

Old village schoolhouse a fount of new possibilities

By J B Leftwich

Nestled in the hills cascading eastward from the Caney Fork River is a building that housed a school in the days before extensive busing, which today is a hive of activity for the community's energized swarm of volunteers

From a vantage point on the road threading the hillside above, the beauty of the old school building and its springtime setting demand a pause and a gaze while prompting memories of another century when school children enlivened this galvanizing scene.

'Tis more dazzling now that it was decades ago when I was among the eight grades of pupils attending a new school in an era before the advent of power mowers and neatly trimmed lawns that now enhance the beauty of this site and of scenes in surrounding valleys and hills.

Lettered on the building are the words, "Buffalo Valley School." It is no longer a home of a school, but it is on the verge of emerging once again as an educational and recreational site, largely because of the vision and energy of three women who hope their efforts will culminate in a revitalized community focused on recapturing the vigor of this village during the first quarter of the Twentieth Century.

That period of history was an age when Buffalo Valley was a thriving commercial community with a cluster of general merchandise stores, blacksmith shops, a produce business, stock pens, barber shops, a post office, quarters for railroad workers, a thriving shipping business – and, at one time, an automobile dealership.

Now, only the post office remains, but in a modern building. Flea markets operate in the old post office building (once home of the bank) and in an old store building. There is nowhere to buy a loaf of bread or a can of coffee

Just as commerce has vanished, so have most of the residents I knew as a boy in the late Twenties and during the Thirties. Earlier this month, John T. Jared, my last high school classmate in the community, died at age 88. In effect, I can't go home again, but I can return to the scene. And last week, in a car loaded with books, my daughter Barbara and I did return.

Descendants of early Twentieth Century residents still live in the community which encompasses hills and valleys surrounding the center of Buffalo Valley, but the population is peppered with new residents who migrated to these same hills and valleys and who brought fresh ideas and renewed vitality to the region.

Among the newcomers are **Barbara Markel** and husband, Vernon, who were driving Interstate 40 about ten years ago and became entranced with the natural beauty of the area, decided to move, bought a farm and settled in.

Char Wanser also migrated from Wisconsin to the village about five years ago after she and her husband, Albert, read in a magazine a description of a farm for sale and subsequently bought the farm.

Carolyn Shanks Huddleston and her husband, **Ted**, greeted the newcomers. They are members of families who have populated the area for many years more than a century.

From these three women came the idea Buffalo Valley could become more than it is, that the village could recapture some of the drive that once made it thrive both in commerce and culture.

Their initial thrust is a library. Budget constraints eliminated the bookmobile, leaving the community with no public offering of literature and lore.

Here is where the old school building entered the mix.

Vacant rooms in the building, now a community center, could house the library. Donated books would fill shelves, cash donations would fund improvements, volunteers would renovate the quarters.

Hundreds of books have been donated, checks written, paint applied, gutters attached, telephones and computers installed.

The library will soon be in operation three days each week with volunteers providing needed services. An open house is scheduled May 2, beginning at 2:00 p. m. Visitors are invited, especially with donations of books or funds.

The beehive of movers and shakers are incubating a plethora of ideas.

“We plan on serving our community in a variety of ways: senior programs, reading programs for all ages and helping those in need all year long, not just at Christmas,” Barbara Markel said.

The Buffalo Valley Library Center could be more than just a service for one rural region. It could become a model for other communities in surrounding areas.

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