



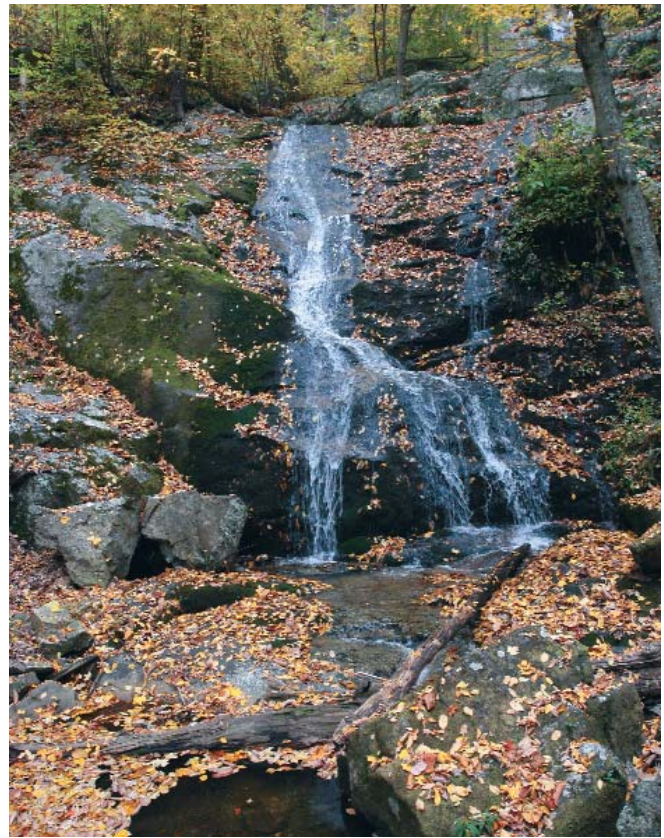


Fiercely Independent
NELSON COUNTY

By Phil Audibert

The view from Wintergreen looking towards Glen Mary Village and the road to Nellysford. Photo by Phil Audibert

Crabtree Fall, the highest cascading waterfall east of the Mississippi River, draw thousands of visitors each year to Nelson County. Photo by Phil Audibert



The ivy-covered Rehoboth Mennonite Church sits on a hilltop in the once bustling company town of Schuyler. During its heyday at the turn of the 20th century, that company, Alberene Soapstone, was Virginia's largest employer. Photo by Susie Audibert



“**T**here are no incorporated areas in Nelson County. Everything is a village,” says Maureen Kelley, Nelson County’s Economic Development and Tourism Director. She rattles off the names: Montebello, Schuyler, Shipman, Piney River, Roseland, Afton, Nellysford. Did we forget any? Probably. Faber, Wingina, Arrington, Colleen, Massies Mill, Howardsville, Wintergreen. “They are so unique. They’re treasures themselves.”

Wait a minute. You mean to say that the county seat, Lovingson, is not an incorporated town? Yep, that’s right. It has no police department, no town council, no public works department, and (blow a trumpet fanfare here) no municipal taxes. That’s not to say they don’t pay taxes in Nelson County. The board of supervisors sets a levy to pay for the usual things: a sheriff’s department, courts, and in this particular case, four brand-spanking-new schools, among other things.

But what is remarkable is that the fiercely independent people who live in these diverse and vibrant communities don’t expect services. “You don’t move to Montebello and expect someone to pick up your trash,” says Kelley.

This is confirmed as an attractive gray-haired woman pulls up to the gas pumps at the Montebello Country Store (established 1894). Kim Cash squeals in delight to see her friend Kelley has come up from the low country to visit her in this hamlet nestled in the mountains. They joke that she’s the mayor’s wife, because her husband Stanley is the logical choice to be mayor—if they ever got around to incorporating, which they won’t.

Self sufficiency

“You have to be; you honestly do,” says Cash. “When I first came up here, I used to run into the grocery store every day, and I thought, I can’t live this way. But you learn real quick.” Now she goes once a week.

