

House on hill oversees town's past and future



The house John Frank Chamber's father, T.E. Chambers, bought in 1913 still sits on its hill overlooking the intersection of Routes 46 and 460. At least 125 years old, the original house was enlarged and improved to fit his growing family. The six children who grew up there—Norma, Katherine, Sterling, John, Ruth, Emma, and Nancy—made it a hub for young people in Blackstone for four decades.

"This house has been lived in," said Chambers, 78, who with his sister Katherine are the last of the Chambers living in Blackstone. "You can talk to any of the older people in town, and they will tell you about the times in this house."

Chambers, who worked for Blackstone Fuel and Supply Company for 33 years, has always lived here, except for his years in the military during WWII. "Three of us were born in this house. The bed I was born in is upstairs I feel right at home here," he said.

On the walls family pictures preserve the images of the people that once inhabited the house. All the ancestors are here too. "This is my great-great grandfather Dr. Sterling Neblett, who built Brickland in Lunenburg County," he said as the chimes from a clock began their hourly track of history flowing through the old rooms.

If one looked for a place from which to view the past and the future of Blackstone, the Chamber's house is a likely choice. T.E. Chambers, a prominent businessman in the town, bought and sold land that has since become Eppington Forest. Keeping his father's habit, John Frank sold the land for the Blackstone Shopping Center in 1973. The idea of Blackstone being a hub of activity seems rooted in the Chambers' house.

"Blackstone originally started right near here," said Chambers, who could look out his sitting room windows at the spot he was talking about. "There was a store at the intersection on the edge of our property. The old Union Academy was just beyond there, and there was a foundry near there during the Civil War."

The Chambers farm also became a hub of night life for the town and surrounding area in 1935 when the Nottoway Tavern opened at the intersection where a Citizens Bank Branch Office is now. At night you could hear the sweet sounds of Lawrence Welk drift across the fields. Later, during the war, you could also hear the fights. The tavern closed as Chambers found it more and more difficult to keep responsible renters.

Chambers also remembers when the town almost burned down. "It was the Fourth of July, 1928, and I had ridden a horse downtown. I was standing in front of the moving picture house (which is where West's Grocery Store is), and I saw this fellow coming around the corner yelling Fire! Fire! Of course, that fire burnt out the end of town: a tobacco factory, car dealer, Planters Warehouse, a clothing and grocery store, Spencer's Drugs, and the Courier-Record. The fire had started in the hay of a livery stable. Two fire trucks were sent by train from Petersburg, too late, of course.

But from the ashes he has seen the new growth and drawn a lesson. When you are in the hub of activity, it's not the buildings but the opportunities that matter.

From his house, Chambers looks back on a Blackstone that was a manufacturing hub of the region. "It was a production center that created opportunities here," he observed.

And the men like his father, who built businesses here, wanted to make money and help the town at the same time. You stay in the hub by grabbing those opportunities, they knew.

When Chambers looks out his sitting room window, he still thinks in the way he has been conditioned by his house. Blackstone should always be a hub of activity for the region. Below the hill he watches the shopping center grow with the new Food Lion. The parking lot was filled with cars and new signs were going up.

"It's fixed now better than it has ever been fixed," he observed with some satisfaction. He said he sold 16 acres so it would be large enough to keep out other shopping centers.

But Chambers has paid a price for his decision. The shopping center brought new economic forces into the town that challenged the established order. Neighbors and businessmen were threatened by the shopping center. Did Chambers open Blackstone's future, or close it?

But even Chambers' house on the hill will someday give up its ground to the growth brought by the shopping center, said Chambers. All along the road that he used to catch rides on tobacco wagons as a boy, business opportunities are growing.

"This house will eventually be gone for business," he said without any sign of regret.

After all, what are memories when there is no one around to remember them. What's more important is to stay in the hub, Chambers would say.