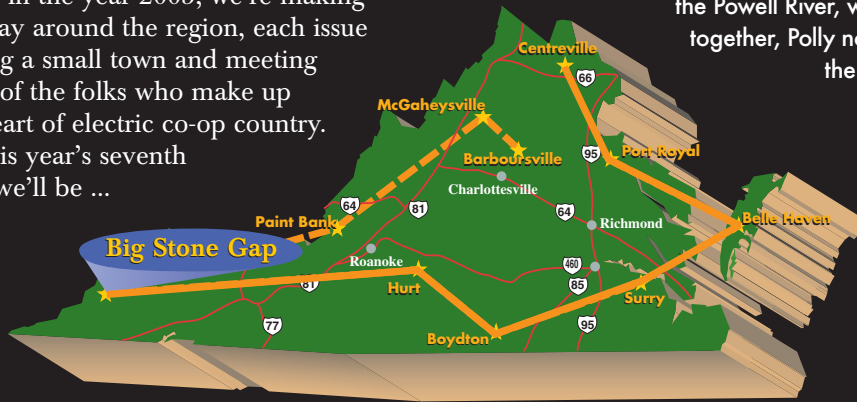


DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2005, 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 seventh stop, we'll be ...



Town manager George Polly stands beside a portion of the greenbelt, now about two-thirds complete. The trail follows along the North and South Forks of the Powell River, where they join together, Polly notes. Evenings, the trail is lighted.



DOWN HOME IN BIG STONE GAP

by Ida Holyfield, Contributing Writer

"It's like Brigadoon, a wonderful place captured in time. I feel myself calming the closer I come to home," novelist **Adriana Trigiani** told 150 luncheon guests on her latest return to Big Stone Gap.

But beneath the calm, there's a whole lot going on. This little town, with four museums, a greenbelt under development, a passion for sports and the arts that defies description, and a volunteer spirit that

undergirds it all, seems to have a knack for drawing people to it and getting them involved in making things better.

Trigiani's \$20-a-plate luncheon on the lawn of the John Fox Jr. Museum was a prime example. The meal was served by 30 volunteers ranging from a bank vice president and a retired eye doctor to the high school coach's wife and teachers on summer break.

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 5,906

LAND AREA: 5.14 square miles

INCORPORATED: Feb. 23, 1888

ELEVATION: 1,492 feet at the post office.

FUN FACT: Big Stone Gap has eight parks and four museums. But at one time, this was the largest lighted cow pasture in the world, Town Manager George Polly says. Cows roamed free in the town until the 1950s.

Income from the fundraiser goes toward buying an event sign for the 101 Car, the tourist and information center in the Gap.



Interstate Railroad Private Car No. 101 serves as the Regional Tourist and Information Center, operated by the Gap Corporation, the town's business association. Visitors come for travel information, but linger for Pat Gibson's great tours.



Lonesome Pine Arts and Crafts president Barbara Polly and novelist Adriana Trigiani greet each other before speaking to a crowd at "Adri's Garden Party," a Gap Corporation luncheon to raise money for the 101 Car.

Cooperative Living/August 2005



Check on happenings at the June Tolliver House, and likely volunteer and avid history buff Garnett Gilliam will be in the middle of them. Gilliam set up the School Rooms on the second floor, where visitors can search for family members among more than 25,000 local photographs.



The Trail of the Lonesome Pine state outdoor drama's all-volunteer cast sings, dances, feuds and fights in this bittersweet love story of a mountain girl and a "ferriner" who comes to the Gap. Dancing are the heroine, "June Tolliver" (Adrienne Bergeron in the red dress), and her father "Devil Judd Tolliver" (Jack McClanahan, nicknamed "Jack Mac"). Adriana Trigiani made "Jack Mac" the main male character in the Big Stone Gap trilogy, and McClanahan a "must meet" for visiting tourists.



The John Fox Jr. Museum is an incredible example of Victorian-era homes. Built in 1888, this antique post card depicts the home as it appeared when the author was in residence.