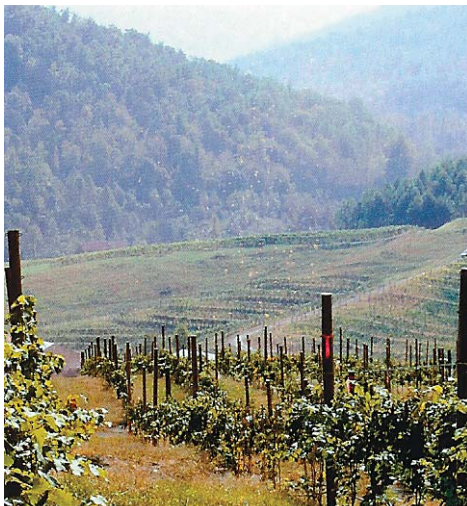
Cash looks at her home-schooled

son, Taylor. “Remember when you were younger if you did something bad in the neighborhood, somebody called your mom before you got home and told her? Okay, that’s what Taylor lives with every day. They know who he is.” Taylor squirms and nods.

Welcome to Nelson County, 474



Pansies seem to stretch as far as the eye can see at the Saunders Brothers 60-acre bedding plant and shrub nursery near Piney River. The family-owned and operated enterprise also grows 120 acres of apples and 40 acres of peaches. Photo by Susie Audibert



Wine grapevines thrive at one of Nelson County's nine vineyards. These terraced hillsides are part of DelFosse's 20-acres near Faber. Photo courtesy DelFosse Vineyard and Winery

square miles barely containing 14,445 fiercely independent souls living in and around a dozen equally independent communities such as this.

Imagine a somewhat lopsided baseball diamond with home plate at Gladstone where Route 60 crosses the James and second base at Afton where Interstate 64 crosses the Blue Ridge. The rather crooked base path from second to third is the first 30 miles of the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway. The base path from home to first is the James River. Route 29 enters the county from Charlottesville to the northeast and exits on its way to Lynchburg in the southwest. Lovingston, the aforementioned county seat, is appropriately located at the pitcher's mound.

For a county this remote and sparsely populated, there are a tremendous amount of things to do and see. At last count, nine vineyards and wineries, two breweries, a single-malt distillery (opening in May), 26 restaurants, 14 bed-and-breakfasts and country inns, numerous cabin rentals, three locally owned hotels, three campgrounds, 23 orchards, family farms and nurseries, two golf courses, five public boat launches, a public riding stable, two conference centers, a mountaintop four-season resort, and a shooting preserve are all located in Nelson County.

Let's take a tour. Starting in Lovingston, head south on Route 29, turn left onto Route 653 to...

Oak Ridge Estate

It might almost be easier to tell you what's not here, because Rhonda and John Holland and daughter Heather Goodwin have most of the bases covered. At the center of this 4,900-acre tract lies a magnificent 250-year-old mansion that was tripled in size in 1901 by Lovingston native Thomas Fortune Ryan. Orphaned at age nine, he went on to live up to his middle name, becoming one of the 10 richest men in America. He came home to Nelson County to build this getaway.

Today, the mansion and gardens host historic tour groups, weddings, catalog shoots, even movie sets. And if you need more room, you can always go to their recently expanded Carriage House Conference Center, capacity 750!

If upland bird hunting is your game, pack your shotgun, load your dog and take advantage of their 3,000-acre pheasant-, chukar- and quail-shooting preserve. Half-day, full-day, and three-day packages are available from October through April. They can even provide guides and dogs.

And then there's the racetrack. The Hollands wisely avoided the pitfalls of pari-mutuel betting, saying "until the rules change and loosen up a little bit, it's not cost-effective." Instead they have converted the track to host everything from an annual steeplechase in late October to all-terrain driving groups such as Camp Jeep and the National Four Wheel Driving Association who take advantage of miles of surrounding trails. The racetrack is also ideal for concerts, having hosted such country music stars as Kenny Chesney and Joe Nichols. "We can reconfigure ourselves, that's the beauty of it," says Holland with a smile.

Orchards

If you have time to do only one thing during your visit to Nelson, go to an orchard, particularly if you're here during the fall. Most of the orchards in Nelson County are located west of Route 29. So,



The formal Italian garden at Oakridge Estate serves as an elegant backdrop for events, weddings, photo shoots and movie sets. Photo by Susie Audibert

make your way back to that road and head south. Turn right at the sign that says to Piney River. You'll soon come upon Saunders Brothers' orchard and nursery.

