Gary A. O'Dell & Duane D. Allen

The Changing Fortunes of a Small Town in Kentucky

Ghosts of a prosperous past

Strung along the narrow valley of Roundstone Creek, just before it joins the swift waters of the Rockcastle River, is the very small town of Livingston, population about 240 souls. The old federal highway, US 25, will take you there. Rising from the peneplain of Kentucky's Bluegrass region, the highway skirts the solitary hills called Knobs as it enters Rockcastle County on the edge of the Appalachian foothills. After passing through Mount Vernon, the county seat, the road meanders back and forth, mostly following the

valley bottoms as it threads the ragged edge of the Cumberland Escarpment. Along the wayside are scattered barns and rural dwellings: new houses of brick and vinyl siding, old homes of log and clapboard, mobile homes and metal buildings. The terrain grows more rugged with every mile, the ridges higher, the valleys more narrow. Trees cover the hills, stark and leafless on this day late in winter. The lowering sun splays their long and complicated shadows over the pavement. The road ascends once more, cut deeply into the side of the ridge, and sweeps downward in a broad curve to Livingston on swift Roundstone.

As Highway 25 approaches the town, it briefly sheds its country ramblings and straightens to assume the sedate promenade more appropriate to the Main Street of a Small Town. Just outside the town limits is the first of four churches in Livingston. A sign before the Pentecostal Church tells of its 1974 erection on the former home site of a native son who was a posthumous recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Just beyond is the sign, "Welcome to Livingston." Tidy white frame houses, with impeccable lawns and manicured shrubs, trimmed in dignified colors of brown and black and dark green, are interspersed with churches. Baptist, Christian and Church of Christ, each is spruce with new paint and the pride of the congregation. Next door to the Christian Church the Stars and Stripes snaps briskly on the flagpole before the brick post office.

Here is the semblance of quintessential small-town Americana. But this Thornton Wilder landscape, perhaps inspiring the nostalgic illusions of *Our Town*, lasts for no more than these few blocks, shattered by the deadly reality of the moribund commercial district. Not even the shabbiness and monotony of the small town Main Street so bitterly etched by Sinclair Lewis can match the wasteland that is downtown Livingston. Sinclair's young Carol Kennicott, that naively determined social reformer fresh out of university, strolled through the fictional town of Gopher Prairie and viewed with distaste daily life at the hotel, the drug store, the doctor's office, the hardware store, the bank and numerous other "soundly uninteresting symbols of prosperity."

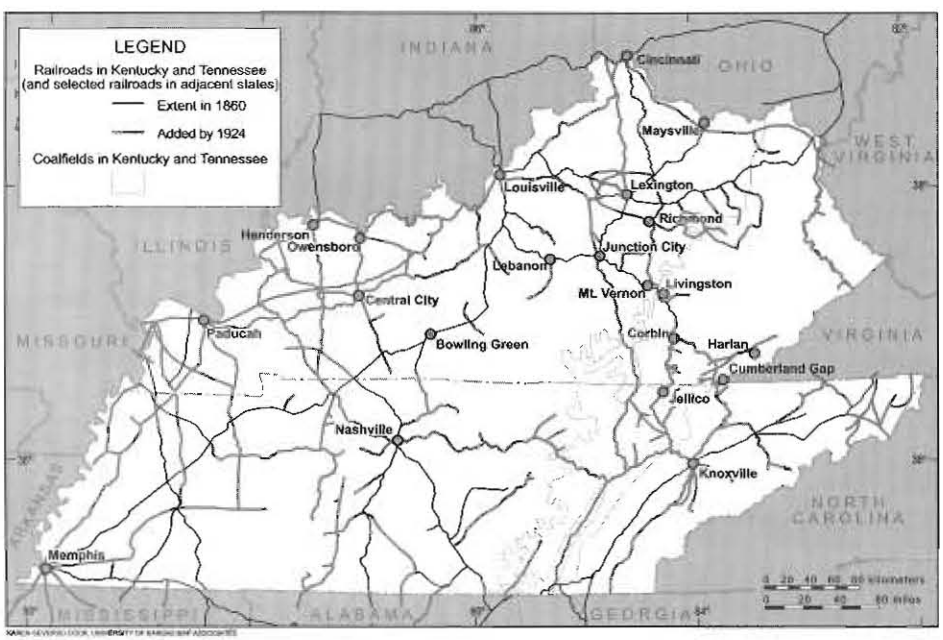
But Livingston has no hotel, no drug store or bank or any of these sundry establishments. There was a time when all these and more were present. Not one, but four hotels and numerous boarding houses catered to temporary residents. Not one, but two doctors tended human frailty. All that remain now are ghosts, faint echoes of a once-prosperous past when Livingston was a busy and exciting place to live. Livingston's Main Street, at the heart of the town, is a place of padlocked doors and boarded windows, of burned and sagging buildings, of broken glass and rotting timbers and unswept dust.

US 25 sweeps past the wreckage, hurrying to cross the river. All roads, it seems, lead away from downtown. As night descends, out in the countryside porch lights are glowing in front of many homes. On this chilly March evening in 1994, many residents of both Livingston and its rural neighborhood have left their homes to attend a meeting in Mount Vernon, ten miles distant. They have gone to fight for the survival of the last remaining institution in Livingston, the last visible symbol of community pride. The Livingston Elementary School was to be a casualty of the wave of educational reform that was sweeping the state and nation. It was a time of new trends in education, of tightened state budgets, of consolidation. The county Board of Education proposed closure of the school following the current term. More than 200 students attending the community school would be henceforth bused to Mount Vernon. The meeting room was filled with angry parents.

Gateway to the coalfields

Blighted and forsaken Main Streets are not particular phenomena of the urban metropolis. The annals of American landscape are crowded with the ghosts of small towns that were founded in hopeful anticipation, thrived for awhile, and faded dispassionately away. As many more linger on in stagnation or decline after the loss of one or more economic pillars. Seasons pass, times change; the original rationale for their existence may no longer have relevance in fin-de-siécle America.

Communities are founded for many reasons. One of the most important factors to influence the planting of a town was a location perceived to be on a strategic transportation route. During the early nineteenth century many settlements were established on navigable rivers and streams to take advantage of steamboat trade. By mid-century, the railroad was well on its way to becoming the dominant mode of transport. The railroad town was a common form of community in the midwest and west during the nineteenth century. Railroad companies in the west turned massive federal grants of public land along their right-of-ways into capital by creating new towns, laying out identical grid patterns and selling lots in these proposed settlements. In the midwest, however, towns were already numerous before the railroad boom began. Towns competed against one another to attain a rail connection; the railroads generally went to wherever they got the best offer. Communities successful in attracting a line or spur usually thrived for a time at the expense of their less successful neighbors.



