

by Rick Gunter,
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2002, we're making our way around the region, 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 tenth stop, we'll be ...



Down Home in Crewe

Carved out of the Virginia wilderness by railroad companies well over a century ago, Crewe still considers itself a railroad town.

One does not have to go far in this small Southside Virginia town to understand immediately where its roots are, where it has been, and where, to a large extent, it remains. That singular place is the railroad.

Although the big trains do not rumble

through the one-mile-long town either in the number or fashion of 50 years ago, Crewe, 18 miles from Farmville, still considers itself a railroad town. It is hard to find a family in the town of 2,378 people untouched by the railroad. Many have at least one or two family members who worked for the Norfolk &



RICK GUNTER PHOTOS

Western Railroad or who labor now for its successor, the Norfolk Southern. Many a railroad pension is collected in Crewe.

Carved out of the Virginia wilderness in 1888 by railroad companies, Crewe, or so local leaders boast, is the only town in America that owes its creation totally to the railroad. Indeed, the name of the town itself comes from the name of another railroad town, Crewe, England. Many of the community's founders were English railroad men from Petersburg who were dispatched to what became Crewe to build a town.

The lingering fingerprints of the railroad and the men who engineered the big trains and maintained the lines are everywhere, beginning with the names of streets, which typically are named for states traveled to and from by railroad men of a bygone era. Streets and avenues carry names such as Georgia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Tennessee. The main business thoroughfare, known unofficially as Main Street, is officially Carolina Avenue.

In Crewe's heyday, there were numerous retail shops and eight or nine grocery stores. The big railroad roundhouse served as the base of operations for more than 200 railroaders who had big checks to cash and

A full-sized N&W caboose is a featured attraction of the Crewe Historic Railroad Park.



The Crewe Homecoming Festival, held annually in August, never fails to draw a crowd.



(Above) Crewe's Town Hall. (Inset) John Spencer, a former train engineer and current member of the Crewe Town Council, sees the town maintaining a high quality of life.

spend on payday. But that all began to change in the late 1950s and 1960s. The diesel engine had a huge negative impact and so did new economies by the railroad.

While the railroad's influence remains strong, the town, if truth were told, really has not gotten over the loss of much of the railroad operation being moved to Roanoke. It is a town in search of a new identity, a town struggling to find a new niche in an ever-changing world.

It also is a town that has been targeted by the Virginia Department of Transportation for a bypass. The issue has divided community leaders. The eventual decision, for now, has been placed on hold in wake of the funding crisis facing the state's highway program.

"When the railroad here dried up, well, Crewe was hit hard," says **John Spencer**, who long served as an engineer on the big trains and now is a member of the Crewe Town Council.

Spencer, as do so many others, longs for the days when Crewe was full of retail shops and other commercial activity, yet still had a superb quality of life.

He sees the town maintaining a high quality of life, a sentiment shared by residents in

a recent survey conducted by the town government. He also sees Crewe becoming more and more a bedroom community of Richmond and the other nearby metropolitan areas of central Virginia.

Spencer and the others, however, believe it is unlikely that Crewe will ever regain the economic vigor of former days. But Spencer also believes Crewe is making a comeback. He points to the town's industrial park as evidence of that.



Joyce Simpson, president of the Crewe-Burkeville Area Chamber of Commerce, says, "If you love history, you'll love Crewe."

Joyce Redford Simpson, president of the Crewe-Burkeville Area Chamber of Commerce, also points to the continuing appeal of life and living here.

"If you like history, you will love Crewe," she says. "Crewe is like that line in 'Cheers.' When you go there 'everybody knows your name.'

"This is a down-home place," says Simpson. "Unlike so many communities these days, in Crewe, you know your neighbor. You can sit on the porch and enjoy a cup



Crewe's distinctive water tower features a painting of a locomotive, reflecting the town's historic ties to the railroad.

If You Go...

You can't go to Crewe without a stop at the **Crewe Historic Railroad Park**, 100 Virginia Avenue, West Route 460 (434-645-7196). The museum is billed as the largest free exhibit of railroad memorabilia, artifacts and railcars open to the public in the state. It is located a block from the town's main street, Carolina Avenue. Included in the exhibits, which grow in number by the year, are a special display devoted to railroad conductors and personal and rail-yard equipment, including a full-sized caboose. There also is a replica of the old Crewe railroad station.

Crewe is home of two well-known festivals. The **Virginia Chicken Festival** is held every June, in Hooper Park, 460 West, just outside of the town limits, and is considered one of the largest food festivals in Virginia. It draws entertainers, politicians, but most of all it attracts down-home folks looking for a good time on a summer's day and evening.

