



# PASTORAL PARADISE

BLAND, VIRGINIA



The Appalachian Trail has always captured the American landscape, from forests to farms. Its route, woven through mostly rural communities since it was first built in the 1930s, has evolved, and so have many of the communities, growing with the pace of our time. Other communities, like Bland County, have managed to retain the quintessential experience of agricultural America. Due in part to its geography, bound by high ridges and large holdings of U.S. Forest Service lands, the county's population and industrial growth has been slow. The result is a quiet community that's rich in farms and recreational opportunities.

Seventy-seven percent of Bland County is made up of Forest Service lands that include four wilderness areas, hiking trails, horseback riding trails, campgrounds, and 23 miles of new mountain bike trails at Round Mountain. For northbound Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, entering Bland County marks the comple-

From top left: Pastoral Bland County and Big Walker Mountain; The trails at Wolf Creek Picnic Area; Piedmont A.T. Hikers welcome community members to learn about the Trail at the Festival of Leaves; The author, and her dog, Annie, hike across Interstate 77 in Bland County — photos by Leanna Joyner and Trevor Lind; PATH members hike to Chestnut Ridge overlooking Burkes Garden — photo by Dianna Billips.

tion of a quarter of their journey. In the next 36 miles of Trail, they'll walk the rim of Burke's Garden along Chestnut Knob, ease over Brushy Mountain, and crisscross Little Wolf Creek. They'll enjoy a meal by the rushing water of Dismal Falls. They'll admire the design of the suspension bridge of Kimberling Creek, and most of them will leave Bland County with a bellyful of ice cream and a pack full of candy bars, according to Jimmy Miller who owns Trent's Grocery.

Hikers near Virginia Route 42 are also near Nature Way Country Store and the Amish community of White Gate whose simple living reflects some similarities to backpackers' streamlined experience with just the essentials. In the two or three days they traverse this

county on foot, hikers walking the narrow corridor of the Trail can chose to resupply at Trent's, Nature Way, or in Bland or Bastian, 2.5 or 1.8 miles, respectively.

Bland residents know when hiker season begins, and they're on the lookout to give hikers rides. "For eleven years we've been taking them to the post office and motels, and we do a weekly breakfast meal for any people who want to come to the church," says Alan Ashworth, Minister of New Hope Union Church. Anne Beardshall with the Bland Historical Society says she frequently runs into hikers, either at the post office or over breakfast at the Bland Square Citgo. With her encounters, she gets the chance to educate hikers on the history of Bland's namesake, Richard Bland of Jordan's Point, a colonial Virginian who led the resistance against Great Britain's taxation without representation in the 1760s and 1770s leading up to the Revolutionary War.

Bland's history is rooted in independence. The county was

TEXT BY LEANNA JOYNER

established because residents were no longer willing to cross the mountains to pay taxes that benefited other towns instead of their own. Bland continues to be an independent locale, with hardly any chain stores in any of the unincorporated towns of Bland, Bastian, or Rocky Gap. The community celebrates its scenery and recreational opportunities, with seasonal fairs. The town hosted an inaugural Festival of Trails last May that coincided with its designation as an Appalachian Trail Community. The event included a charity bike ride of two of Bland's Signature Road Bike Trails and several hikes on the A.T. The grand opening of the mountain bike trails on Round Mountain in the fall of 2012 may be a signal that future festival schedules will include rides there as well.

In October, the annual Festival of Leaves takes place at the fairgrounds. The event has live music, hayrides, local artists,



exhibits of school students' work, and booths of community groups, including the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers (PATH), an official A.T. maintaining club.

PATH's tent always includes information on the location of the A.T. in Bland County, education on Leave No Trace, the history of the Trail, and ways to get involved in hiking or maintenance. "There are a lot of people here who have forgotten what's in their own back yard. I like to introduce getting out on the Trail to people, because as they become more familiar with what's here, it builds their interest," said Diana Billips a county

## FOR NORTHBOUND APPALACHIAN TRAIL THRU-HIKERS, ENTERING BLAND COUNTY MARKS THE COMPLETION OF A QUARTER OF THEIR JOURNEY.

resident, PATH member, and the area's A.T. Community Ambassador. "I had an older fellow call — he's about 70 — and he wanted to explore the Trail. He'd never been out on the A.T. before; now he's a repeat customer."

PATH's outreach in the community has also included hosting SummerFest at the 260-acre Tilson Farm in June of 2012. This was the first year the event was held in Bland, and served as a way for the club to encourage the use of the Trail among local residents. "We invited the community to participate. We had a

have the option of several area day-hikes, which vary in length from 1.7-miles on trails at the Wolf Creek Picnic Area to a seven-mile A.T. loop hike of Little Wolf Creek, and include a 4.3-mile hike to Dismal Falls.

The Wolf Creek Indian Village and Museum in Bastian also has plans to expand the trails at its facility. April to November, visitors can explore a re-creation of the Native American village that was at the site 500 years ago. Protected at the time Interstate Highway 77 was cut through this mountainous terrain, the

community night, just like an old-fashioned community picnic, with hotdogs, hamburgers, and games. We had s'mores to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the A.T., and a bunch of people camped out with us. Some thru-hikers camped with us, too," says Diana.

This year the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and PATH are working with the Forest Service on a project to enhance the habitat for wildlife diversity at the Tilson Farm. As part of the project, partners hope that a loop trail can be added to the property for birding, recreation, and exercise. Residents already

museum has been serving visitors and school children since 1992.

For visitors exploring the area's history, beauty, trails, Amish country, or artists of the Mountain Crossroads Heritage Trail, overnight accommodations are found at the quaint Old Log House behind the courthouse and the Big Walker Motel in Bland. In getting to know A.T. hikers, Alan Ashworth observes that the Trail calls everybody. He says, "the thing that makes good people good people, makes good hikers good hikers," as he cheerily waits to greet the next season of good people to visit his town. ▲