Livingston was a serendipitous beneficiary of the frenzy of railroad building during the mid-nineteenth century. The citizens offered no incentives to the companies, subscribed to no railroad stock, for before the railroad came, there was no Livingston. The steel tracks planted in Rockcastle County only incidentally germinated a town. The place that became Livingston was in the path as the railroad pushed into the mountains of southeastern Kentucky in search of profits to be made as the tremendous natural resources of the region, coal and timber, were harvested with increasing rapacity.

Steel rails or wedded to the L&N

Just after the US Civil War (1861-1865) ground drearily to a close, excitement stirred the inhabitants of a small, sleepy clump of houses along the dusty road near where Roundstone Creek flows into the Rockcastle River. The Lebanon Branch of the Louisville & Nashville railroad was coming! Their little settlement was about to become a town! There would be jobs to be had on the line, and steady wages. It would be a grand thing, a great day for the people of Fish Point, named for the long-established Fish family.

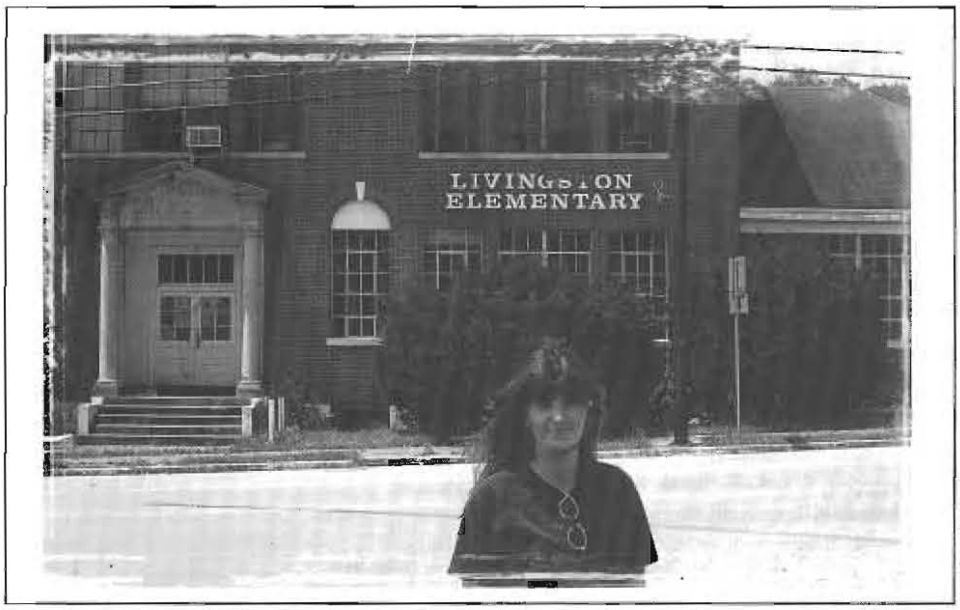
The year was 1869. During the months that followed the announcement, twin gleaming rails of steel were laid along the southwest bank of Roundstone, and the first engine soon chugged into town, shrilling its whistle in celebration. Until 1882, the town was the last stop on the branch line. Reflecting its new status, the name of the community was changed to Livingston Station in 1879 to honor the first postmaster, and to Livingston a few years later. By 1883 the tracks were extended to the Tennessee line, to hook onto existing rail lines at Jellico. In 1884 the Kentucky Central Railroad, which served the Inner Bluegrass, completed a junction with the L & N at Livingston; the Kentucky Central was absorbed by L&N in 1891. The first rail links between the regional trade centers of Louisville, Lexington, and Knoxville and the rich but formerly inaccessible coal fields of southeastern Kentucky were complete. The reddish-brown water-worn boulders of the creek bed gave name to the stream that meandered past the town, embracing it in broad sinuous loops. Set into the steep south bank of Roundstone Creek is an immense "blue hole" spring, a great upwelling of subterranean waters that the inhabitants came to call the "Boils."

This large spring was responsible for the original location of the community, whose citizens depended on the cold subterranean waters to supply their daily needs. This is cave country. The ridges have their roots in impermeable shales and are capped by sandstones and thin beds of bituminous coal; sandwiched between are layers of massive limestones, pierced by a vast maze of tunnels and caverns where groundwater murmurs in the dark.

Daniel Boone passed close by the site of future Livingston in 1774, laboriously engaged in cutting a road from Cumberland Gap to the Kentucky River. The trail followed and improved by Boone and his men had been a bison trail for millennia, and then a path for Cherokee incursions to the Kentucky lands. In 1796 Boone's trail became the first road authorized by the newly formed state government, improved to a wagon track known as the Wilderness Road. Segments of the road served in later years as the bed for US 25 and parts of the railroad line. In the years after Boone came through, the mountain region was gradually settled, more slowly than the fertile Bluegrass land to the north. A number of people found the situation to their liking at the Boils of Roundstone.

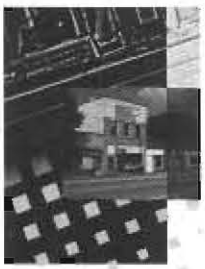
Just outside the southern edge of Livingston, the Wilderness Road still exists in much its original condition for a few miles, a dirt track crossing the Rockcastle River at a ford and snaking its way south to the top of nearby Wildcat Mountain in Laurel County. In 1861, Union and Confederate armies clashed atop the mountain in a bloody struggle for control of this important north-south route. After the battle, a victory for federal troops who reached the summit first, deserters and renegades from both armies plundered the hamlet of Fish Point. When the L & N line came through, the community began to grow rapidly. Close at hand was the Rockcastle River, which, although scenic, had been of little significance in the economy of the region. The Rockcastle was not a navigable stream, being full of whitewater and boulders below Livingston. Timber could be cut, but there was no way to send it out of the region. The Kentucky River, whose upper reaches drain much of eastern Kentucky, had long been used to float timber downstream to commercial centers such as Frankfort. The waters of Rockcastle, in contrast, ultimately merged with those of the Cumberland River, following a long meandering route through Tennessee that went to no major markets.

