

## **A History of the Log Cabin and Community Cannery in Riner**

In the fall of 1941 on the eve of the United States' entry into WWII, Auburn High School freshman class of 1941-42 undertook an extraordinary community project. Under the guidance of their homeroom teacher, Harry W. McCann, Jr., who taught math, social studies, and English, the students decided that a place for social gathering and recreation was an important need for the people of Riner.

Undaunted by the rising crisis in Europe and Asia, and their own experiences growing up during the Great Depression, these youths of 14 and 15 set to work to construct a log building to meet their needs. These students, about 30 in number, drew up blueprints, solicited donations of materials, and raised funds by selling bonds.

On January 6, 1942, the students made a presentation about the project to the Riner Grange, an agricultural service group chartered in 1928 dedicated to the improvement of life for those living in the Riner area. The Grange voted to support the project on February 3, 1942 and on April 21, 1942 moved to provide \$200 for the building. An Auburn Recreational Club was formed and a committee was appointed to govern its affairs. Memberships in the Auburn Recreational Club were sold for \$1 to raise funds.

In the spring of '42, newly hired agriculture teacher George Guilliams, along with McCann, the students, the school janitor R. A. Weaver, and Riner farmers Ralph and Raymond Lucas, cut poplar trees using crosscut saws from Dan Cundiff's place and hauled them in a borrowed truck to the building site adjacent to the high school. The logs were then peeled, footer trenches dug, forms built, and cement mixed and poured one wheelbarrow at a time into the trenches. The log walls were raised and the subflooring put in. A stonemason, Mr. Gray from Blacksburg, was hired to build the chimney using local field stone.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, 1942, the Grange held a cabin work day, placing top plate and rafters on the building. Soon the roof went on and Mr. Thomas, a carpenter from Shawsville, was hired to put in doors, window, floors, and two interior walls. However, building supplies had become scarce because of the war and, more significantly for the project, money ran out, so the doors and windows were installed but the interior was not completed.

Auburn principal L. E. Moseley was much interested in the project and determined to see the building used for community purposes. Through his leadership, the community was able to procure canning equipment through the Rural War Production Training program. The federal government in conjunction with the state was offering canning equipment to communities that could supply a location, so the cabin's intended use was diverted to house a community cannery. The equipment was installed on the oak subflooring and holes were cut for the necessary plumbing. The response was immediate and in the fall of 1943, 5,691 cans were processed. In 1945 the state Agriculture Department granted money for an actual cannery building and in the spring of 1946 an adjoining slab-on-grade block structure was built. George Guilliams oversaw construction of the cannery with most of the labor provided by the students in the FFA and the Grange men. Again, R. A. Weaver was instrumental in providing the know-how to complete the project, having previously been in the timber and threshing businesses where mechanical steam pressure systems were employed.

With the canning equipment moved to the new building, the cabin was "showered" on the 18<sup>th</sup> of

June 1946 and outfitted with chairs, tables, and dishes, and formally dedicated as the Auburn Community Recreation Cabin on June 22 by the Grange. In the following years the cabin was completed and used extensively by the Grange for its regular meetings, special events, and annual oyster supper. The Home Demonstration Club, a group of community women dedicated to the improvement of family and domestic life, were regular users of the building. In 1954 an electric stove was installed and in 1955, the Grange voted to sponsor the addition of a Junior Grange room for its young members, a bathroom, and an addition to the cannery. The facility was used for parties, dances, piano recitals, family reunions, wedding showers, and other social events. David Myers and Janet Shelburne fondly recall the annual Halloween carnival held there for many years and attended by most everyone in the community.

George Williams supervised the cannery operations from its inception and “never lacked for business.” R. A. Weaver operated the cannery until sometime in the 1950s and Mrs. I. J. “Bess” Greear and her sister Miss Mallie Richardson helped get it all started by showing people how to prepare food for canning. Williams taught evening classes on growing and preparing vegetables for canning. Class attendees were given preferential use privileges, but this practice was soon abandoned as demand for the facility was so great it was impossible to dictate use.

