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Green Bank: the town that banned Wi-Fi

'Electrosensitive' people are flocking to the West Virginian home of a deep-space telescope, attracted by the rules prohibiting phones, TVs and radios. But, as Ed Cumming reveals, their arrival means Green Bank is far from peaceful

Ed Cumming

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Up and up the roads to Green Bank went, winding into the West Virginian hills as four lanes thinned to one. It was early March and snow was still spattered on the leaf mould between the firs and larches. Hip-hop and classic rock radio stations were gradually replaced by grave pastors and bawdy men twanging banjos and, eventually, they too faded to crackling white noise. The signal pips on my phone hollowed out. I was nearly there.

Over a crest in the road was the cause of the electronic silence: the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO), an array of radio telescopes set against the indigo vastness of the Blue Ridge Mountains. These giant white ears are cocked to interstellar whispers: the formation of stars, nebulae and supernovae. So sensitive are the devices, and what they are listening for so faint, that even tiny signals nearby can be disruptive: a badly fitted microwave or a faulty electric blanket. It's like trying to eavesdrop across a room while listening to heavy metal in your earphones.

In the same zone is another telescope, run by the National Security Agency (NSA), and there is a chance some of your Facebook messages may have passed this way. But if that scheme caused international outrage, then the Green Bank telescope has been more controversial locally. Thanks to the unusual lack of interference, the town has become a haven for those looking to escape electromagnetic radiation and over the past decade, as many as 40 people have moved here.

It might not sound much, but Green Bank's population was only 120 or so to begin with. Imagine two million people moving to London and demanding the city be ghost-proofed, and you get an idea of the scale of the disruption. There have been reports of tensions in the town: tales of threats and abuse unfitting to a sleepy mountain village. And it is all the stranger when you consider that no serious scientific study has been able to establish that electrosensitivity exists. According to the World Health Organisation, "EHS [electromagnetic hypersensitivity] has no clear diagnostic criteria and there is no scientific basis to link EHS symptoms to EMF [electromotive force] exposure. Further, EHS is not a medical diagnosis, nor is it clear that it represents a single medical problem."

When I arrived there was not much sign of anything, let alone simmering social unrest. Past five o'clock everything was shut for the night. The air was freezing. For \$30 I got a room in a motel where I was the only guest. "Leave the key on the bed when you go," said its owner, before driving off herself, leaving her business in the care of at least six cats. The next day I headed for the main drag, which was not hard to find in a town with one road. Green Bank is not a metropolis. Along with the telescope, there is a school, church, library and craft shop, as well as Henry's: a petrol station that quintuples up as a supermarket, public toilet, restaurant and general hub, and where I went in search of breakfast.

“You’re not from round here, are you?” said Mary, my waitress. The staff were engaged in trying to balance a green plastic St Patrick’s Day hat on a stuffed moose head. Other diners arrived, heavy-set men in fleece and camouflage. Everyone knew everyone by name and I was the only person without a pickup truck. I confirmed Mary’s suspicions, and asked her about the migration.

“People come here because they say they can hear the electrics,” she replied. “I don’t know if it’s a real condition or not. But the electro- sensitives swear it is, so... to each their own, I say.” She didn’t look convinced. “I don’t really mind not having a cellphone,” she added. “You get used to that. And a lot of us have Wi-Fi in our homes anyway, so that’s OK.”

Hang on, so in The Town Without Wi-Fi, there is in fact quite a lot of Wi-Fi? I worried that this would not make for as catchy a headline as I had hoped. “Not publicly, but at home some of us do. It’s not illegal, but the observatory has a truck that can sense it. They’ll come round and ask you to turn it off.”

At the library I met Arnie Stewart, a longtime resident and retiree. He had an easy manner, and the air of someone who had been asked these questions before. He pitched himself as a conciliatory figure, a diplomat between two warring tribes. “The serious migration has been going on for about six years,” he said. “It depends on the person, but almost all of them are affected by cellphone towers. They’ll be driving along and have to pull over because they have blurred vision, confusion, or their skin will break out in rashes. I think it’s something that everyone is sensitive to, in some degree: I sit in front of a computer for a couple of hours and my face starts to feel warm.”



'It's something everyone is sensitive to, in some degree': long-term resident Arnie Stewart.
Photograph: Ed Cumming

Stewart said he was sceptical about electrosensitivity until he tried an experiment. He held a meeting with some electrosensitives, and didn't tell them he had a mobile phone in his pocket. "They noticed at once. After that I was convinced. If you're sick, who am I to shun you? And mostly the electrosensitives have realised that they have to fit in, and it's been fine," he adds. "But one person created some tensions."

That person was Diane Schou, one of the first electrosensitives to migrate to Green Bank, and their unofficial local leader. She moved in 2007, after her life was made unbearable by a new cellphone mast at the research farm in Cedar Falls, Iowa, that she shared with her husband, Bert, and their son. She began suffering terrible headaches, along with blurred vision and skin rashes. At first she didn't know why.

"I got the symptoms of radiation sickness," she told me. Her tone was patient, like a veteran teacher explaining old truths to young students. "I went to the doctor and he wasn't able to diagnose it. Eventually I established that I was reacting to a buried cellphone tower. US Cellular was the brand - I didn't react to AT&T, Spring or Cellular One towers." She reeled off the names as if it would be the most normal thing in the world to have a brand-specific allergy. With her home life increasingly unbearable, she began to travel across the USA and even further afield, to Scandinavia and Nicaragua, in search of somewhere more peaceful. Sweden is one of the few places to recognise electrosensitivity as a disability and the government will help sufferers insulate their homes. "In Scandinavia there were places where electrosensitives gathered, but they didn't go far enough to prevent the signals," Schou said. "Farmers still used electric fences for their sheep, or people would use cordless phones."