With the advent of the railroad the Rockcastle River took on new significance. For the first time natural resources of the region could be profitably exploited. A log boom and mill dam were built on the Rockcastle near its junction with Roundstone. As elsewhere in eastern Kentucky during the late nineteenth-century logging boom, hillsides were stripped of virgin timber and tremendous logs floated down streams and rivers in massive tangled rafts. Sometimes logs were so huge and streams so small that loggers built temporary dams to impound a large body of water. When the resulting pond was filled with timber, a worker knocked out the props and an avalanche of



Carol A. O'Dell

Full of ideas and energy, Mayor Sandra Tyree is aggressively seeking to tap into funds available through state and federal programs to revitalize the community. The Livingston school building, background, remains a primary concern.



wood roared and smashed downstream with the swollen waters. At Livingston sawmills the captured logs were converted into lumber, railroad ties, and mine timbers. Many logs from virgin stands were huge beyond the capacity of local mills and were sent out on railcars.

Coal beds in the vicinity were meager compared to those farther east in the Kentucky mountains, but even so Livingston became a mining center. Coal was hauled into the railroad bins by electric trolley and carried by cable across Rockcastle River northeast of town. Furnishing crushed stone to the railroad also became an important industry. From its marriage to the railroad, Livingston gained several major props to the local economy in addition to the taxes L & N paid into the county treasury.

The lingering scent of diesel

Denver Mullins, a tall man with no extra flesh on his bones, walked slowly up the little dirt road that cut perpendicularly through the west bank of Roundstone, about a thousand feet north from his home and on the same side. Denver's ancestors were among the first settlers in the region and there are today a great many Mullins in Rockcastle County. He stood with hands in his pockets and contemplated the tracks and the stream below. He made a half turn and pointed to the left. "Right there is where the first depot was," he said. We looked, and saw nothing but weeds and trees and eroded soil. "Next to it, was the freight depot." Denver turned back to face us. "Up there," he said, pointing to the slope behind us, "was the Mullins Inn. There was a grocery store in front of it. All gone, now." Above the vine-covered suggestion of a retaining wall, a double row of low rock pillars, remnants of the old hotel foundation, sprout like stone toadstools under the trees in Francis Dickerson's back lawn. Denver turned again, and pointed in the direction of US 25, beyond the former sites of the freight and passenger depots. "Over there used to be the Sambrook Hotel. Old man Sambrook lived across the creek. The old state highway used to go across the creek here, there was a bridge, an old iron bridge."

A few minutes later we drove to the south end of town, following a dirt road that looped under the railroad bridge where it crossed the Rockcastle River. The road came back out into a wide graveled area filled with rusting machinery, stacked railroad ties, and a couple of decrepit rail cars, out of sight down the slope from Main Street. The air was redolent with creosote and the lingering scent of diesel. Standing on a small heap of granite ballast, Denver gestured toward the river and told us that was where the sawmill had been located. We looked around where we stood. Three generations ago this had been the railroad yards. Now, there was a single pair of rails, shiny with constant passage, sweeping out of town between Roundstone and US 25. Loosened rails and piles of splintered ties were mute evidence to the ongoing removal of a parallel set of rusted tracks. Denver walked over to a concrete foundation set against the hillside, just below a row of houses that faced opposite toward Main Street. "This here was the new depot, built in 1898, torn down in 1966. Beside it was the Eight Gable Hotel, where the railroad men stayed. Down a ways was the stables, and the jail."

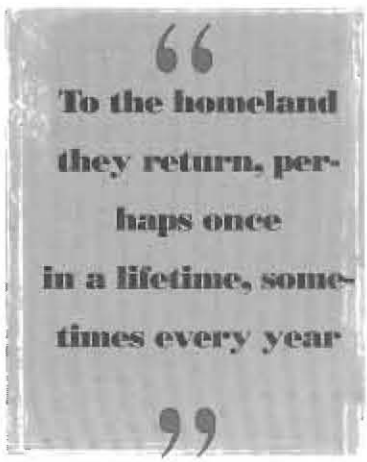
Gary A. O'Dell

The financial ills that have plagued the community are symbolically and starkly framed in the doorway of a building that was gutted by fire more than 30 years ago and never demolished nor repaired.

Change was in the air

More than a half-century ago, young Denver Mullins worked in the railroad yards as an engine driver, shuttling the cars around. In 1932 he brought Hazel Hansel to Livingston as his new bride. After a half-century of competition with nearby county seat Mount Vernon, Livingston was then the largest and most prosperous community in the county. Nearly 1,000 persons called the town home. Businesses lined Main Street from end to end; hotels, restaurants, drugstores, a theater, a bank, all reflecting the lively commerce and high wages generated by the steel rails. Yet change was in the air that year. It was the era of the Great Depression, when small towns across America were touched by a poisonous blight from which many never recovered. In those uncertain times, hard and practical men in distant offices made decisions concerning the future of Livingston, decisions that in a few short years quietly bled away the vitality of the town.

For many years before Hazel's arrival, the railroad was the heart and soul of the town. Multiple tracks paralleled Main Street, running between the street and the bank of Roundstone Creek. The depot was on Main, near the center of town, and many times during the day the hoot of the locomotive whistle was heard announcing the arrival of passengers and freight. Just east of the town center were the railroad yards where cars were overhauled and repaired, engines refueled and watered. Several hundred Livingston men worked for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, and supported the families who lived in the tidy homes along Main and subsidiary streets.



By the time of the Great Depression, Livingston was a bustling, prosperous railroad town. In 1902 L & N spurned linkage with the tracks of a competing line and laid its own tracks through to Knoxville. In short order the L & N was able to provide complete service from Cincinnati through to points in Georgia. Double-tracking was completed through this area by 1910. Livingston greatly benefited from the ever-expanding rail volume of passengers and freight. After the turn of the century both timber and coal operations intensified. The depot employed about a dozen persons including operators, mailmen and freight men. A couple of helper locomotives were on hand to help the southbound trains up Crooked Hill a few miles south of town. This was a steep and winding grade several miles long that passed through several tunnels, leading to East Bernstadt and London. The adjacent L & N yards at Livingston employed a large number of men to switch the cars, conduct "running repairs," and supply the coal-burning steam locomotives with fuel and water. Four large water tanks were located next to the depot. Northwest from the depot, opposite from the yards, was Bill Nicely's Eight Gable Hotel, a tidy restover for passengers bound north to Cincinnati or south to Knoxville and home to many railroad workers. Below the hotel and next to the depot was a restaurant. Tom Welch was born in Livingston in 1912 and well remembers the railroad era, for his father was an engineer paid about $200 per month to run the trains between Louisville, Corbin and Nashville. Walter Nicely's Railroad Restaurant was a busy place, he recalls, receiving orders for box lunches phoned ahead of the expected arrival of the train. As many as 200 lunches, mostly simple fare of beans and potatoes, were readied and passed through the windows of the passenger cars.