The meal also served as the prelude to an afternoon book signing for Trigiani's latest novel, *Rococo*, and gave the author the chance to catch fans up on progress as she prepares to make a movie based on her first book, *Big Stone Gap*, to be set in the town.

Trigiani grew up in the Gap in the 1970s, in a time when coal was booming and the Tri-State Singing Convention was still drawing large crowds to Bullitt Park every year on the second Sunday in June. The volunteer-driven singing convention, which started back in the 1920s, brought crowds of up to 10,000 to the park for decades. While the draw has withered to less than 1,000, the

convention continues, still volunteer driven.

The Gap has seen a boom-and-bust economy since coal mining became big back in the 1890s. In the bust period of the 1990s, leaders looked hard at ways to diversify the economy and to put more emphasis on tourism as an element in that mix. Trigiani's first three novels, the Big Stone Gap trilogy, helped boost the effort.

But tourism, tied to a volunteer spirit, really started back in the 1960s, when mechanization of mining made employment plummet.

A group of volunteers asked the sisters of turn-of-the-century author John Fox Jr., if

they could produce an outdoor drama based on the writer's 1908 blockbuster, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, to try to draw tourism dollars to the town. While Fox died in the Gap in 1919, his legacy had put the town on the map.

The Trail had been made into a movie three times, in 1916 and 1923 as silent films, and in 1936 as the first outdoor Technicolor movie, starring Sylvia Sydney, Fred MacMurray and Henry Fonda. Only the Bible and *Gone with the Wind* had outsold it in its heyday. And Fox's earlier book, *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, had been America's first million-seller.

Year 'round, there are fun things to do in the Gap, and in the region. If you visit, it's wise to have reservations for motels or campgrounds, just in case there's a big race at the Bristol Motor Speedway (90 minutes to the south), a local event or reunion drawing folks to town.

All area codes are 276.

Motels: Comfort Inn, 523-5911; Country Inn, 523-0374.

RV parks, camping: Country Inn Campground, 523-0374; Jesse Lea Campground, 523-0055.

Nearby: Natural Tunnel State Park – tent and RV campground, chair lift, hiking, interpretive programming, swimming pool, amphitheater, Cove Ridge Center concerts. Call 940-2674.

Motels and campgrounds full? Call the 101 Car, the regional tourist and information center, 523-2060, for information on accommodations in Norton, Wise and Duffield.

Virginia Time Travelers Passport participant: TimeTravelers program encourages students and families to explore Virginia history and heritage sites. In Big Stone Gap, kids can pick up "passport" forms and earn five of the six required stamps to earn their TimeTraveler certificate. The sixth stamp can be earned at nearby Natural Tunnel State Park!

The Trail of the Lonesome Pine state outdoor drama: Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights in July and August; gates open 7 p.m., pre-show entertainment starts 7:15 p.m., show starts 8 p.m. against a 72-foot panoramic backdrop. Tickets \$12 adults, \$10 seniors, \$8 children under 12. Bring a light jacket. Reservations accepted but not required. Call 800-362-0149 or 523-1235. On the Web at www.trailofthelonesomepine.org/.

Production of the outdoor drama sparked development of the June Tolliver House, a museum and gift shop next door to the theater. Success of the play prompted volunteers to incorporate as Lonesome Pine Arts and Crafts Inc., and under that corporate umbrella, to ultimately own, preserve and operate the John Fox Jr. Museum, the Fox family home acquired with original furnishings intact.

LPAC president **Barbara Polly** estimates that more than 3,000 volunteers have participated in *Trail* productions in the 42-year run of the show. Polly says the *Trail* is now the longest-running outdoor drama in the state of Virginia and the official drama of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Town manager **George Polly** says the community has always had a love of the arts, sports and recreation, and those priorities have molded growth and activity in the



MUSEUMS

Harry W. Meador Jr. Coal Museum: Curator Freddie Elkins, retired coal miner. Features old photos, scrip, mine equipment, doctor's and dentist's "office," mine tools, memorabilia. Hours vary with seasons. Call 523-4950 or 523-9209.

