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Alia Payne, right, and Alexis Zimmer-Chu, both 5, check out an 80-foot mural in the town park designed by local elementary school students.

Round Hill Captures Loudoun's Old Spirit

Small Town Seeks to Guide Its Own Growth

By ANN CAMERON SIGAL
Special to The Washington Post

Pam and Gary Oldham were not prepared for what a 21-mile move last August would teach them about community and adaptability.

Leaving behind the frantic pace and never-ending traffic in eastern Loudoun County, the Oldhams headed toward the Blue Ridge Mountains, to Round Hill, the county's westernmost town.

As they settled into an 1895 Victorian house, they relished the cool mountain air as rabbits darted across the lawn while movers unloaded the truck.

"The biggest surprise was how welcoming people are. We met more people our first weekend here than we'd met in our whole six and a half years there," recalled Pam Oldham, a freelance writer.

Neighbors regaled the couple with stories about the house and its landscaping. Because of those stories, "I'm less inclined to start ripping things up," she said.

Life in Round Hill moves at a slower pace. A trip next door to borrow a cup of sugar can easily evolve into a 45-minute chat. Some residents still trek to the post office to pick up their mail, because only a few streets have curbside delivery.

An unofficial old-timers table at the local diner is rarely empty; an invitation to sit and chat a spell is considered an honor. "The old-timers define a community more than the structures," Pam Oldham said. "They share the culture that has been passed down through generations. You don't get that in a manufactured community."

Need plumbing supplies or night crawlers? Giant freeze pops for 25 cents each or a bottle of wine? The Round Hill Grocery has them. Tuck elbows in and walk sideways while navigating the 1913 building's crammed shelves and narrow wooden aisles.

The Round Hill Art Center, in a converted 1880s furniture factory, offers studio space and rotating exhibits to artists, but draws its biggest crowds for monthly bluegrass jam



BY ANN CAMERON SIGAL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Many Round Hill homes have been meticulously remodeled. This one was built in 1898.

sessions where musicians old and young, some with handmade instruments, gather to learn from each other.

Round Hill's annual "Hometown Festival" includes a soapbox derby, a pie-eating contest and a community feast that stretches the length of Main Street. A roundtable where seasoned residents share their stories is a highlight.

Not bad for a community that's still just

312 households.

However, many newcomers have blinders on about what the meteoric growth of Loudoun County may mean for the town, Mayor Frank Etro said. "They think Round Hill is locked in time and won't change." Before annexation at the beginning of this year of land east and south of town, Round Hill was only

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ROUND HILL



BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSO—THE WASHINGTON POST

BOUNDARIES: Irregular, and recently expanded by annexation.

WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE: Round Hill Art Center, Franklin Park Performing and Visual Arts Center, post office.

WITHIN 30 MINUTES BY CAR:

Shenandoah River, Harpers Ferry, Leesburg, Dulles Greenway

WITHIN 45 MINUTES BY CAR:

Washington, Shenandoah National Park, Dulles International Airport.

SCHOOLS: Round Hill Elementary, Blue Ridge Middle, Harmony Intermediate and Loudoun Valley High schools.

HOME SALES: In the past 12 months, 12 houses have sold in the older portion of Round Hill, from \$312,000 to \$550,000, said Leslye Edwards of Prudential Real Estate. New houses at the Villages of Round Hill start in the low \$500,000s, going up to the \$700,000s.



BY ANN CAMERON SIEGAL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Once the end of the line from Washington, Round Hill's train depot has a new life as Kathryn and Fletch Wiley's home.

Maintaining an Oasis of Tradition

ROUND HILL, *From G1*

127 acres.

Oldham, part of a group called Citizens to Save Round Hill, is searching for the brake pedal, before the community she is in awe of vanishes. Etro sees himself as a realist, meeting the inevitable head-on. "The only thing we can do is try to shape it [development] in a way that best suits the town's goals," he said.

Round Hill, incorporated in 1900, was once the end of the rail line and a thriving summer resort for Washingtonians. A boardwalk promenade drew well-dressed folks wanting to be seen.

When passenger service ended in 1939, Round Hill faded as a destination. Economic development stalled. Efforts were made to lure people back, but a trip through the town became more accidental than purposeful.

Now, though, the little community that for decades seemed to go unnoticed is receiving attention that's almost overwhelming.

In the early 1990s, outsiders began piecing small farms together into large parcels for development. Town officials seem to have been blindsided by county approval for a 1,329-acre, 1,100-home subdivision called the Villages at Round Hill, which will eventually surround the community on three sides.

"It was a parallel community being constructed," said Leslye Edwards, a local real estate agent.

The town learned its lesson quickly and began playing an active rather than passive role in development decisions. Generic county ordinances for new development don't acknowledge the diversity within the county, Etro said. "Standardization will not work for Round Hill," he said.

That's because nothing is uniform in Round Hill. Houses include vintage Victorians, Sears four-squares and newish Colonials. In a new book, "The Story of Round Hill," Ann Whitehead Thomas, a resident since 1968, chronicles in minute detail the evolution of the town's commercial establishments and residences, which often sit side by side.

Meticulous renovations to preserve the historical character of many buildings blur the line between old and new. "That's the idea," said Patrick Moriarty, a member of the Round Hill Renovators, volunteers who spend one day a month on improvement projects at each other's houses.

All is not pristine in Round Hill, however, as evident in the decay of a once-grand 19th century Queen Anne Victorian on West Loudoun Street. The owner isn't interested in selling "the dilapidated house," as it's called. It has been vacant for 15 years and leans precariously on external support beams, looking as if it will topple at any moment.

For all the talk about preserving the community's heritage, residents

have been reluctant to institute blight ordinances or seek historical preservation status. "People are afraid they'll be told what they can and can't do with their own homes," Oldham said.

That tendency to trust in others' good intentions seems to be the guiding force as town officials work with developers. To keep adjacent development somewhat in line with the town's character, site plans are tweaked. Linear streets, varied lot sizes and setbacks, common areas and pedestrian pathways between the communities are showing up as design elements of an incoming 97-house community by Richmond American Homes and a 12-house development by Bay Homes, owned by resident Carter Morrow, a member of the town's planning commission.

"The priorities of the town are being considered," said Tobi Moriarty, a member of Round Hill's streetscape committee.

"The town has grabbed development by the tail," Edwards said.

Oldham is still skeptical. But she remembers something she witnessed last December when wind tore down the holiday garland decorating her fence. As a group of teens walked towards her property, she recalled thinking, "Well, there goes that."

Instead, she said, "they picked up the garland — not playing with it, not destroying it — but carefully placing it back where it belonged. That said it all."