

LIFE IN UPSHUR COUNTY

Upshur County offers the quintessential small-town experience.

The author, who will speak in the first person below, has been reading West Virginia county articles in *The West Virginia Lawyer* for many years. Most are focused on the county courthouse and county history. He has been asked to personalize Upshur County from the “perspective of a small-town lawyer.”

He does so as a West Virginia Wesleyan graduate, who met his wife of 52 years at the “Freshman Mixer” in 1964, and as a lawyer who returned to Buckhannon with two of four children (two more born here) on July 4, 1976, after service in the USAF JAG Corps. It is a personal description of an adult lifetime career in Upshur County and its surrounds and the academic and cultural influences of this rural West Virginia county and county seat.

If you want a “history” of Upshur County, he urges you to read the article on Upshur County in *The West Virginia Encyclopedia* authored by local historian and folklorist, Noel Tenney, found here: www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/842. It is authoritative.

For insights into the history of West Virginia Wesleyan College (WVWC), its philosophy of teaching, learning and building character and its approach to technology, he suggests that you peruse the table of contents of the WVWC Catalog: <https://tinyurl.com/y2cpm54z>.

When I, Burt, interviewed my old friend, Bob Skinner, retiring senior advisor to the president of WVWC and father of Mayor Robbie Skinner, he quoted from the “history” in the West Virginia Wesleyan online catalog above: “West

By Burton J. Hunter III



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PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER.



Wesley Chapel is an icon on the West Virginia Wesleyan College campus.

Virginia Wesleyan College offers the ... facilities to create an environment suited for teaching and learning. The elegant steeple and classic Georgian design of Wesley Chapel set the architectural style of the campus, while a partnership with Dell ... provide(s) a student purchase ubiquitous computing program ...” West Virginia Wesleyan College, which opened as a college in 1890, is fully accredited and highly regarded in the Eastern Region and among West Virginia institutions of higher learning.

Here is the link to the *West Virginia Encyclopedia* article on Buckhannon, with links to other resources: www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/682.

I knew nothing of the history of Buckhannon or Upshur County in 1963. My knowledge of this area came from several stays at the West

Virginia State 4-H Camp, Jackson’s Mill, in Jane Lew, Lewis County. But, as my parents drove us into the green hills of Upshur for my college visit, I felt as if I were coming home. Our “tour guide,” Peter Weaver, became my fraternity brother and Bishop of the Eastern Region of the United Methodist Church.

I was born in Wheeling, Ohio County, West Virginia, and my wife, the former Nancy Lynne Goodfellow, was born in Fairfield, Connecticut. We chose Wesleyan for similar reasons. We were United Methodist kids who preferred a small college experience in order to get “a liberal education.”

Nancy learned of WVWC from her high school guidance counselor. After visiting the WVU and Pitt campuses, I realized that Wesleyan’s campus was much closer to my small high school campus at Linsly

Military Institute than to those schools. And the college brochure showed a projected view of the campus nearly identical to the photo immediately above.

Nancy and I married in 1969. Fast-forward three years in Morgantown and law school and four years at Griffiss Air Force Base, Rome, New York, and, in 1975, after visiting classmate Bill Garrett in Webster Springs, one of us said the fateful words, **“I wouldn’t mind raising our children here.”**

We drove into town the following July 4, 1976, during the Bicentennial celebration, with Burt as a new associate in the husband-and-wife law firm of Rexroad and Rexroad. David and Lynne remain friends to this day.

We found a very welcoming town, a nice rental house just over The Poe Bridge, our church and

later our church choir of 25 years. The town was small enough that a person could feel he or she was making a difference.

We learned, by being part of it, what makes a good small-town rural community: the churches, organizing “personal computer fairs” and “People’s Law Schools” sponsored by the West Virginia Trial Lawyers Association, Burt’s 20 years on the Board of West Virginia Bancorp, NA Buckhannon, Nancy’s Buckhannon Junior Women’s Club, The YWCA, The Upshur County Senior Center Board, The Rotary Club, Regional Library Board, United Way Board, Family Resources Network Board, Upshur Arts Alliance, Chamber of Commerce and our daughter’s music performance. We coached youth soccer for kids who eventually became a powerhouse, winning an “unofficial” and three “official” state high school championships.

Five years ago, Nancy, our grandson Jack and I, “Pop Pop,” walked around town on a “Festival Friday,” seeing people along the way and speaking to many of them. Finally, Jack asked, “Grandma, does Pop Pop know everyone in town?”

Her answer? “Almost everyone, Jack.” And so it seemed.

Festival Fridays, sponsored by “Create Buckhannon,” are held during warm weather in Jawbone Park. There are food vendors, produce stands, crafts, friends and music! Jawbone is part of a complex that includes other parks, flowers everywhere, and The River Walk and Dog Park which blend with the WVWC campus. Nothing is



The Upshur County Courthouse (right foreground) is located on Main Street in Buckhannon, West Virginia.

COURTESY BUCKHANNON MAYOR ROBBIE SKINNER

sweeter than a River Walk with the Wesleyan Chimes coming from the steeple of Wesley Chapel.

Most West Virginians have heard of our Annual Strawberry Festival, which we have been celebrating every spring for over 75 years, until this year. Its myriad activities and parade draw over 50,000 people!

The City of Buckhannon, in collaboration with ART26201 and other community groups, has purchased and is renovating the former Colonial Theater as an art and music center. We have an active community theater group. Upshur is the home of the West Virginia Wildlife Center, and Audra State Park (Barbour County) is “in our backyard.”

As idyllic as Buckhannon can seem on a warm spring or cool summer evening, there are a few “downsides.” A busy family lawyer makes enemies and gets threats. So, growing up, our children would sometimes take guff from children of people I had come up against, as would I, including having our office doors “super-glued” shut on the coldest morning of the year.

And a small, rural community, with the mineral industry struggling

and some businesses closing or moving away, means that most clients are not “well-heeled,” and many need “that extra mile” when funds run low. These problems have been exacerbated by recent events.

Today, too many rural practitioners are overworked and heavily dependent on the “court-appointed system.” There is no pretending these crises have not impacted our

wonderful county and its people and made us less trusting and friendly.

With the interstate, billboards, the Internet and television in the larger cities, a personal injury lawyer had better have a pretty good reputation and a willingness to self-promote. There is lots of competition for that work.

Neighbors in this rural county still look out for one another. Driveways are cleared of snow, holiday food dropped off and calls made when the power goes out or weather gets extreme. Our “Parish House” is a center for food distribution and aid. Churches do their best but are struggling as populations age.

Nevertheless, for those who want a quintessential small-town experience, a visit or move to Buckhannon will not disappoint. You will be welcomed. **WVU**

J. Burton Hunter III is a 1972 graduate of the WVU College of Law and a former U.S.A.F. Assistant Judge Advocate. Burt and his wife, Nancy, moved to Buckhannon, the college town where they met and where they raised their four children. He has been a small firm and solo practitioner for over 40 years.