Much of the building boom in Livingston took place just prior to and during the Great Depression. This era, 1920-1940, was the zenith of Livingston's prosperity. The largest buildings in town, still present today in dilapidated form, were two brick structures built in 1919 and 1929. The town's potential seemed unlimited. Yet a shadow lay across this burgeoning growth. Events elsewhere were beginning to diminish the importance of Livingston to the railroad.

A large railroad shop was established in Louisville in 1905 for the maintenance of rolling stock, lessening the need for other facilities, but even this was not as significant as a development just 25 miles south of Livingston. Other towns in the region had benefited from the establishment of rail lines, and one in particular, Corbin, Kentucky, began to receive increasing patronage from the L & N after the turn of the century. By 1910 Corbin was an important junction for rail traffic bound to and from Knoxville. When a roundhouse and shop were constructed at Corbin during the 1920s, the town began to assume many functions that had operated at Livingston. Late in the 1920s the coal industry collapsed as a result of overexpansion and reduced demand. Following immediately on the heels of this regional economic calamity, the Great Depression affected railroad lines all across the nation. Freight volume handled by L & N shrank drastically. Worker layoffs and consolidation of operations were slowed only by the gearing up of the national defense industry in the late 1930s, but it was then too late for Livingston. The yards and depot at Livingston were shut down and the operation moved to Corbin, never to resume on the banks of Roundstone Creek.

Virtually overnight, the mainstay of the town's economy was removed, a blow from which Livingston never recovered. Today Corbin, with a population of nearly 8,000, is one of the major towns of southeastern Kentucky, possessing manufacturing and service industries no longer dependent upon the railroad. In Livingston today, diesel trains of the CSX line rumble swiftly by on the tracks behind Main Street several times each day, but never stop. "You can't go to Louisville on the train anymore," Hazel Mullins wistfully observed.

Relics of the Automotive Age

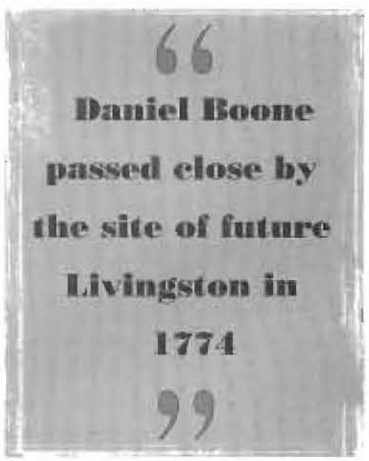
The impact of the bad years was not felt as severely in Livingston as in the numerous company-owned coal camps and towns further east, where rigid company control removed incentive and stifled economic and social development. Despite loss of status as a railroad center, there remained sufficient confidence in the town to stimulate new construction even during the Depression. Much of the development in this era was sponsored by local physician and entrepreneur Dr. R. G. Webb. The Webb Block was built in 1932, a one-story yellow brick building on Main Street housing four storefronts. Dr. Webb's professional office occupied the choice corner location, and he also provided the town with a theater in the same building. The eminent doctor also owned several rental houses immediately behind this building. Yet new development was not enough in the midst of the Depression to replace the economic support lost once L & N divorced the community. Livingston lost its bank in the same year, one of many such casualties of the period throughout America. The railroad workers moved on, and there were no longer passengers from the trains to seek lodg-

ing and meals. Hotels and restaurants closed their doors, forever, and were eventually torn down. Economic decay was briefly arrested by the increasing volume of truck and automobile traffic that flowed through the town. Prior to the 1920s Livingston could only be reached by train or at the end of a long stretch of bad road. US 25 was macadamized between Livingston and London early in the 1920s, and by 1928 a hard-surfaced road was continuous between northern Kentucky and the Tennessee border. After World War Two the highway received its first layer of asphalt pavement, and the era of the automobile had truly arrived. The federal highway became a major artery for the motoring public from Ohio into the southlands.

The automobile era left many imprints upon the town. The leveling by cut and fill of natural undulations of the old road left the residential area north of the commercial block perched above the street, the frontage on both sides lined by a concrete wall up to six feet high. To attend the greatly increased vehicle flow, roadside service industries sprouted along the highway both outside and within the town to provide motorists with gasoline and oil, repair work, food and lodging. Census figures for the town reflect the influence of the road. After a long downward slide from the 1930s, Livingston's population began again to increase.

The positive effects of the new road were short-lived, however. The construction of interstate highways in this country after 1956 had depressive effects on many towns. Urban historian Chester Liebs notes that these new limited-access four-lane speedways "did much to alter the pattern of roadside commercial development. Each new interstate tended to siphon off traffic from older parallel trunk roads." Whether or not a community lay upon the interstate route could determine economic life or death, and civic authorities in small towns suffered acute anxiety during the planning stages, replaying, in a new century, the same drama characteristic of the railroad boom.

Construction of I-75 in southern Kentucky began at the Tennessee line in 1961, proceeded northward, and was built through Rockcastle County in four sections from 1967-1969. The final section, crossing the Rockcastle River at the Laurel County line, opened to traffic on November 21, 1969. With Livingston snubbed by Interstate 75, traffic on the old federal highway dwindled to a trickle. Automobile-dependent service industries folded. Livingston had received another severe economic blow, comparable to the loss of the railroad. The fate of Fort Sequoyah, about three miles south of Livingston, provides a striking representation of the economic effects of the advent of high-volume highway traffic flow and its abrupt withdrawal. In tandem with the massive post-war program of highway expansion, multitudes of Americans set out to explore America in their beloved automobiles. Across the nation, locals sought to separate these hordes of nomadic tourists from as many dollars as possible. Commingled with necessary roadside services of gas and oil, food and lodging, were rustic tourist attractions where wayfarers could gawk at the caged bears, snakes and alligators or buy fireworks, seashell ashtrays and concrete Madonnas. More respectable than many such establishments, Fort Sequoyah was established in 1955 to serve the demand for Indian souvenirs, initially as an business outlet for the Cherokee Nation but soon including handwork from many tribes. The attraction thrived on the endless stream of vehicles that clogged US 25, until that stream dried up. "The interstate just killed it," recalls owner Lucille Carloftis.



The history of the White Star garage is also representative. The original structure was built more than fifty years ago by Clifford Bales, just north of the town limits on what was then the route followed by US 25. About 1950, the highway was rerouted to straighten out some of the curves and the White Star was left stranded on an abandoned segment of road paralleling the new highway. Bales promptly built a new White Star on the new road directly opposite his old place, now invisible behind a hill. This establishment was one of the most successful of the service industries, offering travelers hot food as well as fuel and repair work. Completion of the interstate highway doomed the enterprise. In 1972 Bales sold the empty building to Standard Oil, and it remained unused until 1978 when it was purchased by Jackie Burdine. Burdine, who had operated Burdine's Garage in downtown Livingston, reopened the White Star in 1980 on a much smaller scale, selling auto parts and specializing in exhaust system repair. Nearly all his business, he says, comes from out-of-town.