This is the embodiment of Nelson County's goal to promote what Kelley calls "agri-tourism" or "agri-tainment." Just walk into the retail store that used to be the packing shed and seek out Hubert Carson. He's been working here for the past 18 years. Get him to put together your basket of fruit because he will treat you like family. He can also help you make a decision on which jam, jelly, salsa, cider or ice cream to buy. Just make sure you get some FROG jam...Fig Raspberry Orange Ginger. It's delicious.

"We used to pack peaches in here when I was in high school," says Jim, one of the four brothers in the family business. Started by his grandfather in 1915, the business branched into peaches in the 1930s. Jim's dad, Paul, diversified into the nursery business following a spate of crippling spring freezes. Today, Saunders Brothers has 60 acres in bedding plants and landscape shrubs, 120 acres of apples, and 40 acres of peaches. "We can stay in peaches from June 25 until September 25, and our customers really appreciate that," says Jim proudly.

His father Paul comes out of the office and stands next to a tall conical evergreen shrub. It is a boxwood, and for those of you who think that there are only two kinds of boxwood, American and English, think again. Sixty-one years ago, Paul Saunders planted boxwood cuttings as a 4-H project. Today, he propagates 25 cultivars. He has authored books, hosted trials, and is responsible for boxwood plantings at the White House, Mount Vernon, even the Forbidden City.

But let's get back to Nelson County. Just off Route 56, folks line up at Dickie Brothers packing shed to pay for the apples they picked themselves in an orchard on land that this family has occupied and farmed since 1752. Tommy Bruguere, whose mother is a Dickie, is also a member of the Nelson County Board of Supervisors. He takes a break from a busy weekday to answer a question about hot-button issues in Nelson County.

"It's all property rights, what you can use your property for," he answers. Kelley follows that up with "The citizens here are very welcoming, very open. You've got farmers living right next door to folks who just moved here. It's a very accepting society."

Time to head up Route 56, past

beautiful Pharsalia (built in 1814), past the state fish hatchery, past one of four crossings of the Appalachian Trail. Don't forget to stop at Crabtree Falls, the highest cascading waterfall east of the Mississippi. Stick to the trail; slippery rocks have claimed 24 lives here!

After you wave to the fiercely independent folks at Montebello, turn north onto the Blue Ridge Parkway and marvel at the vistas on both sides. It is from here that you can see the magnificent peaks of The Priest (4,063 feet), Three Ridges, Black Rock and Humpback Mountain. Much of this pristine forest was made a wilderness area in the 1990s, and Raven's Roost, a popular climbing area, is featured on the front of Virginia's official state road map. Using that map, when you come to Route 664, turn right and go to...

Wintergreen

Originally developed in 1972, Wintergreen is a mountaintop resort unique for many reasons. It is probably best known as a ski area with its 26 trails, 1,003 feet of vertical drop, two tubing hills, night skiing, high speed chairlifts and terrain park. But there's more.

Anne Marie Jones is the resort's Public Relations and Communications Manager. She points to the two golf courses: 18 holes at Devil's Knob, the highest golf course in Virginia and the three nines at the bottom at Stoney Creek, designed by Rees Jones. In fact, in early spring, you can ski in the morning and golf in the afternoon.

There is also a world-class tennis facility here at Wintergreen. According to Kelley, "for the seventh consecutive year, Tennis Resorts Online has ranked Wintergreen Resort as one of the top 10 tennis academies and one of the top 15 tennis resorts in the world."

To soothe and tone up those aching muscles, stop in at the spa, aquatics and fitness center, offering everything from full-body massages to gym workouts. And then have dinner at one of the four full-



The slopes at Wintergreen offer 1,000 vertical feet of skiing on 26 trails, as well as two tubing parks and one terrain park. In early spring, you can sometimes ski in the morning and golf that afternoon at the bottom. (Photo courtesy Wintergreen Resort)

service restaurants, before you collapse onto your bed in one of 300 villa-style condos. And there's more: You can get married here, you can have a conference here and you can park your kids here. The Dome features all kinds of cool games and activities for the younger set. Also, there's 30 miles of hiking trails, a 20-acre lake, and at Rodes Farm at the bottom, horseback-riding stables.

"It's a great place to retire," says Jones. "You have four distinct seasons." And the fact that, at 3,800 feet, they typically run 10 to 15 degrees cooler, spells blessed relief during Virginia's infamous dog days of summer.

