**Down Home Series**

by Donna Bozza Rich, Eastern Shore News Reporter and Freelance Writer

During the year 2001, we’re making our way around Virginia, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year’s third stop, we’ll be...

**Down Home in Cape Charles**

Watercolor sunsets, Victorian charm and friendly residents characterize this Eastern Shore community.

So cozy is Cape Charles with the Chesapeake Bay that each day ends with watercolor sunsets. Whether viewed from its Victorian porches or beach-front pier, spectacular brush strokes of turquoise and pink paint sky and tide.

There was a time many believed the sun had also set on the glory days of Cape Charles, back almost a half-century ago. The railroad that built the town had bid farewell, the grand steamboats and ferries that once filled its harbor were only fond memories.

“Nothing ever happens in Cape Charles” became the pessimistic motto.

But even after decades of decline, the town had its faithful. And in recent years, lifelong residents have joined forces with newcomers, or “come-heres” as they are affectionately called, to rebuild their community.

**Tracking History**

When William L. Scott, a wealthy coal tycoon and congressman, shared his vision for a railroad on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, none of the Pennsylvania Railroad officials were interested, except for one — Alexander J. Cassatt.

But one was all it took.

Born into an affluent Pennsylvania family (his sister Mary Cassatt was the renowned Impressionist painter), the brilliant engineer so believed in the venture he resigned as senior vice-president of the railroad, and, with his partner Scott, forever changed the Eastern Shore.

Cassatt organized the New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk Railroad in 1882. By 1884 they had laid tracks from Pocomoke City, Maryland, south through the center of the Eastern Shore.

The NYP&N railroad would give birth to a bevy of villages and towns, but none so
grand as the planned Cape Charles “city” near the tip of the rural peninsula.

Here Cassatt dredged a small creek for a deep harbor and closed the watery 26-mile gap from the Eastern Shore to Norfolk in a most ingenious way: floating train barges.

With his unique design, 18 freight cars carried goods more efficiently since it wasn’t necessary to unload the train cars’ wares onto ships, then reload them back onto trains again.

Throughout the elegant age of travel with steamboats and ferries and the romance of the rails, Cape Charles thrived as the connecting point for both commerce and people heading to northern cities.

Margaret Carlson, 80, who grew up in Cape Charles and owns Charmar’s Antiques with her husband Charlie, remembers the tiny 8- by 8-block town during the 1930s and ’40s.

“It was bustling, everything was busy,” she recalls fondly. “You had to wait for everything from getting your hair cut to getting on the ferries.”

In 1950, the vital town took its first blow when the car ferry operation moved further south to Kiptopeke. Three years later, the last of the passenger steamboats, the Elisha Lee, left Cape Charles, never to return.

Before the decade closed out, the whistle of the passenger train could be heard no more. It was now the age of the automobile.

The completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, connecting the Eastern Shore to the mainland in 1964, was not the cure for the town’s ills. Travel and time continued to pass Cape Charles by.

Down but Not Out

When Chris Bannon came to Cape Charles 13 years ago to open Seagate, the first bed-and-breakfast inn here, he saw what many others saw — a forgotten town. But unlike others, he also recognized its nostalgic appeal.

“It’s Americana, like stepping back in time to the 1950s,” says Bannon, who restored a rundown welfare house back to its 1912 Victorian splendor. “The town looked tired, but was architecturally spectacular with tree-lined streets.”

Some town residents doubted he would succeed, but Bannon did, and later was joined by four more B&Bs, each flourishing in the small bayside town.

Even a scant five years ago, Kim Starr heard more than a few snickers when she decided to open a real estate office, Chesapeake Properties, in Cape Charles, wanting to raise her daughter Katie in the friendly small town.

“Most Eastern Shore realtors considered it a no-man’s land,” says Starr, who started

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the business before the Bay Creek development was yet a player. “But I grew up in another shore town — Cape May, New Jersey — before the lovely Victorian homes there were restored. I knew Cape Charles had the potential, and I knew others would see it, too.”

Those others often saw the town for the first time while staying at local B&Bs, and, succumbing to its small-town charms, moved here, fixing up homes and small businesses, says Starr.

“It was the B&Bs that really started the town’s renaissance,” says Starr. “And we also owe a debt to those who kept the pilot light on during the town’s dark times.”

Carlson says there has always been a stubborn determination among natives here to hang on.

“Cape Charles people never give up — never,” she says. “We know the town is coming back, not the way it was, but in a different way.”

**A New Day Dawns**

So remarkable is the town’s ongoing transformation, that a walk down any street reveals row upon row of homes and businesses finally receiving the TLC that they have long deserved.