In ironic contrast, the Livingston Motor Company on Main has instead become dependent upon the interstate highway. Lacking sufficient clientele within the community, the company takes its services to I-75 by providing on-the-spot repairs for the trucks that transit this busy expressway. The White Star and Livingston Motor Company are survivors of the interstate debacle, albeit in greatly reduced circumstances. Less fortunate than either, on the roadside about one-half mile southeast from Livingston are the derelict remains of the Trolley Inn. The parking area of this small former service station is overgrown, the windows boarded up, and graffiti scrawled on the walls. Burdine's Garage on south Main Street still stands empty, and on the north end a mobile home occupies the place where once a Texaco station attended motorists. Today, many of the visible traces of the automotive era are relic forms lacking function in a transformed environment.

A gradual economic erosion

Lil's Restaurant on Main Street, established in 1990, does a good business. Lil Griffin, assisted by various members of her family, serves a simple menu of traditional American staples: burgers and fries, chili dogs, ham sandwiches. The restaurant has a long counter against one wall, three booths opposite, and a handful of tables and chairs between. The restaurant is the social center of the community, where the few young people and the many elderly often come as much to visit with their friends and exchange news as to consume a meal. On most afternoons 86-year-old Tom Welch can be found in one of the booths, consuming a dish of spicy fried cheese balls for which Lil usually neglects to charge. Tom moved away to Mount Vernon a long time ago, but his Livingston roots are strong. Lil's daughter comes in toting her new baby and sits with Lil at a back table. Tom abandons his cheese

balls for awhile and goes over to entertain the baby. People wander in and out, exchange greetings, drink colas. Every so often Lil gets up and goes into the back room and returns to slap a burger on the grill for someone who actually came in for a meal. Against the wall in the back room is a massive block of steel about four feet square. It is always in the way, but a few years ago Lil gave up and placed a freezer in front of it. It is embedded in the floor and would be considerable trouble to remove. The massif has a steel door in front with a handle: it is an old-fashioned upright safe. Lil's is located in what was once the First State Bank of Livingston, long gone since the Depression years. There are only three other businesses within the town limits. On the south end of Main Street, between the volunteer fire department building and the empty Burdine Garage, directly above the site of the old depot, is a large expanse of worn and weary asphalt. At the back of the lot is a mobile home, incongruously surrounded by all this pavement instead of a lawn. A small building, about the size of a garden shed, is attached to one end. A striped pole hangs by the door; here is Bill Medley, the town barber. At the edge of town on the north is the Livingston Motor Company where Jerry Jones makes his living servicing trucks that break down on I-75. Across the street is Hays Grocery. For decades this tiny market, not much larger than a suburban garage, was owned and operated by Lee Mullins and known by his name. Lee retired last year, and the store was purchased by a Laurel County man.

Until recently there were a few other business establishments in Livingston. The poolroom closed just this year. A couple of years ago, the variety store occupying the northern end of the Webb Block was forced to vacate when the building next door collapsed upon it. The failed building was gutted by fire in the mid-1960s and never renovated by the owner. Before the variety store closed, the laundromat shut down...and so the story goes. Economic attrition as, year after year, establishments close and are never regenerated. The relatively new post office building occupies the site where in the 1950s stood Livingston's only manufacturing establishment, a casket factory, which in its turn replaced a skating rink.

There has been some new construction in Livingston in the last decade or so. The post office is one example, but the most prominent is Livingston Manor on the south end of Main Street, next door to the Baptist Church. This modern brick structure provides subsidized housing for the elderly and other needy persons. The latest addition, on the other side of the Baptist Church, is only a concrete slab at this time. A building donated by Fort Sequoyah will be transported to this site next year and will be the new home of the volunteer fire department. Beside the old elementary school, a one-story brick classroom building erected in the 1970s stands empty and deteriorating.

S.O.S.: Save Our School!

The March 1994 meeting at the Mount Vernon High School was not going well, despite moderation by representatives from the state Department of Education. Arms folded across their chests, parents and teachers of Livingston Elementary pupils radiated hostility and determination toward members of the county school board present. Many had picketed the high school before the meeting began, carrying signs that were now propped against the walls of the room or stashed under chairs: "Save LIVINGSTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL!" "Hometown Education for Livingston Pupils!" "I'D RATHER KEEP MY KIDS AT HOME THAN SEND THEM TO MT VERNON!" "LISTEN to the PARENTS! We know what is BEST for OUR KIDS!"

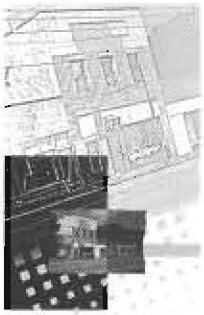
Members of the county board shifted angrily in their seats as abuse and accusations of betrayal and corrupt politics were heaped upon them. The traditional one-room schoolhouse, providing a primary education, was a fixture in many rural areas of Rockcastle County until the late 1960s. Higher education in the Livingston area commenced when the Livingston independent graded school district was organized in 1913, serving grades 11 and 12. The original wood building consisted of eight large rooms heated by individual coal stoves and had neither electricity nor running water. In 1927 the present brick building was constructed. The increasing cost of school financing and a decreasing rural population forced many community independent schools to consolidate with the Rockcastle County School system during 1949-1950. The Livingston school expanded its program to serve grades 1-12. Livingston began busing in students from the surrounding countryside in the mid-1950s, and the one- and two-room schools scattered through the county were gradually closed down.

Lucille Carloftis sent her four children through the Livingston school in the 1950s and 60s and has no reason to regret the quality of education they received, for each went on to achieve a college degree. "It was like a private school," she recalls. "The teachers were completely dedicated. They were like part of the family." Discipline problems were rare, and quickly resolved, for the parents, too, had been Livingston pupils and a close rapport existed with the teachers. Several of the instructors, like Francis Dickerson and her sister, were themselves products of the Livingston school who attended as children and returned as adult professionals to teach. With a student body of three to four hundred, this era was the Livingston school's zenith. Graduating classes numbered thirty to fifty young adults who, as Buzz Carloftis remembers, became lifelong friends.

Carol A. O'Dell

The trophy collection of the now-closed Livingston school has found a new home at Lil's Restaurant, keeping alive in memory the proud accomplishments of the community's children.

