

## **Reflections on the Commonwealth**

**July 2021**

Over seven weeks, I have traveled 3,000 miles, passed through nearly 90 Virginia counties and cities and met with dozens of college, university and local officials. I visited every cultural, sports and arts center that would have me, sought out musicians and artists, ate what the locals ate and listened to stories of trouble, hope and everyday life. I slept in “America’s Coolest Hometown” (Marion) and ate lunch in “Virginia’s Tallest Town” (Bluefield).

As Johnny Cash would say, I’ve been everywhere, man.

Through it all, I arrived at one conclusion: Virginia is a state of infinite beauty and possibility.

From the narrow mountain walls of Grundy, to the vastness of the Shenandoah Valley, to the rugged earth of Pittsylvania County and to the sandy soil of Southampton, Virginia is rich in character. Geographically, we are surrounded by water and mountains. Culturally and socially, we embrace those who have come before us and those who arrive anew.

Our landscape, just like the way people speak, offers ever-changing variety and color. In minutes, gentle flatlands can turn into winding and foreboding troughs. Many times I cut through a gap or reached a peak where the skies opened upon a breathtaking vista. The valleys were so open and clear I thought I could hear voices.

Outside of the major metropolitan areas, we are an agricultural state. Corn is everywhere. So is lumber. Soybeans are almost as prevalent. Farmers grow wheat, hay and other grasses for sale and for livestock. Tobacco, hemp, peanuts and cotton fill fields along the North Carolina border. Just the right amount of rain, sunshine and hard work point to one of the best harvests of Virginia’s finest in a long time.

I began my journey at the geographic center of Virginia - Buckingham County - and ended at Virginia Beach, where I watched a sunrise bend into the ocean. In between, I experienced long-established routes of commerce and trade and got to know long-gone ancestors who, unbeknownst to them, helped shape our 21st century experience.

Over seven weeks, I crossed the James River at its narrowest (the confluence of the Cowpasture and Jackson rivers) and widest (Hampton Roads) points. I criss-crossed the U.S. highways that define our state - Routes 11, 29, 17, 15, 522, 50, 250, 220, 33, 58 (what a beast), 60, 360, 460, 301 and 1. I witnessed the impact of railroads on the development of great cities such as Lynchburg, Petersburg, Suffolk, Roanoke, Norfolk, Danville and Bristol. I met hikers who stopped off the Appalachian Trail for a hot shower and a cold drink.

The influence of people who pass through our Commonwealth - many of whom stay and give generously of their experiences and talents - help make Virginia the prosperous place we call home.

Our land and people bear scars of the past, and we struggle to overcome those atrocities. The Great Dismal Swamp and the coal mines of Buchanan County hold stories of both: land that has been torn apart and people who have suffered. Nonetheless, we have experienced freedom, sought new lives and prospered. In many parts of our state, we have established communities of diversity and inclusion that dazzle modern standards.

The fact that we are not isolated from the rest of the world is to our advantage. I never met Mark Twain, and he may never have traveled in Virginia, but he may have been thinking of me when he said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

One of my hosts - and I mean that with great sincerity; the people I met along the way were generous, hospitable, kind, forthcoming and every other description of goodness that words can conjure - thanked me for my visit. "Every state agency head," he said, "should be required to spend time in every part of the state every year."

I intend to extend that sentiment to others on our staff. I could tell a hundred stories, but it's more important for others to experience what Virginia has to offer. I hope to inspire you not to take more vacation time (which you also should do), but to take more work time in different parts of the state. We are only as good as our awareness of the people we serve.

Thanks to the SCHEV staff for giving me the confidence to get away for so long. I could not have done this without you.

**Peter Blake**