Initially, tin cans were used exclusively, but sometime in the 1950s the Ball Company sent a representative to demonstrate the use of glass jars and both types of containers were used until the 1980s when the rising cost of tin cans made their use less appealing and the sealing equipment became irreparable. The cannery continued to receive heavy use well into the 1970s. Use has been steady for the past 25 years, although the number of units processed per year has gradually declined. The cannery remains open in season as a service of Montgomery County.

In 1964, the Riner Grange disbanded as changing social, cultural, and economic conditions swept across America beginning, essentially, with the end of WWII. As Miss Virginia Deal Lawrence puts it, “The Grange died out because the older ones couldn’t get on like they used to, and the younger ones had too many other things to do.”

With the end of the Grange, the cabin became a classroom for Auburn High School serving a generation of Riner students, variously for English, math, history, music, cosmetology, and ISS, or In-School Suspension. The Junior Grange room has become the girls’ softball locker room and the cabin is now the Riner Branch of the Montgomery Museum and serves as a focal point for the annual Riner Heritage Day held in September.

The cabin and cannery reflect a fascinating period of American history and served as a cornerstone of the Riner community for two generations. These structures are representative of this community’s ethos and, as such, are highly worthy of preservation, interpretation, and continued use.

#### Sources

“An Interview with George Williams, Builder and Teacher,” published in “AVENUES” newsletter, Vol. 1, Issue 1, April 1999.

“The Grange Cabin—Past, Present, and Future” published in “AVENUES” newsletter, Vol. 1, Issue 1, April 1999.

Letter by Mrs. Dorothy Teel Leftwich published in “AVENUES” newsletter, Vol. 1, Issue 4, Fall 1999.

“Grange” Notes of Virginia Deal Lawrence, undated; copy available in Riner Branch

Conversation with Virginia Deal Lawrence, 6 January 2006

E-mail from Glenn A. Anderson, Specialist, Agricultural Education, Virginia Department of Education, 9 March 2006

Conversation with George Guilliams, 8 August 2007

Conversation with David Myers, 8 September 2007

Conversation with Scott Weaver, 13 March 2008

Conversation with Janet Shelburne, 16 April 2008

## CANNERY WORKING GROUP

The Cannery Working Group was formed in 2005 and volunteers have worked on renovations, publicity, and fundraising. Because the cannery serves as a place where local food traditions are passed from neighbor to neighbor and from one generation to the next, it serves to help preserve the cultural heritage of the region. It also provides an opportunity to collect oral histories from individuals and groups who are there to can. The cannery has long provided an important way for residents to preserve their garden produce or harvested game for the winter. It also makes specialty food items (such as organic, low sodium, no preservatives) more affordable for users with dietary restrictions or preferences. In previous years, AHS and AMS classes used the cannery more regularly, and there are opportunities to better integrate the facility in the school system. With the growing interest in local food and sustainable food systems, there are opportunities for grants and possible commercial opportunities, perhaps in conjunction with tourism-based economic development.

Please consider joining the Cannery Working Group. You can help in many ways:

- Use the cannery!
- Publicize the cannery.
- Teach or take a canning class.
- Help renovate the facility.
- Serve as a liaison to school system.
- Write grant proposals.
- Donate funds to buy a large-scale apple pulper.
- Many additional opportunities.

Check our website at [montva.com/cannery](http://montva.com/cannery) or sign up for our mailing list to receive information about the cannery schedule and educational and volunteer opportunities. Send an email to [cahaas@vt.edu](mailto:cahaas@vt.edu) with "cannery" in the subject line if you are interested in being added to our mailing list.

## CANNERY OPERATING SCHEDULE

The cannery is open for use July to mid-November (later dates for venison or pork may be available with advance request). Normal days of operation are Wednesday and Saturday mornings, by appointment only, and other dates and times may be available upon request. Please call the operator, Mike Ewing, 540-382-9566, for appointments. Our website ([montva.com/cannery](http://montva.com/cannery)) has a map to the cannery, information about upcoming classes, and further information. Folks new to canning are welcome to come and give it a try.