Livingston lost part of its student population in 1973 when the new county high school was completed at Mount Vernon and siphoned off all high school students in the county that attended smaller facilities. The Livingston facility became an elementary school and thereafter served grades 1-8. Enduring despite the loss of so many other community institutions over the years, the school represented continuity of existence and a portent of future hope. So significant was the school as a symbol of community that a photograph of the building was featured on the menus at Lil's Restaurant. In 1993 came the disturbing rumor that the pride of the town would soon be closed down permanently. Sweeping changes in educational programs at



both state and local levels prompted this development. Kentucky was then in the process of instituting middle schools statewide to serve grades 7-10. To meet this mandate, construction of a new high school began at Mount Vernon in 1992, and the former high school would become Rockcastle County's first middle school. In the view of the county school board, with the removal of grades 7 and 8 from Livingston to Mount Vernon, the Livingston school would have too few remaining students and could no longer provide a good education.

The rumors of impending closure stimulated a group of local citizens to organize SOS, or "Save Our School" to influence the county school board through public opinion. This grassroots campaign had little effect, for in February 1994 the board met to act upon the recommendation of its planning committee to close the Livingston Elementary School. About thirty citizens unleashed their ire on startled officials at the February meeting, storming out of the building before the votes were cast. Despite the uproar, board members voted unanimously to close the school.

This marked the beginning of a considerable furor in which the citizens of Livingston found themselves often pitted against their neighbors. Over the years the Livingston school had produced successive crops of graduates from whom many of the county leaders originated. In this controversy on the one hand was the local school board and planning committee, with the state Department of Education proclaiming neutrality on what it called a "local decision." The board was perceived by many as the enemy of the town, operating hand in hand with the state against the best interests of the community and children. At least one member of the county school board was a Livingston resident, and was subjected to particularly harsh criticism for his role in recommending closure of the school. Aligned against this group were many leading citizens of Livingston, including the mayor and town council, along with teachers, parents, former alumni and other residents. The school closure was perceived not only as a threat to a parent's right to control the education of their children, but a threat to the continued existence of the town. Following the meetings in February and March, school boosters unleashed an assault of pamphlets, newspaper advertisements and public meetings to demonstrate support for the school and to attempt to change the decision by the board. The board members defended their stance, expressing their regrets at the decision but emphasizing their belief that if a smaller scale Livingston School were allowed to remain open, students there would suffer academically.

Many Livingston residents remained unconvinced, and expressed their fears and anger at public meetings. Some parents felt their children would be discriminated against in the larger facility, that "attendance would drop, test scores would go down and the children would be treated like dirt." One parent stated that it was "cruel and unusual punishment to get a child up before the crack of daylight and bus them for an hour." Several parents stated emphatically that they would teach their children at home rather than allow them to be bused to Mount Vernon. Many of the comments heard were reminiscent of those expressed in city school districts across America when forced integration was accomplished. These sentiments were not universal, however, for some parents felt that their children could be better educated in a larger, more modern facility.

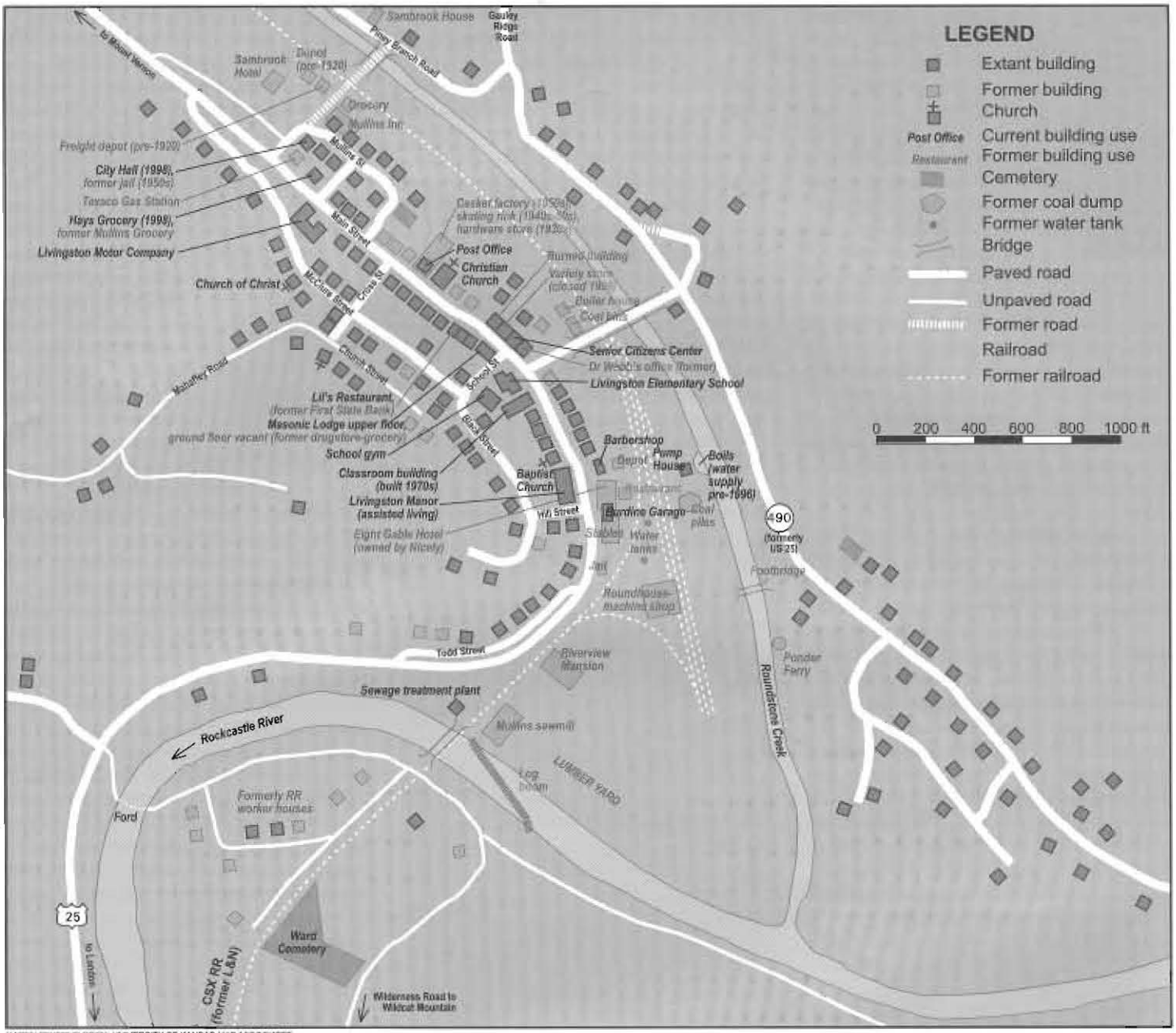
The most telling arguments in favor of the Livingston school were the simple statistics that demonstrated that Livingston Elementary students had dramatically improved academic performance in recent years, and that Livingston parents were more supportive of their school than those in any other area community. No other school in the county could boast a higher rate of student attendance, of parent participation, or a lower student/teacher ratio. Perhaps the most universal emotion aroused by the school controversy was a sense of discrimination and helplessness, reflecting sentiments endemic in the community for decades. The actions of the school board were seen as one more example of the county power structure in opposition to small and relatively powerless rural communities, of money and politics versus the common people. The threat was relevant to other small communities in the county with local schools. A notice in the Mount Vernon Signal stated a common opinion: without community effort, "you may as well say goodbye to Livingston and other small communities in Rockcastle County." Protest was to no avail. Although local residents took the fight to the state capital and the plight of the school received widespread publicity, the last class ever to attend the Livingston school passed outward through the doors into the warmth of a fine day in June 1994.