John Fox Jr. Museum: *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* author's family home. Furnishings, all contents original to the house, just as Fox family left them. Hours vary with seasons. Call 523-2747.

June Tolliver House Museum and Book and Gift Shop: Next door to *Trail* drama ticket office. Four floors of period furnishings; School Room photo collection featuring more than 25,000 school, community and local photos; gift shop featuring local books and crafts. Call 523-2707.

Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park: Current rotating exhibit: "The Civil War in

Harry W. Meador Jr. Coal Museum curator Freddie Elkins, a retired general mine foreman for Westmoreland Coal Co., shares mining stories and lore with tourists, school groups and researchers who come to visit.

Southwest Virginia," ends Oct. 15. Festival of Trees, featuring 80 decorated holiday trees, is Nov. 13-Dec. 31, call about night viewings and evening concerts. Annual Spring Quilt Show April 1-May 31, 175 quilts. Museum hours vary with seasons. Call 523-1322 or go to www.swvamuseum.org.

101 Car: Preserved interstate railroad private car, built in 1870 for South Carolina & Georgia Railroad, acquired by Southern in 1899. Most original fixtures intact, including lavatories, lighting, speedometer in rear observation room. Free tours. Also houses the town's business association, on the

town. "For a rural setting, there's a lot going on here. There's something for the very young to the very old."

The town parks-and-recreation department operates eight parks, and offers everything from aerobics and yoga to Seniorcise. From 450 to 500 youngsters participate each year in Little League baseball, and youth football, basketball and soccer programs, and Powell Valley High School athletes have won state championships in golf, baseball and football. There are two ballet and dance schools in town, and council contributes to the Pro-Art Association, which presents a wide variety of area musical programs and plays.

In nearby Powell Valley, Lonesome Pine Country Club has an 18-hole golf course, driving range, pool and dining room. There's excellent fishing in several lakes and streams near the town.

Tony Scales, a local geologist with the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy, likes to speak to local groups about the geology of the place he calls home. "If you stand at Little Stone Gap, at the Powell Valley overlook on U.S. 23 north of Big Stone, you can see the folds that form the valley below," he notes.

"The Appalachian Mountains are 250 million years old, the oldest on earth. They once rivaled the Himalayas in height. Most gaps in mountains are formed because the rock originally fractured. In Big Stone's case, the river wanted to wear through, and to this day, Powell River is still wearing down the gap."

Celestite, a strontium-bearing mineral that is semi-rare, is found in the Hancock Dolomite rock formation up by the Comfort Inn and Huddle House restaurant, he says. Fossils can be readily found in an exposed

Web at www.gapcorporation.com; operates the regional tourist and information center. Brochures on all area attractions, map of "real" locations of places in Adriana Trigiani's Big Stone Gap trilogy, Big Stone Gap Walking and Driving Tour booklet. Call 523-2060.

EVENTS, OTHER INFO

Appalachia Coal Railroad Days: Annual festival in Appalachia, two miles away. Aug. 2-6, 2005, and Aug. 2-6, 2006, town's centennial year. Go to www.appy100.com and reconnect with local folks, read about events planned for the entire year, or call Louise Henegar at 565-0055.

Adriana Trigiani movie shooting: Slated to begin this fall in the Gap. Author of the Big Stone Gap trilogy, she will direct the film, stars to be announced soon. Novels sold at several local stores. Book-signing schedule, passages from nov-

els, discussion guides at www.adrianatrigiani.com.

