

*From the pages of The Mountain Eagle, here's a look back at what was making news in Letcher County at this time in years past—stories large and small, recorded as they happened, and forming the first draft of our history.*

**THURSDAY  
MARCH 18, 1926**

Residents of Mayking, Pine Creek and Cram Creek are being given the opportunity to vote on whether they want the Letcher County Board of Education to establish a four-year high school to serve the area. Cyrus W. Collins and Watson C. Webb are teaching this year at the Mayking Elementary School, which boasts nearly perfect attendance.

The *Mountain Eagle* is calling on the young men of Letcher County to refrain from the growing practice of drinking rubbing alcohol, also known as wood alcohol. "We are told that blindness, deafness, brain paralysis and death too hideous to describe lurk in this clear, nauseating fluid," the paper warns.

The Appalachian Way Association will hold its convention in Lexington April 5. To be determined at the meeting, which will be attended by Kentucky Governor W.J. Fields, is the final routing of the Great Appalachian Way highway, which is tentatively planned to connect Chicago, Illinois with Jacksonville, Florida via Charleston, South Carolina. States through which the road will pass include Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

The mountains and forests of Letcher County are now loaded with the heaviest snow of the entire season. The long hang-on of winter is bad for most of us, but is good for coal miners and those who supply the winter wants of the rest of us, says *The Eagle*.

**THURSDAY  
MARCH 21, 1946**

Consolidation Coal Company has started the sale of its company houses in Jenkins. The houses are priced at \$100 per room, with those now living in Jenkins getting first priority. Mineral rights will not be included in the sales.

Members of the Whitesburg Methodist Church will celebrate the payment of their church debt with a "note-burning ceremony" on Sunday, March 24, during which the burning of the church's mortgage note will take place.

Members of the Letcher County Medical Society met at the Jenkins Hospital last week to discuss the latest developments in the use of the antibiotic penicillin, reports Dr. R. Dow Collins, secretary of the organization.

A proposed dam on the Poor Fork of the Cumberland River near the Letcher-Harlan County line could provide the region "one of the finest fishing resorts to be found in the state," *The Eagle* says in an editorial. The proposed flood control project "would have an important effect upon the morale of this section," the newspaper says.

**THURSDAY  
MARCH 15, 1956**

A tragic accident has claimed the lives of two men at South East Coal Company's mine at Goose Creek. Section foreman Eston Hall and miner Everett Roberts were killed in a slate fall Wednesday while eating lunch. Hall, 47, was a resident of Neon. Roberts, 36, lived at Tollivertown.

Officials with the new Whitesburg Memorial Hospital say the facility will not be ready to accept patients until sometime after March 20. Also this week, hospital administrator Joseph H. Doney gave the Whitesburg Rotary Club a brief

insight into the operations of Whitesburg and the nine other hospitals to be opened by the United Mine Workers of America. Doney said the Whitesburg facility will hire more than 100 people.

The old Henry Combs house on Madison Street in Whitesburg is being razed this week for a new building being erected by Clarence and Carl Harlow, who plan to expand their Neon-based Harlow Motor Company into Whitesburg.

The price for a ton of "soft coal" is expected to increase between 15 cents and 50 cents on April 1. The increase comes several months after the coal operators' labor contract with the UMWA provided wage increases totaling \$2 a day.

The Carr Creek High School Indians, predicted by many to win the current State Tournament, knocked off the injury-laden Whitesburg Yellowjackets, 74-46, in the final contest of the 14th Regional Tournament at Hazard Saturday night. *Mountain Eagle* sports reporter Don Woodford Webb notes that one of Carr Creek's top players, Bobby Ray Shepherd, is a Letcher County boy who transferred from Kingdom Come Settlement School to Carr Creek at the beginning of the current season.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Gilley have announced the birth of their first child, a little son born Monday, March 15. The baby has been named Marion Gale. Also, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Bowen of Camp Branch are the proud parents of a boy born March 1. They have chosen the name Emil Robert. The Bowsens have two other children who are giving the baby a hearty welcome.

U.S. Representative Carl D. Perkins had dinner at the "Toot and Tale" restaurant at Sergent Sunday.

**THURSDAY  
MARCH 17, 1966**

The Letcher County Board of Education has employed Perkins and Threadgill, Harlan architects, to draw up detailed plans for a proposed new library-cafeteria building to be built at Whitesburg High School.

A 28-year-old school teacher was sent back to his job in the one-room, 16-student Coyle's Branch School after parents of his pupils petitioned for his return. The teacher was arrested by federal agents at a moonshine still last week, but says he had merely gone with a friend to look at the still.

Toll-free calling among residents of Whitesburg, Neon and Jenkins is expected to begin later this year. Until the new service takes effect, calls from Whitesburg and Neon to Jenkins will continue to be long-distance calls. Calls between Neon and Whitesburg have been free for several years.

A 52-gallon hot water heater is on sale for \$79.95 at Hoover's Home Furnishings in Whitesburg.

**THURSDAY  
MARCH 25, 1976**

Whitesburg attorney Harry Caudill has said he will resign at the end of March as commonwealth's attorney for Letcher County because the position is inadequately funded. Caudill took office three months ago. His term was to last six years after he was elected without opposition last November.

A program for the development of 326 new homes in Jenkins has been approved by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). The houses will be located on three sites — Ben's Branch near Burdine, and two tracts on Pine Ridge, the hill overlooking Elkhorn Lake and U.S. Highway 23 southeast of Jenkins.

