

Leipers Fork, Tennessee
*Old-time Southern Values Shimmer in the Shadow of
Metropolitan Nashville*
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What's been nicknamed the Leipers Fork Computer Anger Management Seminar began one day when resident Bruce Hunt began having a hair-graying experience with an obstinate PC printer. The Tennessee man became so exasperated with the digital device that he planned to heave the thing into the road so he could flatten it with his truck. Friend Greg Murry, a maker of classic flintlock rifles, offered a more sobering idea.

Let's shoot it, he suggested.

The two men took the pigheaded printer outside and drew targets on it. Armed with black powder and musket balls, they opened fire.

By the time the pair finished, a dozen cheering people had gathered, many hoping to squeeze a trigger against technology themselves. Now an annual event, the Computer Shoot draws nearly 70 participants a year to Leipers Fork.

Pitting past against present serves as a fitting theme for this Tennessee community located 45 minutes southwest of Nashville. With the look and feel of classic Southern Americana, Leipers Fork offers a nostalgic slice of Andy Griffith's Mayberry served on the platter of the 21st century. Even Barney Fife's original squad car graces the village's main street.

Bucolic splendor hems the unincorporated town and its few hundred residents. The Natchez Trace Parkway stretches up one side, the Leipers Creek flood plain edges the other and undeveloped land trust reserves cap both entrances to town. Beyond the village lie rolling hills separated by hollows where twisting roads penetrate woods. It's here, where deer, boars and wild turkeys roam, that people once made their living distilling moonshine.

One of the things that saved the land was that it wasn't considered a very nice place to live, admits resident Deborah Warnick, Williamson County's heritage tourism director.

That changed about 12 years ago when people from the health care and music industries began moving into the area. With them came an impetus for change. Boarded-up stores were rebuilt, remodeled and reopened using original paint colors to preserve authenticity.

This community, which once held the county poor farm, turned into a National Historic District that now includes a premier art gallery, four antique shops and three eateries.

The town has attracted painters, woodworkers, furniture makers, photographers, sculptors, quilters and carvers. But it may be the musicians and dancers for which Leipers Fork is best known. Although Nashville stars such as the Judds live nearby, the town's most locally renowned performer is probably Lester Deal, a 68-year-old retired hardware store employee affectionately known as Uncle Lester.

He's got about four or five teeth in his mouth, wears his bib overalls and shining, sparkly clogging shoes, explains John Whisenant, executive director of the Williamson County CVB. My last visit down to Leipers Fork, I was in the art gallery. They put on some music, and he started clog dancing in the middle of the gallery.

Leipers Fork is also home to the Homer Dever Band, known for its Hank Williams-style country performances. Puckett's Grocery, a combination food mart, cafe and gas station, presents singer-songwriters on Friday nights, and a now-private venue known as Green's Grocery has hosted stars from Leon Russell to Garth Brooks. Even Leipers Fork Antiques offers playing space for local musicians.

The local penchant for music and dance may have played at least a tiny part in influencing Nissan to move its North American headquarters from Los Angeles to nearby Franklin, a city of 46,000 located eight miles up the road. Local business folk invited a delegation from the Japanese car company to a barn gathering where the Homer Dever Band played and Uncle Lester danced.

The quote in the newspaper said the head of Nissan has obviously

been served every fine wine imaginable, Warnick relates. So we did what we do best: We had music and we danced.

While the influx of relocated corporate employees will have an economic impact in the county, its effect on the Leipers Fork lifestyle will hopefully be minimal. The village itself is landlocked by natural boundaries. Outside of town, county zoning requires new home lots be a minimum of five acres.

The privacy of space has turned the area around Leipers Fork into a mecca for celebrity musicians and others who crave the quiet anonymity afforded by the rural environment. In spite of home prices ranging from around \$200,000 in town to countryside mansions costing millions, economic disparity has not created financial friction nor has it displaced those of more modest means.

Most of the wealthy people who move into the area use local carpenters, contractors, electricians and plumbers, and we have a lot of those people here. They often become good friends, says town matriarch Marty Hunt, owner of Leipers Fork Antiques.

Rich and poor join for coffee at Puckett's Grocery and share the front porch swing at Leipers Creek Art Gallery. The local philosophy is that it doesn't matter who you are just as long as you're friendly. In Leipers Fork, it's not just landscape and architecture that have been preserved. It's also the culture.

We all know and try to take care of each other, says Cindy Garvey, broker/owner of United Country Leipers Fork Land & Home. If somebody's injured, we make sure that everyone takes turns bringing them dinner until they can take care of themselves. It's that type of place.

International flair and big city amenities may lie 45 minutes away in Nashville, but in Leipers Fork, one finds a countrified lifestyle. The community serves as a reminder of that screenplay fantasy where young Opie went fishing, Aunt Bea baked apple pies and Barney loaded his only bullet to start a potato sack race.

Leipers Fork is like Mayberry, observes Brandy Blanton, publisher of Southern Exposure Magazine. But this is better than television, it's real life.