

Fallout Shelter Is Sign of the Times
The Caswell Messenger
By Angela Evans
Mar 10, 2009 - 07:38:38 pm CDT Managing Editor

Peace. Free Love. Woodstock. Cold War.

Memories of the 1960s hold a plethora of images for those who lived them; but for a local dentist, a physical reminder of the times lies just yards from his home and business. Dr. G. Allison Page, who practiced dentistry in Caswell for nearly 41 years, has one of few remaining examples of a 1960s fallout shelter on his property off U.S. 158 in Yanceyville. Page's father, Dr. L.G. Page, also a dentist, built the 1,500-square-foot fully furnished shelter, which once boasted a host of amenities including two bedrooms, full working kitchen and bath with shower, air-conditioning, electricity, even television with reception underground. "It's just an old hole in the ground," Page said on a recent showing of the deteriorating underground home. "It used to be furnished, but it's not anymore. Needless to say there's not any electricity in here now." The shelter was completed while Page was away in dentistry school at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1961.

"I know I had a professor that gave me a bunch of lip and static about it when I was in school," Page remembers. "The year I graduated, I had him up here. I told Daddy, 'I want to get Dr. Lister and Dr. Holland to come up here and see this thing they are always teasing me about.'" Saying his dad was a "character," Page explains that the shelter was built, for the most part, on a whim. "He said, 'If I ever build me a house, I'm going to build one under ground. It'd be easier to heat; you wouldn't have to cool it,'" Page said. "Then, in the late 50s and early 60s, when we were in a Cold War with Russia, and they were talking about fallout shelters everywhere - that was the spark." Backhoes were brought in to remove the dirt from the hillside and dig out walls.

"When they put the top on, they bound it with dirt and black plastic," Page said. Then the dirt was hauled out and a concrete floor, walls and ceiling were poured over metal rebar. The shelter had a periscope through a hole in the ceiling that rotated above ground, allowing those inside to see what was happening in the woods around them. "You could turn it around and look at the house; you could look up the road," Page said. The TV antenna wire ran through the same hole. When asked where his father learned how to build the shelter, Page replied, "You just had to know my dad." "He also had a patent for an airplane. He was quite an eclectic person," Page said. "If he thought it would work he would do it." L.G. Page's father certainly hadn't taught him any engineering skills.

"His dad was what we used to call a yeoman farmer; and what that is, he makes enough dadgum stuff to eat and make clothes out of and survive," Page said of his grandfather. Page's father didn't use the place much, but when he did it was memorable. "He had his buddies up. And I remember one time we had supper and he was cooking coon in a pressure cooker; and the top blew off and there was coon all over the ceiling," Page says laughing. "He had his parties here and all that kind of stuff." L.G. must have had no

intentions of ever having a lengthy stay in the shelter, as Page says no supplies were kept there, just basic condiments. The fully furnished underground apartment was advertised for rent; but with a younger brother and two sisters, the youngest in high school, it became more of a party place.

"The only time it really was used, my sister and some of them would come here and stay here rather than at the house," Page said. However, the house didn't go without renters altogether, as a high profile Guilford County murder case came to trial here in the 1970s. When Greensboro florist Gloyd Vestal killed his business partner, Angelo Pinnisi, so much publicity followed the case the proceedings had to be moved to Caswell; and for Vestal's safety, his attorneys rented the underground shelter, where armed guards watched over Vestal during the trial. "They were afraid to drive back and forth the distance; and they wanted a place closer by so they rented this and they had body guards in here at night," Page remembers. That same year, 1970, Page's father died of cancer.

"After my dad died, the furnishings and everything were in here but it was such a headache to keep everything from mildewing," Page said, pointing out that high humidity and water leaks had begun to cause damage to the interior wooden structures. "Mama tried to keep it up after daddy died; and you had to come over here and empty the dehumidifier - sometimes more than once," Page said. "It got to be a headache for her so she took all the furniture out." Page doesn't have any plans for restoring or using the space, but he says it's sure to be around for a long time to come. "Unless somebody comes in here with some awful explosive stuff, or an earthquake," he said.

The shelter will live on in history as well, having been featured in the August 1963 edition "The State" magazine and recently on WRAL's Tarheel Traveler. Frank Blazich, who was working on his master's degree in history at N.C. State University, brought the shelter attention when he began work on his thesis on Civil Defense. Blazich asked that his research be mentioned in a column in the News and Observer to help him find interviews. The request brought numerous emails - one in particular about the 1963 article on the Pages. Blazich came to Yanceyville and was followed shortly thereafter by Tarheel Traveler's Scott Mason. The video feature that ensued can still be viewed at <http://www.wral.com/lifestyles/travel/video/4412874/>. Blazich's thesis can be seen at: <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/theses/available/etd-10282008-171921/unrestricted/etd.pdf>. The North Carolina Historical Review published Blazich's chapter on the Cuban Missile Crisis in the February issue and a picture of Page's shelter entrance is on the cover.

As for the cave-like home never having fulfilled its original purpose, Page says his dad would have used it as a bomb shelter, "if we'd been attacked," pointing out that it is still well-suited for the job, since nothing is visible from above ground. And when asked about the door - which might have been the only way the shelter was found - did Page have a plan for covering it? "I would have covered it with a machine gun," he says laughing.