



PAST....BUT NOT FORGOTTEN
Preserving the history of Putnam
County's Buffalo Valley

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Near the Center Hill Dam, on the far west end of Putnam County, is the small town of Buffalo Valley. Today, what remains is a post office downtown and an old school building, turned community center and library. Standing, looking at what remains, it's fascinating to imagine what it was like 80-100 years ago. At the school, which is still standing, the past is not forgotten. It's being preserved and

honored.

Around ten years ago, Barbara Markel and her husband Vernon were driving on I-40 and fell in love with the hills and valley of Buffalo Valley. They bought a farm, moved in and would soon contribute to the renewed vitality and fresh ideas of the community. Barb, along with Char Wanser and Carolyn Huddleston had a vision to revive the thriving



history of what Buffalo Valley used to be. They've invested in collecting stories, history and photographs to turn the Buffalo Valley School into a place of remembering.

In 1884, Buffalo Valley was growing and expanding. It was a large river port to which steamboats made regular trips to go up the Caney Fork. In 1890 the N & K Railroad was completed and the town continued to grow. Throughout the rest of the 1800's and early

1900's. Buffalo Valley was a prosperous center for trade, shipping and transportation. It was bigger than Cookeville, known as "Little Egypt" because you could practically buy anything you could ever want. Land was hard to find and in high demand.

The railroad was responsible for the Buffalo Valley boom. Six freight and passenger trains a day came through town. In 1900, Buffalo Valley estimated they exported thirty-five carloads of chickens and 75,000 dozen eggs from Putnam County.



Their exportation of meat ranked third in the south as well. Area farmers exported meat, corn, potatoes, dried fruits, nuts, roots and tobacco. As the town continued to grow, by 1925, there were three general stores, three grist mills, two blacksmith shops, a pole and timber yard, a produce dealer and several

livestock dealers. Cars were a big ticket, and only cost \$300-500 around that time. Jephtha Askew wrote a story of how the mail men spent many hours teaching those on his route how to drive their new cars. Flat tires were also a common occurrence.

1925, Buffalo Valley School was built as part of a State project, built with the standard five teacher community floor plan. The schoolhouse was a lynchpin for the community. It remained a “free public school” until 1966 when the doors closed. It was vacant for 10 years until Buffalo Valley leaders turned it into a community building for programs, a library and school reunions. This is where Barb, Carolyn and Char have established their Buffalo Valley time capsule.



The bank was established in 1912. However, in 1926, the Bank of Buffalo Valley closed its doors permanently due to the growing depression of the economy in the country. President Dr. Denton and Jim Evans considered every contributor’s deposits as their responsibility and did whatever they had to to repay the debts. Quite a change from our present day experiences with banks today.

With the 1920’s came the decline of Buffalo Valley. Numerous factors contributed to this decline. The railroad, which was responsible for its rise also became partly responsible for its decline. As roads and highways were constructed, vehicles were used more and more. Railroads were used less. Buffalo Valley began to be cut off from the major roads. Improvements of Highway 70 bypassed by community, and later, the construction of I-40 cut through the small town. People simply didn’t have the same access to Buffalo Valley. As Nashville and Cookeville grew with the changes, Buffalo Valley declined because of progress.

Another cause of the town’s decline was flooding. Flooding of the Caney Fork was a common occurrence. In 1902, a flood swept away the railroad bridge, the Mill and Post

Office. Later, a large flood in 1920 wiped out most of Buffalo Valley. This devastated the town. Combined with the Great Depression, the town never recovered.

Carolyn Huddleston shared how when the war came and gas shortages hit the country, everyone would ride the train often to Cookeville and Baxter. She remembered the drug store, the hat store, all the residents and how the dentist would come for two weeks at a time. Carolyn also tells the story of a visitor who asked the population of present day Buffalo Valley. She counted up the residents in the immediate one mile radius which is 15. The postal route delivers to approximately 350 people.

Many descendants of the families who lived during the thriving time of Buffalo Valley still live in the area. There have also been many new transplants from other states who, like Barb, fell in love with Buffalo Valley, moving to an area rich in beauty and history. What the residents have done in their town to preserve and document history is an amazing tribute to who and where they've come from, honoring those who came before.

*Read more History of Buffalo Valley, Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>