charms: “We have very changeable weather here, and snow or rain can come in suddenly over the mountains. But the great thing is, when that happens you can curl up by the fire with a good book, or sit on the porch and enjoy the quiet, or just take a nice, long nap.”

Up on Spruce Street, at Trimble Acres B&B, owner **Louise Layman** extols the advantages of rural life to her guests. She took early retirement from a managerial job with James Madison University in Harrisonburg in 1991 and then moved to Monterey a year later to open her inn. “Monterey’s one of the most homey, friendly places I’ve ever been. You can be as busy as you want to be here,” she says of the many volunteer opportunities. “Just because it’s remote doesn’t mean it’s boring.”

“Mountains Don’t Change Very Quickly”

Most Monterey residents, though, believe this remoteness will keep the town looking in the year 2000 much as it did in

1900. As chamber executive director Mary Ann Corbett points out, “Monterey hasn’t changed much in its 150 years, and probably won’t change much in the early part of the 21st century. Mountains don’t change very quickly, and neither do mountain people.”

Chamber president **Debora Ellington** owns Ginseng Mountain Lodge and Country Store just north of town. She points out that the town’s small size gives it some distinct advantages in appealing to urban dwellers. “In Monterey, one person can make a difference. It’s hard for one person in a city to do that. We welcome that type of person, who wants to make a difference in a beautiful, unique place with a real sense of community.”

Monterey and Highland face a vexing challenge — keeping the unspoiled beauty and strong sense of community which have made them so special since the 19th century, while building a sustainable economic base for their young people in the 21st century. The area’s most magical moment yet will surely come from pulling off this daunting double trick. ■