Wintergreen also offers fishing. Besides the trout waters of the Tye and Rockfish rivers, "we have three miles of private blue-ribbon trout fishing," points out Jones. The expert guide service of Mossy Creek Fly Fishing in Harrisonburg runs the Orvis-endorsed program.

"We have good brand loyalty and people come here and they enjoy the

experience, and they want to have that experience with their kids and grandkids for years to come," sums up Jones.

"As a four-season resort, smoothing out that revenue stream and making spring and summer, those shoulder seasons, are what's making Wintergreen a destination," adds Kelley. It's hard to beat the location: 30 minutes from Charlottesville, one hour from Lynchburg, two hours from both Richmond and Roanoke, and a little less than three hours from Washington, D.C.

But before you leave, make sure to stop in at the Black Rock Gallery. Celebrating its fifth anniversary this February, the gallery features the work of more than 50 Virginia artisans, most of them from Nelson County. Owner Merideth Young came here from Colorado, "fell in love with the place," and with no business experience opened the store in only 14 days with \$250. Why? "Because it totally impacts and supports the locals."

Time to head down to the bottom and pay Steve Crandall a visit at his brand

new Devils Backbone German style micro-brewery and restaurant in Glen Mary Village. Steve is a longtime contractor in the area, having built 400 homes at Wintergreen. Now he's taking the plunge himself by erecting this magnificent wood and stone lodge. The first thing you'll see when you walk in is a 500-pound stuffed black bear. "We wanted a place for local people to come and enjoy, and people driving through the area to get a flavor of Nelson County. We're going to do a lot of locally produced foods."

If you drive north on Route 151, up through Nellysford to Afton, you'll pass six of Nelson County's nine vineyards as you make your way to Blue Mountain Brewery. No wonder Nelson County is brimming with what one of its brochures calls the "spirit of red, white and brew." And speaking of spirits, Eades Whiskey opens in Lovingston in May, "the first single-malt Scottish style whisky distillery in the Commonwealth."

While we're on the spirits trail,

drop in at DelFosse Vineyard and Winery just off Route 29 at Faber. Not only can they serve you a gold medal-winning wine, they can provide a perfect setting for your daughter's wedding. It makes sense that this recently established 20-acre vineyard and winery features classic French grapes; its owner is a transplanted Frenchman. "We are putting in place sustainability practices," says Claude DelFosse proudly. That makes them red, white and green!

Schuyler

This used to be a company-owned 7,000-resident town with its own hospital, school, post office, movie theatres, hotels, and hydroelectric generating station. The company, Alberene Soapstone, at the turn of the 20th century was the largest employer in Virginia.

Schuyler is also the birthplace of Earl Hamner, creator of the TV series "The Waltons." The old school has been transformed into Walton's Mountain Museum, complete with replicas of Ike Godsey's store and John Boy's bedroom. The museum is open 10 to 4, March through November.

Hurricane Camille

No account of Nelson County is complete without mentioning this disastrous event. On August 19, 1969, this "perfect storm" stalled over Nelson County. Measurements of how much rain fell that night vary, but it is generally believed that 31 inches fell in one five- to six-hour period, a

world record. A sheriff's deputy was quoted as saying the rain was so heavy he had to put a handkerchief over his mouth and nose just to breathe.

That much water in that little time unleashed a torrent of water, earth and stone cascading down the mountainsides and hollows, devouring everything in its way. Cars, houses, bridges, roads and, most tragically, 127 people were swept away. Most of the community of Davis Creek was wiped off the map.

"Hurricane Camille completely changed Nelson County," says Kelley somberly, "changes in the land, changes in the agricultural pursuits." Even the population level has barely recovered to pre-Camille levels. This August marks the 40th anniversary. Memorial services are planned. Camille still haunts.

Because 90 bridges were washed away as well as most of the roads, whole communities could not be reached for weeks. Food, medicine, water and supplies were airlifted to them by helicopter. No wonder the villages of Nelson County today are so fiercely independent; they didn't rely on government to help then and they don't now. Fiercely independent—that's Nelson County in a nutshell.

*Anne Marie Jones is no longer with Wintergreen Resort. The current VP for sales and marketing is Dana Quillen.

Phil Audibert has been writing and shooting photographs since he was 16. Recently, he won several first-place awards from the Virginia Press Association. Phil's wife, Susie, is also a photographer. Please visit them at AudibertPhoto.com.

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