Annual week-long Mountain Music School, Mountain Empire Community College: Youth (ages 10 and up) and adult "ear training" classes in old-time fiddle, claw-hammer banjo and guitar; string-band class for intermediate/advanced musicians in guitar, banjo, fiddle, mandolin bass. Classes are 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday the first week of August. Daily afternoon concerts by accomplished musicians (free, open to public). Graduates attend the world-famous "Carter Fold Music Festival" that Saturday at Hiltons (about 30 miles south of the Gap). Tuition \$150. Loaner banjo, fiddles and guitars available; some youth scholarships. Class size limited. Call Sue Ella Boatright-Wells, 523-7489, e-mail sboatright@me.vccs.edu for registration info.

Home Crafts Days: 34th annual event at Mountain Empire Community College is Oct. 14-

16. Free concerts, huge craft show, ethnic and international foods. Shuttle bus service available from downtown motels and shopping district to college campus, about 2 miles from town. Questions? Call Sue Ella Boatwright Wells 523-7439 or go to www.homecraftdays.com.

Tri-State Singing Convention: Free gospel singing, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., second Sunday in June, 86th annual in 2006; started with the Rev. Sylvan Wilson, and his descendants still sing opening songs. Coordinator Jack Gardner, 523-0374.

July 4th in the Gap: Full week of free concerts, games, pet show, other activities ending with Independence Day parade featuring hundreds of kids and grandkids on decorated bikes, trikes, scooters and more. Carnival rides, games, free concerts and huge fireworks display follow in Bullitt Park. Sit in the stands, bring lawn chairs, or stretch out on blankets on the football field and enjoy.

Country Cabin at Josephine: Old-time music and dancing every weekend, about 8 miles north of the Gap. Admission \$3 for most events. Call 679-3541 for info on times and who's playing.

Heart of Appalachia Tourism Authority: Coordinates marketing efforts for the area and has a host of information on local and regional attractions. Call 523-2005 or go to www.heartofappalachia.com. ■



(Far left) Mutual Drug will be the focal point for Trigiani's movie based on the Big Stone Gap novel. (Left) The reunion season in the Gap brings in several thousand folks annually. Tolliver House volunteer Howard Cummins, at right, reads a tribute to singer/songwriter Dovie Sowards before she plays a tune she wrote about her alma mater.

slope on U.S. 23 next to the Powell Valley High School exit.

Pat Gibson, in her third summer as a part-time hostess at the 101 Car, a restored train car that serves as the regional tourist and information center, says folks from all over the nation and a number of foreign countries drop in to ask questions and learn about the town. The car, itself, is an attraction as well.

"It's just incredible to imagine that someone designed a railroad car in 1870 that would be as functional as it is today," she says. The corner sinks in the sleeping quarters are original, as are the etched-glass panels in the china cabinets and the built-in brandy dispenser in the dining room wall.

What do visitors typically want to know? Directions to reunion sites. The location of Glencoe and River View cemeteries, which

have large numbers of Civil War veterans. Museum and drama hours. And everything imaginable about Adriana Trigiani.

"We even have a brochure with a map that lists all the places she writes about in the book and pinpoints where they are. Everybody wants to eat at Mutual Drug and see the drama, if it's in season," she says.

Is there really a Strawberry Patch community and a Cracker's Neck? Yep, and the Victorian houses on Poplar Hill are just as beautiful today as they were when they were built a century and a quarter ago, she tells folks.

The Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park walking tours give the history of old homes and old neighborhoods. The museum, director **Sharon Ewing** says, represents all the historical periods of Southwest Virginia, from early American Indian tribes to Appalachian fam-

ilies, and from the industrial revolution to the building of the town.

Even the museum, originally the Rufus Ayers mansion, is unique. "The woodwork is all native red oak, accented with nine different decorative motifs. But the thing that fascinates a lot of people is the floor. People are used to wide planking and these boards are only three-quarters-of-an-inch wide, tongue and grooved."

In the more than 20,000 pieces of the collection are a one-of-a-kind set of china commissioned by Queen Victoria for Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli and paintings from Dutch and French masters, as well as one by American artist John Brown, all fully restored, "comparable to works you would see in the Louvre or any large metropolitan fine arts museum," Ewing says.