Verandas are returning to the one-sided main street, better to view the town’s former life — the railroad and the harbor — that still captivates today.

Here, the Eastern Shore Railroad, a short-line freight operation with spunky bay blue engines, works from the town, and many a train barge can be seen silhouetted on the horizon.

At the harbor, watermen bring in the day’s catch, passing a visiting tall ship.

Juxtaposed with the restoration of stately houses and quaint cottages are the mainstay corner drugstore and hardware store, joined by a variety of shops working to fill in the blanks that were once unfillable in the Cape Charles downtown. They include a gourmet cookie mix manufacturer, three new eateries, and a bookstore.

“There is no question that the Bay Creek Development and its plans for two championship golf courses are playing a big part in the town’s revitalization,” says Cape Charles native and mayor, Alex Parry. “Coupled with the Sustainable Technologies Industrial Park and the incen-

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**If You Go...**

Southern hospitality is served at all of the bayside town’s B&Bs. Each has its own distinct personality, from Sea Gate Bed and Breakfast (757-331-2206; www.bbhost.com/seagate), to Chesapeake Charm (757-331-2676; www.chesapeakecharm.bnb.com).

Dining has expanded in the downtown area. Straight from a Norman Rockwell painting is the old-fashioned soda fountain at Rayfield’s Pharmacy, serving down-home cooking seven days a week (757-331-1212).

New Southern cuisine is featured at the comfortably elegant Bay Leaf Café. Call 757-331-4800 for dinner reservations or stop on in.

Or visit Julie at her cozy bistro, the Harbor Grille (757-331-3005), for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

To truly immerse yourself in a Chesapeake Bay sunset, set sail on the Schooner Serenity with your hosts, captains Laura and Greg Lohse. Call 757-331-4361 or book your passage via e-mail at lowsea@msn.com.

Like the town, the 1940s art deco Palace Theater, once the home of vaudeville, big bands and the Miss America’s Miss Virginia Pageant, is being lovingly restored. Arts Enter Cape Charles teaches the visual and performing arts while the marquee is ever changing. Catch a local production of “O ur Town” or enjoy the Virginia Symphony in the intimacy of a historic theater. Call 757-331-ARTS.

To learn more about the town’s intriguing history, visit the Cape Charles Museum and Welcome Center located at the town’s entrance in a lofty brick-and-glass building. It opens for the season on April 28. For more information, call 757-331-1008.

Two gift shops located on Mason Avenue are worth a visit as well: Eve’s Gallery and the Cape Charles Trading Company. The Stage Door Gallery on Strawberry Street is the place to purchase Eastern Shore artwork.

Charmar’s Antiques also features a tiny country store museum.

Summertime is a great time to visit Cape Charles. The 4th of July celebration is quintessential small-town USA and its informal
tives for business to locate here, the future
looks pretty good.”

Bay Creek, a 1,700-acre golf-marina com-
munity when complete, will hug the historic
district of the town. The Arnold Palmer
Signature Golf Course is set to open in June.

“People say you could have done this any-
where,” says developer Richard Foster, “but
you can’t create what God created, not the
Chesapeake Bay, not beautiful Plantation
Creek. What makes Cape Charles and the
Eastern Shore so unique is what makes Bay
Creek so special.”

Mayor Alex Parry, a native of the
community, believes that the
changes in sight for the small
town may in some ways restore it to its
prosperous past.

The town also has high hopes for the
Sustainable Technology Industrial Park,
located on 200 acres south of the town’s har-
bror, to attract light industry that protects the
Eastern Shore’s fragile environment while
providing family-wage jobs.

It is America’s first eco-industrial park
and one of only four demonstration models
recognized nationally for sustainable devel-
opment.

Finally, after years of hearing things were
going to change in Cape Charles, even the
staunchest naysayers have begun to believe.

Will Endearing Character Change?

But many wonder if even welcome
changes will change the town’s endearing
character.

Will people stop talking to each other at
Rayfield’s Pharmacy soda fountain? Will a
smile to a stranger still come as easily as one
to a friend when the town of 1,400 grows?

In its heyday, points out Parry, Cape
Charles had 4,000-5,000 people, and the
changes ahead, he believes, will in some
ways bring it back to its prosperous past.

“You have to remember, there was noth-
ing here before the railroad, and this town
was built with progress, industry and for-
ward thinking,” says Parry. “The same holds
true today.”

Between town events that bring people
together and great community spirit, he feels
change will be anything but negative. “I
believe strongly we will keep that small
town feel,” says Parry. “We’ll just be a big-
ger ‘small’ town.”