A strong sense of community

Livingston Elementary School today stands abandoned and deteriorating. Glass panes on the tall windows have been shattered one by one with bricks and stones under cover of darkness. Paint on the exterior woodwork is cracked and peeling, and loose wires dangle from the ceiling in the cafeteria. Even the name is disappearing by increments, the large plastic letters loosened by time and weather to fall unseen behind overgrown shrubbery. A glass case by the front door at Lil's provides a surrogate home for the collection of student trophies won in athletic and academic competitions, but the restaurant no longer displays the school building on the menu cover. Evocative of Livingston's long descent from prominence, the former pride of the community appears destined for gradual and irreversible decay.

The people of Livingston are determined that the old school building will be rescued, and again be an asset to the town. They do not stand alone. "It's a grand old building!" says Ruth Martin, executive director of the Daniel Boone Development Council. This private non-profit Community Action agency now owns the Livingston School property, the purchase made possible by a grant from the Kentucky legislature. As heir to the Great Society social programs of the 1960s, Daniel Boone Development has long been assisting low-income citizens of four mountain counties, including Rockcastle, to improve their lives. Many citizens of the area have obtained better jobs, earned high school equivalency diplomas, or financed improved housing with the assistance of this organization.

Ruth and the agency have worked closely with local citizens and the county board of education to plan a future for the old school facility that would provide long-term benefits for the community. During a series of public meetings, Livingston residents developed a list of potential uses for the school facilities which were evaluated for feasibility and developed into a strategic plan. After renovation to meet state and federal codes, the buildings of the former school will house diverse social services, including family needs assessment; an educational/technical training center to provide job skills needed in regional business and industry; and a trade emporium to pro-



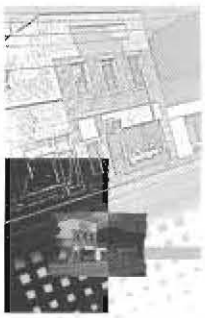
KAREN SEVERUD COOK, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS MAP ASSOCIATES

mote and display local food products and hand crafts. The strategic plan also includes affordable child care, a senior citizens center and a recreation center to be located in the former gymnasium.

An ambitious project estimated to cost more than a million dollars, development of the former Livingston school may well provide the impetus to reverse the community's long decline. The services offered are likely to create an inflow of program participants and stimulate the rise of micro-businesses such as restaurants, shops and convenience stores. Funding for the project has not yet been secured, but grants from the Appalachian Regional Commission and Community Development of the Blue Grass are expected to cover costs.

There are other signs that Livingston may soon experience revitalization. Buzz Carloftis is the executive administrator for Rockcastle County, and knows Livingston well, since he grew up there and attended the elementary school. From behind his busy desk at the county courthouse in Mount Vernon, Buzz explained several advantages that are currently favorable to Livingston's potential revitalization. In his opinion, Livingston's greatest asset is its people: no other town in Rockcastle County has such a highly developed sense of community. The town is located on a good highway, US 25, and is not too distant from Interstate 75. The water system, since connection was made to the Wood Creek water district in Laurel County, now has a greater capacity than any other in the county. Livingston is not far from London in Laurel County, a small city that is one of the fastest-growing locales in the state. If the downtown area could be made more attractive, Livingston would be in a good position to become a bedroom community for London.

Livingston's new mayor, Sandra Tyree, agrees: "I'd like to take a bulldozer and run it through downtown." Wryly, she acknowledges that the solution is not so simple. Some derelict buildings are owned by persons who have no money to either repair or tear them down; nor does the city, if the buildings were condemned. Less dilapidated buildings in the commercial district have been neglected by out-of-town owners more from frustration than lack of interest.



From the minuscule town budget, there have only been funds for a part-time police officer. Lacking law enforcement, small improvements made to buildings are soon destroyed by vandals. "Vandalism has been our biggest problem," Sandra declares. "The needs of young people have been ignored. We're now inviting them to be involved. Right now we're trying to come up with the money to allow the young folks to design and build a picnic shelter." To get the general public more involved in civic affairs, residents were invited to a pot-luck supper this past June where the town books were open for inspection. "We'll have more of these," she says.

Young and energetic and full of ideas, Sandra is a new breed of administrator for Livingston. She was born here, but grew up in Lexington, the urban center of Kentucky's Bluegrass region. In 1981 Sandra's mother moved back to Livingston, and Sandra resolved to stay. Recently she became involved in local politics, initially filling a temporary vacancy among the four city commissioners and then elected to the office for a full term. When the former mayor resigned in April 1998, Sandra was encouraged to tackle the job to see what she could do. In May, she was confirmed as mayor by the commission.

Finances were in abysmal condition; the town was so far behind on various payments that it no longer had any credit. With so many elderly residents with homestead exemptions, taxes collected were insufficient even to pay the town electric bill. Now that an insurance surcharge passed by the commission has been implemented, "We've got all our bills caught up," Sandra relates with satisfaction. The newly occupied town hall is awash with papers and bundles of insulation stacked to the ceiling and a single overhead light so dim that, in her corner, town clerk Angela Lovins has only the light from her computer screen to work by. Once a jail long ago, then unused for years, the one-room block structure is in the middle of renovation funded by the Cumberland Valley Area Development District.

"S.O.S.: SAVE OUR SCHOOL!"