Ongoing interpretive programming, rotating exhibits, an annual show featuring



Entries in the puppy category at the ninth annual C. Bascom Slep Memorial Library Pet Show included, from left, Justin Christian and Daisy, Katie Buckles and Powder, Alyssa Mabe and Rufus, Nick Taylor and Delores Troub with Oddball, Beverly Johnson and Frankie, Ausha Stidham and Bruiser, Kayla Hogue and Midge, and Rebecca Osborne and Phoebe.

175 quilts, and a holiday exhibit featuring 80 Christmas trees bring folks to the museum throughout the year.

“If you love old photos, you can spend hours at the museum looking through ours. If you have a special request for a photo of a historical figure or place that we have in the collection, you can request copies for a fee,” she notes.

Garnett Gilliam, a volunteer at the June Tolliver House and an avid photo collector, has amassed more than 25,000 local pictures of old schools, ball teams, local folks and local bands and groups, and opened the display to the public in the upstairs “School Rooms” on the Tolliver House second floor.

Folks often discover photos of family members in the collection, Gilliam says. “We had more than 3,000 people in town for reunions last summer, and we’re seeing an increase this year. It’s amazing what people find in these old pictures.”

Local books in the gift shop are a popular draw, and displays include period furnishings and a gallery where artists display their work.

Freddie Elkins, at the Harry W. Meador Jr. Coal Museum, hosts visitors looking for old history and photos as well. The museum, which opened in 1982, contains Meador’s and Stonega Coke and Coal Co., later Westmoreland Coal Co., collections of photos, artifacts, scrip, and mining equipment. Visitors see a miner’s kitchen, early 1900s dentist’s office, 1902 equipment from the old Stonega Hospital, and mine-safety equipment and tools.

“What I like best is the ‘No Smoking’ sign

for the mines back then, written in 17 languages. Can you imagine what this place must have been like back then?”

Few folks have looked harder, or longer, at what the Gap was like in the old days than 35-year veteran *Post* newspaper editor **Bill Hendrick**, now retired. Hendrick delights in the successes he has seen residents attain. “Former Miss America **Leanza Cornett** is a local gal. National Football League players **Thomas** and **Julius Jones** grew up here and played Peanut and high school football here. **Larry Dalton** took music lessons here as a child and is now a Steinway Artist who tours the world. Former Virginia Gov. **A. Linwood Holton** was born and raised here, and the list goes on and on.”

The house he lives in, near the entrance to Bullitt Park, belonged to John Fox Jr.’s brother, Horace, the fellow who laid out the streets in the town. “We have the widest streets in the region and we owe it to Horace Fox,” Hendrick says.

Without a doubt, the Gap is a volunteer town, he says. Wellmont Lonesome Pine Hospital, Heritage Hall Nursing Home, the Fox and Tolliver museums, the *Trail* drama and all the youth sports programs involve volunteers. While garden clubs have gone by the wayside in most towns, Big Stone Gap has three, the Intermont, Dogwood and Valley. Clubs schedule standard flower shows at three sites on the same weekend in December, and Dogwood hosts a show in June at the Fox Museum.

“There’s even a volunteer effort to build the Lonesome Pine School and Heritage Center, where Garnett Gilliam’s photo col-



Several paintings that could hang in the world’s finest galleries, china Queen Victoria had made for Benjamin Disraeli and a hair wreath made by local mourners are among the wide variety of holdings at the Southwest Virginia Museum Historical State Park. Its annual quilt and Christmas tree shows draw thousands to the Gap.



Retired *Post* newspaper editor Bill Hendrick lives in the Horace Fox house, near Bullitt Park. Hendrick says Fox, the brother of famed writer John Fox Jr., laid out the streets for the town more than a century ago.

lection and a whole lot of other material will be on display for people to copy and research.

“This has always been a historical town from the word ‘go.’ It’s a perfect place for a retiree or anybody who loves history.” ■