The other festival is known as **Crewe Homecoming**, which extends for an entire weekend on the third weekend of August. It begins on Friday at Hooper Park and continues on Saturday on Carolina Avenue (Main Street). A wide array of activities grace the event, one of the most popular being the "Saturday Morning Coffee" at Crewe Community Center that is filled with current and past residents. If you ever wondered what return-

ing home really means, a visit to that coffee will demonstrate it in powerful scenes.

Civil War buffs will find the Crewe area full of history, including the trail of **Lee's Retreat** that moves through here. Gen. U.S. Grant made a cross-country ride April 5-6, 1865, to join Generals Philip Sheridan and George Meade at Jetersville. Also, the last battle of the Civil War was fought at nearby Sailor's Creek. The retreating Confederate army was cut off by Sheridan's Cavalry and elements of the II and VI Corps. Nearly 10,000 men died.

Also nearby is **Fort Pickett**, named in honor of Confederate Major General George Edward Pickett upon its creation in 1942. During World War II, then-Camp Pickett was home to eight combat divisions, seven infantry divisions and one armored division. The famed "Cross of Lorraine" 79th Infantry Division trained here before the invasion of Normandy.

Lottie Moon's tomb is located in **Crewe Cemetery** on Route 49 South. Charlotte Diggs (Lottie) Moon, the daughter of a wealthy Virginia family, became a foreign missionary in 1873. She sailed for China that year after being appointed to serve in China by the Southern Baptist Convention and served there for nearly 40 years. She gave everything she had to help the starving people of China. She died on Christmas Eve, 1912, on her way home. The Crewe Baptist Church on Virginia Avenue has erected a special memorial window to the missionary. ■



"Crewe is an ideal place, a great place," says Herman "Pie" McCann, a lifetime resident of the community.

of coffee or watch the sun set. People look out for each other in time of sorrow and loss. They cheer you when you are up, too."

That friendliness, that simple act of being a good neighbor, well, it was born in railroad days, too. And so was a certain cosmopolitan flavor that one does not usually associate with small towns. Railroad people travel and travel remains among the best means of educating the senses and sensibilities.

"Crewe is an ideal place, a great place," says **Herman "Pie" McCann**, who has lived here all his life with the exception of his college years and service in the Korean Conflict.

"There is no doubt the railroad left a void in Crewe. It is a shame that kids often have to leave to find employment. But this town is ideal for industry and has the natural resources. I love this town and want to see it grow, but I don't want to see it get too big."

McCann points to the fact that Crewe continues to attract retirees from Northern Virginia and other urban areas. "It is a great retirement place. And there is so much room for expansion."

Longtime businessman **W. E. "Billy" Foote** waxes nostalgic about the town of his birth. "I remember when families not only knew all other families, but they knew the names of the dogs and other pets."

Looking back, he says, "When you went visiting a neighbor, they invited you to pull up a chair and spend the day with them.



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Residents of the community are proud of the new Crewe Volunteer Fire Department building, located on Rt. 460. A special dedication ceremony was held at the new headquarters site in spring of 2002.

Growing up here gave you the sense of living in two worlds. There were ‘town folks’ and ‘country folks,’ and they were different. I saw the best of both worlds.”

Foote says the town retains much of its quaintness. He believes it will survive and grow despite changes in the economy and the struggles encountered by most small towns in America. He sees its future as a bedroom community and a haven for service businesses.

Crewe is home to the headquarters of Southside Electric Cooperative, one of the state’s largest consumer-owned electric utilities. The cooperative owns Hooper Park, a focal point for community activities such as the annual Virginia Chicken Festival.

A town of many virtues and contrasts, Crewe is a place where history resides comfortably with the modern world. In Crewe, for example, one finds what private aviators consider one of the finest small airports in Virginia, situated in the shadows of the trail taken in retreat by the battered and beaten army of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in the last days of the Civil War.

That history also shows its face in the old homes, many of which have been restored and lovingly maintained.

And despite Crewe’s struggle to find a new identity in what could be called its post-railroad era, the town is slowly gaining new entrepreneurs and civic leaders. Among them is **Daphne Norton**. Norton and her husband,



Glenn, maintain a tradition at one of the town’s business institutions, Norton’s Place, home of a product famous up and down the long corridors of U.S. 460 that move through the town — the 69-cent, foot-long hot dog.

“You can choose to live your dream anywhere,” says Daphne, also known locally as something of a civic gadfly. “You can carry on a tradition here. You can’t always do that in a city. Life here is what you make it. God gave us many blessings. We just chose to live the ones we received here. We are not sorry. It is down home.” ■



Daphne and Glenn Norton, owners of Norton’s Place, are part of the Crewe business community’s new generation of entrepreneurs.

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