GROWING GRANTVILLE OFFERS 'SLOW PACE'

By W. Winston Skinner

When Ed Wyatt came to Grantville as pastor of First Baptist Church, several things about the town struck him.

"The people were friendly," said Wyatt, a bear of a man with a big, natural smile. "It was a slow pace of life." He paused for a moment, then added, "I really did find it that way."

That is not to say that Grantville is not changing. The south Coweta town has attracted the attention of people who love the visible history and the availability of land at the edge of what demographers consider metropolitan Atlanta.

Wyatt remembered that when he arrived, several commercial buildings in the downtown area were in "the beginning stages of restoration."

Grantville hugs Troup County's border, and part of the city limits actually slips into Meriwether County. The town's location at the rural edge of the metro area meshes with the dreams of newcomers who are restoring century-old houses and opening businesses in downtown storefronts.

Subdivisions are also sprouting where pines once flourished along Highway 29, the highway leading from Moreland to Hogansville. "The town is really growing fast," Wyatt observed.

There are stores along Highway 29, particularly near the Interstate 85 interchange, as well as a church and the shiny new Grantville Elementary School.

Education has made its mark on the town. The old Grantville Elementary School was renamed to honor longtime Grantville educator Thomas Glanton before it closed. Today, that building is Grantville's municipal building. The city hall, council chambers, police department and library are located there. The adjacent school auditorium, which actually predates the 1930s-era school, is being restored.

On the other side of town, Grantville Brown School, which served the area's black students prior to integration, has been the headquarters for the Regional Educational Services Agency, which provides services to several area school systems. Both schools closed several years ago, and there was not a school in Grantville until the new elementary school opened in 2004.

Grantville's downtown area retains its authentic small town charm. Moviemakers used the row of storefronts as a backdrop for "The War," the 1994 film which starred Kevin Costner. Just across the railroad tracks are the town's two depots. The antebellum freight depot has been restored and is used for meetings. The other depot, a Victorian structure where passengers once waited for the train, now serves as the research center for the Coweta County Genealogical Society. Visitors from around the country have come to use the books, newspapers and files to search their roots.

At the other end of downtown from the depots, Bonnie Castle stands. Built in 1896 as the home of banker J. W. Colley and his wife, Itura "Love" Moreland Colley, the house has been a landmark from the day it was finished. James and Dee Latimore-Berry discovered the architectural gem, bought it and have filled it with the antiques she has been collecting for years.

Dee Latimore-Berry "fell in love with this place," according to her sister, Retta Bryant.

Grantville's streets are lined with historic homes. David Wilson, who has written patriotic plays and published a novel, "Curse of the Vampire," lives in his ancestral home which was built

during the Civil War – a time when little home construction took place in the Southern states.

Not far from Wilson's Griffin Street residence is the town's cemetery. A historical marker there pays tribute to Thomas Zellars, a Grantville native, who proved his heroism when he opened a flood valve when an explosion took place aboard the USS Mississippi on June 12, 1924, during a practice drill at San Pedro, Calif. Zellars was one of 48 killed in the explosion, but his actions saved the lives of many of his comrades. In 1944 a destroyer, the USS Zellars, was launched and named for the Grantville hero.

During the last municipal election, Grantville voters made history when they elected Casey Houston as the first female mayor in the town's history. On election night, Houston said, "We have lots of possibilities in front of us."

The 2000 census showed a population of 1,309. The Census Bureau's 2006 estimate is 2,550, an increase of 94.8 percent. Grantville is the only municipality in the county that sells water, sewerage, electricity and natural gas to its citizens. The current city administration has "a good, positive outlook," Wyatt said.

Approximately 30 percent of Grantville's residents are black. Wyatt and Chris McCambry, pastor of Greater Jehovah Baptist Church, have forged some new ties that have connected Grantville's citizens across the color line. Wyatt preached to a packed house at Greater Jehovah on New Year's Eve.

Now the two churches are going to work together to make sure no one in Grantville goes to sleep hungry. "We're going to do a joint venture with the Atlanta Food Bank," Wyatt said. One woman from each church will coordinate the effort.

In the midst of his active life as a pastor, Wyatt has enjoyed tending a 60 x 90 foot garden next to the pastorium. He hopes to share the produce with others who are blessed to live in Grantville.

"Things are really improving," the preacher said. "There's still a lot to be done." CL

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