With the support of John Kuhns — manager of the water and sewer plants and general-purpose assistant — Sandra is busy trying to tap into various other state and federal programs to obtain the improvements Livingston needs. John's enthusiasm is contagious, as he relates recent accomplishments and hopes for future development. The town has just employed a full-time police officer thanks to a grant from the US Department of Justice through the COPS program. Paperwork is now underway for further grants from this source that would provide funding for an additional officer, a patrol car and other equipment. This may be just what is needed to break the vicious circle of vandalism that has frustrated building maintenance, let alone new investment. Additional funds for community development may become available through the multi-agency Renaissance Kentucky program, established by Governor Paul Patton in 1996 specifically to help communities revitalize downtown areas and recognize those that achieve this goal.

Nor has Livingston been idly waiting for an influx of outside cash to magically solve all problems. The volunteer fire department is by necessity self-supporting, hosting a fish fry each month to provide operating funds the town budget cannot supply. The fire-fighters are in the process of constructing a new home for the department, using money earned by volunteering to clean up highway roadsides in the region on a state contract.

Nowhere is the concept of self-help more evident than in the local organization known as LEAP, or Livingston Economic Alternatives for Progress. The roots of LEAP began in 1984, when a group of Livingston citizens formed an alliance to fight a proposed Mount Vernon landfill that would threaten the smaller town's water supply. Flushed by their victory in the county fiscal court and with a new awareness of the power of cooperative action, these citizens were galvanized to address other community problems. The number one priority on their list was the shortage of jobs in the region. Unlike many economic development programs imposed on Appalachia and administered from "outside," LEAP sought to build upon existing skills and traditions with local people in control.

Since 1984, LEAP's accomplishments have been numerous. From the initial but short-lived "sorghum project" which captured national attention as an attempted alternative to tobacco for farmers, a more successful endeavor called Opportunities for Women developed Golden Kentucky Products and Countryside Crafts. Golden Kentucky Products grew out of the sorghum project and markets locally-produced gourmet foods throughout Kentucky including apple butter, honey and, of course,

Carol A. O'Dell

Every year on Labor Day many former residents of the Livingston area return for Homecoming, a celebration of community spirit that includes a colorful parade down Main Street by private and civic groups from all over the county.

sorghum. Countryside Crafts is a cooperative of local people in and near Livingston who, through LEAP, have gained access to markets for a wide range of handmade items. The organization also operates a farmers' market, distributes food at Christmas to those in need, and coordinates for Presbyterian church groups who, each summer, donate labor and materials for badly-needed repairs to homes in the region.

LEAP was originally headquartered in Livingston, but following a succession of unsuitable buildings, the organization finally moved to a location on US 25 a few miles north of the community. LEAP is mostly run by local volunteers and has few paid positions. The current director is Frank VanHoeve, a volunteer from Ontario on a two-year stint sponsored by the Coalition of Appalachian Ministries. The key to LEAP, according to Frank, is self-development: "Local folks started it, local folks operate it." Frank brought to LEAP a master's degree in rural planning and accounting experience with a multinational corporation. "I also mop the floor," he adds.

Homecoming

Soft-spoken senior citizen and lifelong resident of Livingston, Maude Mullins doesn't resemble any popular conception of an environmental activist. Yet appearances are deceiving, for it was Maude who led the fight against the landfill in 1984. When the landfill opponents gathered at the school building in Livingston to celebrate their victory, she observed that it would be a shame to let this newfound sense of unity and purpose dissipate. "We needed something that would help us," she recalls, "instead of pulling us down." Several of those involved in the landfill fight channeled their energies into the organization that would become LEAP but others, including Maude, found a different way to express and reinforce their strong feeling of community. Maude proposed an annual gathering to be called "Homecoming," an event to encourage all those who once resided in the Livingston area to come back home, if only for a day.

Each year on Labor Day, crowds that often number in hundreds converge on Livingston from across the nation. The mountains and forests of this region are so deeply rooted in the psyche of former residents that to most, wherever they may reside, however long they have been gone, Appalachia is still home to the soul. The collapse of the natural resource industries, timber and coal, in the region just prior to the Great Depression had forced a great outward migration in search of opportunities to be found in the nation's industrial and economic centers. During World War Two, thousands left the mountains to seek jobs in war industries, and the process of outmigration has continued because of chronic unemployment in the region. From New York to California, from midwestern cities such as Dayton, Cincinnati, Detroit and Chicago, the emigrants frequently return to their mountain homeland for weddings and births and funerals, to family reunions replete with tables of food and Bluegrass music under the trees. For many of Appalachia's children, old and young, physicians and factory laborers, schoolteachers and construction workers, the siren call of the mountains is irresistible. To the homeland they return, perhaps once in a lifetime, sometimes every year, to rediscover their roots, to reforge bonds of kinship, to renew the sense of place that links them irrevocably with those who never left the hills.

Carol A. O'Dell

The author stands next to the marker, nearly obscured by vegetation, commemorating Daniel Boone's 1775 trailblazing efforts that later became the Wilderness Road into Kentucky. The marker is located a few hundred yards north from Livingston on a cutoff stretch of old US 25 that parallels the newer highway.

This is the cement that binds residents together with the larger rural neighborhood to transform Livingston into something far more than a place name in the landscape. On Homecoming day, booths line the downtown sidewalks offering Homecoming T-shirts and memorabilia for sale. Merchants all over Rockcastle County donate items for the auction that helps to fund this event. The highlight of the day is the parade, in which virtually every public agency and private organization in the county is represented. Siren blaring, a fire truck from Mount Vernon leads the way, followed by a marching band from the county high school, a clown, horse-drawn wagons from the local saddle club, and floats featuring Bluegrass bands, the Livingston Ladies Auxiliary, Lion's Club, local churches and more. Slow-moving police cars with sirens compete in the din with revving motorcycles. Later, platform speeches are heard from dignitaries and the national anthem is sung. For a moment, at least, Wilder's *Our Town* does exist.

The authors are grateful to the many citizens of Livingston and others who assisted in the framing of this report, including Jackie Burdine, Buzz Carloftis, Lucille Carloftis, Elizabeth Crowe, Frances Dickerson, Father Al Fritsch, Lil Griffin, Frank VanHoeve, John Kuhns, Angela Lovins, Ruth Martin, Denver Mullins, Hazel Mullins, Maude Mullins, Dale Ponder, Ina Taylor, Sandra Tyree, and Tom Welch. Carol Allen O'Dell critiqued the manuscript and provided many useful insights. We are also indebted to Charles B. Castner, former L & N public relations executive and now part-time archivist of the L & N collection at the University of Louisville.

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