At last she settled on Green Bank, the "best of the worst," even though some residents still have local Wi-Fi, and power lines run above ground. "At least they speak English here," she said. Bert stayed behind in Cedar Falls. "He would move if I asked him, but he gets bored here." Surely such a move has been difficult for their marriage, I asked? "It has been a challenge, for sure. We used to have three meals a day together, and now we only see each other every few months."

In an effort to make Green Bank more navigable, Schou made some requests of local businesses. A Dollar Store was opening, but its fluorescent and halogen lights would be intolerable. She asked that they were changed. "They wouldn't do it. And without the light it gets very dark in there, so they're not willing to turn off the power." She took to eating her meals in the senior citizens' centre, where a gap in the lighting gave her some peace. But walking to collect her food entailed exposure to problem bulbs, so she would ask others to wait on her.

Things came to a head. A town meeting was called. "She became very demanding, asking other people to turn their lights off or replace their bulbs," said Stewart. "It was too much. And Schou was encouraging other sensitives to move here, and this is not a town with many jobs or houses to begin with."

Where the locals might have been happy to tolerate one or two of the sensitives, the mass migration was beyond the pale. Another sensitive who moved to Green Bank was reported to have flown into a rage at the library, denouncing the "dumb hillbillies". "People tell me to stop encouraging others to move here, and to stop bringing them into stores," Schou confirms. "The hostility continues." People would walk towards Schou with concealed electronics, in an effort to provoke a reaction. A meeting

she and her husband organised to help educate the others about electrosensitivity descended into a slanging match. Schou, who has called herself a “technological leper,” said the ill will went further: “I had a visitor staying, a fellow refugee, and the air was let out of our car tyres overnight.”

She felt the hostility was best explained as a kind of conspiracy between the ill-informed and Big Telephony. “I believe that there are some people here who used to work for the telephone industry, and are trying to support the industry by getting rid of me.” Schou seemed to accept that her role as a pioneer will ruffle a few feathers. Charlie Meckna, by comparison, was more reserved. Friendly but quietly spoken, he wore blue jeans and white trainers, in that style unique to middle-aged American men. His view is that “attention-seeking” behaviour by “certain individuals” is a distraction from the real issues. This is an argument I heard several times from those with EHS, that their particular condition was real, while others’ were purely psychosomatic.



'It was going to kill me': Charlie Meckna moved to Green Bank when he believed mobile-phone signals were making him ill. Photograph: Ed Cumming

Meckna moved to Green Bank last July, after years trying to work out what was making him sick. In particular he found that he was sensitive to cordless phones and public Wi-Fi. “I would feel dizzy and nauseous, and get a bad ringing in my ear. People would find me passed out. It’s not perfect in Green Bank at all, but otherwise it was going to kill me. There are a lot of ignorant people who don’t understand. You’d have thought the population would be more sympathetic, given that 70% of them have diabetes and more than 20 people have cancer. I always say: ‘Do you think I want this?’ No.”

None of which gets round the core issue: if EHS is real, I asked Diane, then why has it not shown up in formal experiments? “I encourage scientists to go to where we are and measure the environment,” she replied. “Don’t try to pretend that you’re God and expose us to different frequencies in a lab. That’s like taking someone and breaking their legs and asking how much it hurts.”

For Sarah Dacre, the head of the 1,000-strong Electrosensitivity UK, the lack of proof from major studies is merely evidence of a conspiracy between interested parties. “Conventional government-funded science isn’t a reliable indicator of health defects,” she told me. “There’s a vested interest in keeping the truth out of circulation. But the independent science isn’t sceptical about it at all.” Her society was on the verge of exerting great influence on public policy, she added, although progress had been hindered by infiltrators, who were leaking information back to the government and phone companies. “Like spies?” I asked. “Well, they don’t call themselves spies.” No, I said, I supposed they didn’t.

Like Meckna, Dacre felt that there were people claiming to be electrosensitive who were nothing of the sort, who were queering the pitch for the others: “You can tell at once who is just pretending,” she said. After I spoke to her, my inbox was deluged by fellow sufferers who had been alerted to this article, linking to the independent studies that support their claims.

Perhaps surprisingly, Green Bank was a hard place to leave. After the initial difficulty of organising interviews without a mobile or the internet, I had quickly settled into a slower pace. In my motel I read until I fell asleep. I woke at dawn to the pale light sharking through the windows. It was easy to see how this place could provide solace, even to the non-electrosensitive. Part of the problem, I suspect, is that few of us doubt the behavioural or environmental threats of technology; our endless distractibility, the constant beeps and whirrs and notifications of modern life. You might argue that electrosensitivity is simply an extreme reaction to a whole range of bewildering stimuli. Dacre told me that many come to her after a bereavement or other illness, even a bad insect bite – something that knocks the world off-balance. It is well documented that psychosomatic conditions can provoke real symptoms, and nobody would wish to mock the afflicted.

Or at least, not much. As I prepared to make tracks, Charlie Meckna pointed up at some slivers of grey cloud that hung in the vast powder-blue sky.

“See those?” he asked.

“Aeroplane trails?”

“Not contrails - chemtrails,” he said. “The government sprays the air - it gets in the atmosphere.” He paused and looked me in the eye. “The world needs to know what’s happening here.” I drove off, slightly too quickly, eager to refresh my feeds.

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