

# Mountaineers Find Home Away From Home

BY SUSAN USHER

No matter where you roam, there's no place like home. Ask any transplanted West Virginian.

"We haven't moved, we're on vacation," jests Chuck Bannister of Long Beach, a Mountaineer who says he left his beloved hills in 1981 following a chance encounter at Shoney's one morning. He makes the trip "home" at regular intervals, visiting family and taking care of business and property interests.

At the time Bannister left St. Albans, W. Va., he had a coal mine and owned General Maintenance Petro-Chem Inc., which serviced a then-depressed oil industry.

When a relative scolded him outside Shoney's for not visiting another family member, Bannister's disgust reached the limit.

"Get me a bag ready," he told his wife. "I'm going south."

"Where?"

"I don't know. South," replied Bannister. In keeping with the state motto "Montani Semper Liberi" (Mountaineers Always Free), he has for years allowed himself freedom from business for travel, usually to more exotic places.

A few weeks later he called home from Wilmington, N.C., (not Delaware, he told her) where he had found work.

Today the Bannisters live at Long Beach, where Chuck builds houses, excavates, does general



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

BACK IN ST. ALBANS, W. Va., Chuck Bannister (right) had never met Ben and Elly Ramsey, but now that all three live in Brunswick County they form the nucleus of a Mountaineer alumni club.

maintenance, plays with a local band—and with his wife Jinny socializes with other expatriated Mountaineers.

In Brunswick County? "There's a slew of them," says Ben Ramsey of Long Beach, another former St. Albans resident who has found refuge at the coast.

Like Bannister, Ben and his wife, Ms. Elly, are members and co-organizers of the West Virginia Club. So far the year-old group has about 60 members and, said Ramsey, "If someone put some time to it, it would be a booming thing."

Some club members have another connection—Ben, Ms. Elly and Lois Taylor all retired from Union Carbide plants. Mrs. Taylor and her husband, C. W. Jr., have lived in the Shallotte area for six years. She was the first person Ms. Elly met at Union Carbide. Their friendship has continued down South.

The local group may be the only Mountaineer State alumni chapter in the United States. But, quipped Ms. Elly, "there oughta be one in Florida."

It's no surprise to the governor's press office in West Virginia that such a club exists.

"I would say they're probably just the way West Virginians are," said Jo Ann Humphries. "If you ever live here, you love it. You always come back."

Away from home, Mountaineers or "hillbillies"—a word only West Virginians are allowed to use—become the state's staunchest defenders. If any remark could be construed "by any stretch of the imagination to be detrimental, we attack," she continued. "We just don't like people to abuse us."

As is sometimes the case with other love affairs, distance has been known to make the heart grow

fonder. Most members can pull out caps, jackets and other ensignia-laden items for parties and each new club member gets a packet of information from West Virginia Secretary of State's office. It includes an attractions map, lyrics to one of the state's three official songs (all equal in status) and other trivia.

West Virginia Club members left home with no intention of permanently breaking ties.

Some were "starved out" by a depressed economy, frozen out by long winters and snow and in Chuck's case, he insists, forced out also by a need for breathing room.

"I wanted to get away from the family," he claims, eyes twinkling.

These Mountaineers away from home get together about once each four to six weeks to chit-chat trade stories and make connections.

"I had heard my dad talk about

Ben Ramsey about all my life," recalled Bannister. "But I had never met him."

Not in St. Albans, anyway. He hadn't been in Brunswick County long, though, before the question came from another transplant: "Have you run into Ben Ramsey?"

When they did get together, recalled Bannister, "I said, 'We're going to have to get something started to get all these hillbillies together.'" On that note, the club was born, with surprisingly good turnouts for dinner meetings at local restaurants, cookouts and even a Halloween party.

Recently the club met in Shallotte, drawing additional members from Holden Beach to Calabash.

Like other gatherings, it was a time for recalling memories and making new connections.

"Everybody knows somebody's cousin, uncle or somebody—if they're from West Virginia they know somebody," claims Ms. Elly.

Only after moving to Long Beach did Bannister's wife Virginia (Jinny) learn she had a cousin, Jimmy Ellis, living across the waterway at Sunset Harbor.

What memories don't keep alive, ingenuity can.

In "The West Virginia Hills," the chorus sings of "the hills, the beautiful hills" of West Virginia thusly:

"If o'er sea or land I roam  
Still I'll think of happy home  
And the friends among the West Virginia hills."

In their new home away from home, West Virginia Club members have the best of both worlds, perhaps—with Bannisters' manmade "hill" in the front yard and their many new/old friends from the hills.

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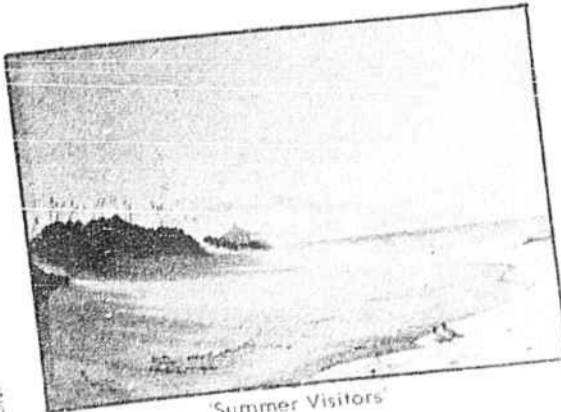


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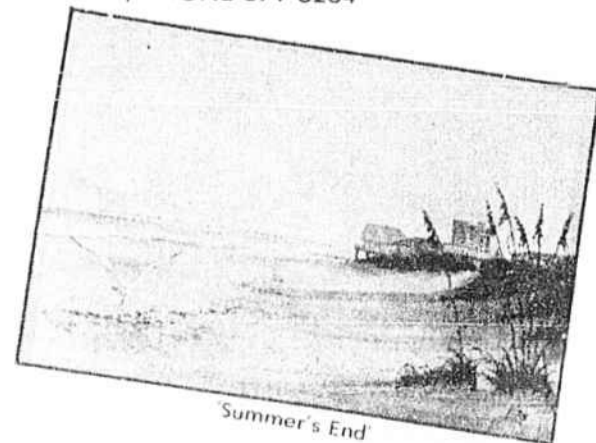
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