Friends and relatives of the 26 miners killed in the Scotia disaster gathered Sunday for memorial services at the First Baptist Church in Whitesburg.

**WEDNESDAY  
MARCH 26, 1986**

Twenty-one Letcher County people who failed to pay overdue littering fines have been sentenced to pick up garbage for a total of 453 days. District (Continued on Page B8)



**WE'VE COME A LONG WAY** — The Letcher County Public Library is shown here in 1965 at old L&N Railroad depot at the mouth of Cow Hollow in Whitesburg. The depot later was torn down to make way for the Whitesburg bypass. The library operated in the depot during the early 1960s after moving from a building behind the old county jail. (Photo by John Engle)

## 'Story books make kids dumb,' county official said in 1960

*Debate over funding once threatened survival of library, then housed in room of old L&N Depot in Whitesburg*

By **BEN GISH**

*"If they read some kind of story books and don't get their history and all, they come up dumb."*

That was the warning issued in 1960 by Letcher County Magistrate Cleamond Scott as the Fiscal Court debated whether to spend public money to keep the county's struggling library alive.

Scott was one of two magistrates who voted against funding the Letcher County Public Library. But despite such opposition — and years of financial uncertainty — the library survived through the persistence of local citizens, especially members of the Whitesburg Woman's Club, and eventually through public funding that secured its future.

Today the Letcher County Public Library system serves communities across the county, but its survival was far from certain in the early 1960s, when the library operated out of borrowed rooms, depended on donated books, and struggled year after year to stay open.

At the time of Scott's remarks, the library was about to move into a 35-foot by 35-foot room inside the abandoned L&N Railroad depot at the mouth of Cow Hollow in Whitesburg — near the foot of School Hill in an area that today serves as the Main Street ramp to the Whitesburg bypass.

As the accompanying photo shows, there was nothing luxurious about the library's new home in the abandoned railroad depot. Still, it was a far cry from the library's previous quarters in a dilapidated building behind the old Letcher County Jail. That site was later occupied by a county health department building that now serves as home to the Letcher County Sheriff's Department.

The *Mountain Eagle* is not certain when the county's first public library opened in Whitesburg, but records show that one closed in August 1943 for lack of resources. In his final financial statement to the public, library treasurer W.H. Poore reported the library began the year with \$31 raised during two events — a pie supper and a tea — and spent it all on book purchases.

Letcher County remained without a public library for at

least nine years.

Then in December 1952, a group of citizens — including several school teachers and members of the Whitesburg Woman's Club — began a drive to reopen one. Volunteers went house-to-house collecting donated books and magazines for the shelves.

Sometime in the summer of 1953, the Bank of Whitesburg agreed to let the group use one of the rooms in its Main Street building as a library. By then the collection had grown to 254 books and 150 "good magazines," according to news reports published in *The Eagle*.

Just five years later, however, the library was again in danger of closing because it received little financial support from the Letcher County Fiscal Court. By 1958 the library had moved out of the bank building and into the old structure behind the jail.

Finally, in late July 1960, the library was saved by \$2,100 in funding from a reluctant Fiscal Court. The payment was approved on a 4-2 vote and included \$900 the county had budgeted in 1959 but never paid, along with \$1,200 for 1960.

One of the two magistrates voting against the funding, Cleamond Scott, said people in his district were complaining that children were reading library books instead of doing their homework.

"The kids get some kind of old novel to read and don't read their school books. It hurts the teachers," Scott said. "If they read some kind of story books and don't get their history and all, they come up dumb."

Despite such criticism, local supporters continued pushing to keep the library alive.

Members of the Whitesburg Woman's Club played an especially important role during those difficult years. They later recalled the library's early quarters in an old building behind the county jail, where piles of tattered textbooks and cast-off books sat near a pot-bellied stove and visitors climbed rickety stairs to reach the small second-floor reading room.

When the library moved to the abandoned L&N depot in the early 1960s, club members helped refurbish the building and prepare it for use as a public library. Anne F. Caudill

later recalled that members spent "many hours and days and weeks" decorating the depot, cataloguing and shelving books, and covering worn volumes with bright wallpaper dust jackets.

They also worked to obtain new books through the state library and bookmobile program.

"And suddenly the library was flooded with readers, young and old," Caudill said. "Later the club worked to obtain new modern quarters as a part of the planned new Letcher County Courthouse."

The library moved from the depot into the basement of the new courthouse in 1966. But the real turning point came the following year.

In June 1967, the Letcher Fiscal Court — under the leadership of County Judge James M. Caudill — voted to impose a "library tax" of five cents on each \$100 of assessed property valuation. The new tax provided stable funding and ensured the survival of the county's public library system.

Today the Letcher County Public Library operates branches in Jenkins and Fleming-Neon and hopes to reopen the Blackey Library, which was destroyed by flooding in July 2022.

The main branch now sits on Main Street in Whitesburg in the building that once housed the Hobbs 5 & 10 store. Renamed the Harry M. Caudill Library in honor of the late attorney, state representative and author from Mayking, the library moved there from the courthouse basement in the early 1990s while that building was being renovated.

The courthouse space the library once occupied is now used by the Letcher County Jail.

As the story of the library's survival shows, it was not only public funding but also the persistence of local citizens — especially Anne Caudill (the wife of Harry Caudill) and other members of the Whitesburg Woman's Club — that kept the doors open when times were uncertain.

More than six decades later, the library those citizens fought to keep alive still serves readers across Letcher County — long after the depot where it once struggled to survive disappeared beneath the Whitesburg bypass.