

## DOWN HOME SERIES

by Marge Stickevers,  
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2002, 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 eighth stop, we'll be ...



# Down Home in Smith Island

These Marylanders strive to lead a simple life on their beautiful island.

In 1994, cable TV finally reached Smith Island, Maryland's only inhabited off-shore island in the Chesapeake Bay. Smith Island is located in Somerset County, 13 miles west of Crisfield, and is accessible by passenger ferry (no cars). The population of 310 people, devoted to family, religion, hard work and the bay make a

living primarily from crabbing. Upon first sight, the primitive natural beauty of land and water of the island strikes the visitor with its simplicity.

Over 4,000 acres of marshland on the island are managed by the Martin National Wildlife Refuge. Wildlife include muskrat, mink, red foxes, otter, egrets, osprey, blue

heron, diamondback terrapin and wild fowl. The island has three communities, each with a rustic working harbor. In Ewell, the largest of the three, a museum is open daily from 12 to 4, April through October. The main street embraces white clapboard houses with green or red shutters. There are restaurants, a fire department, gas pumps, a ballpark, an elementary school and a post office. One of three Methodist churches stands next to the parsonage and cemetery. Tylerton, a cozy village with shade and fruit trees, and Rhodes Point — formerly known as Rogue's Point for the pirates who fre-



Janet Tyler (above), who works at the Smith Island Center Museum & Gift Shop (inset), feels the island is a wonderful place to raise children, but admits that making a living can be a challenge. (Right) Local graveyards evidence the fact that many of the island's inhabitants are descendants of the original colonists.

MARGE STICKEVERS PHOTOS







Otis Tyler (right) is fire chief and captain of the Island Belle, official mail boat of Smith Island.

quented there — are the other two communities.

**Chris Park**, a 43-year-old writer, grew up in Ewell, tonged oysters and crabbed with his dad for seven years before leaving for college when he was 25 to study history, literature and philosophy. After



graduation he returned to write and work as the editor of the *Crisfield News*. He decided to stay, write a novel and share the bay's

**The Rev. Rick Edmund**, pastor of the United Methodist Church and minister of three churches, feels that God played a tremendous part in sending him to Smith Island.



**Chris Parks**, pictured here with his daughter **Kate**, returned to his childhood home and decided to write a novel to share the bay's fate.

fate. Along with **Rene Tyler** and **Rick Edmund**, he maintains an ambulance service and works as a medical technician. Perhaps Chris, who recently had to start chemotherapy, describes his hometown best when he says, "Nowhere else could I have found the care and compassion shown me. I have no health insurance and these people raised money and even brought us food."

A central figure in the community is the **Rev. Rick Edmund** from York, Pa., who feels God had a tremendous part in sending





# If You Go...

Passenger ferry boats depart year round from Crisfield, Maryland. During the summer they also leave from Point Lookout, Maryland, and Reedville, Virginia. In Crisfield, leave car in lot on W. Main Street, just before the city dock. There are public rest rooms.

## Ferries

**Captain Jason I and II** – (410) 425-5931.

**Captain Tyler II** – (410) 425-2771. Optional seafood luncheon in Ewell at Bayside Inn when you purchase package cruise.

**Island Belle II (Mail Boat)** – (410) 968-1118.

**Spirit of Chesapeake** – (804) 453-3430.

Overnight docking available for boats with a draft under three feet. Call Ruke's Store – (410) 425-2111.

## Lodging on Smith Island

### Motel:

**Smith Island Motel** – (410) 425-3321.

### Bed and Breakfasts:

**Bernice Guy's** – (410) 968-2990.

**Ewell Tide Inn** – (410) 425-2141.

**Inn of Silent Music** – (410) 425-3541.



**A cruise package on the Captain Tyler II includes an optional seafood luncheon at the Bayside Inn Restaurant.**

## Lodging in Crisfield

**Paddlewheel Motel** – (410) 968-2220.

**Pines Motel** – (410) 968-0900.

**Somers Cove Motel** – (410) 968-1900.

## Restaurants in Crisfield

**Captain's Galley** – (410) 968-3313.

**Watermen's Inn** – (410) 968-2119.

**Sidestreet Restaurant** – (410) 968-2442.

## Events

**Hard Crab Derby** takes place on Labor Day weekend, Friday, Saturday and Sunday with fireworks on Sunday at 9 p.m. The Derby is a fair and festival with prizes, games, food and crafts. There are crab races, crab-picking and crab-cooking contests, boat race and boat-docking contest. For information, contact: Visitors Center and Museum, Crisfield Heritage Foundation, (410) 968-2501.

him to Smith Island. Rick observes that his parishioners have deep religious feelings. On Sundays he conducts services at the island's three churches, hopping from one to the other in golf cart or boat. In the winter and on stormy days, Sunday is a transportation adventure for the Reverend.

## **Descendants of Colonists**

For generations, the people of Smith Island have crabbed the island's waters, six days a week from 3 a.m. to at least 6 p.m., April through December. It is possible to read the names on the tombstones next to the church in the middle of town and prove that the present inhabitants are direct descendants of British colonists who first settled the island in the late 1600s.

Smith Island was originally populated in 1657 and named the Russell Isles by Captain John Smith in honor of Smith's ship doctor, Walter Russell. Later, Captain Henry Smith, a prominent landowner and families named Evans and Tyler settled on the island. Population peaked at 800 during the early 20th century, but slipped to present number

levels due to young people leaving the island for jobs other than fishing. Today the prison on the Eastern Shore in Princess Anne employs some of the younger generation. The island recently welcomed its first newborn in more than 18 months.

Inhabitants of Smith Island have a distinctive accent reminiscent of their British forebears and preserved by isolation. One noted custom is that islanders in cars and trucks honk their horns and wave. Although cars are few, there are bicycles (allowed on the ferry) and golf carts can be rented. The islanders also feed a large number of cats who live outdoors.

**Janet Tyler**, a 30-year-old mother of two, says Smith Island is the best place to raise children. "I've never seen kids come here who didn't love it. They can run free." Janet has worked in the museum for three years. She enjoys living on Smith Island, but admits that the biggest challenge is making a living.

Janet's father-in-law, **Otis Tyler**, is the captain of the Island Belle, the 42-foot mail boat that crosses the water twice a day, fer-

rying passengers and mail. Otis has performed this job for 18 years. He likes to meet different people and he thinks every day is unique. Although crabbing has been in his family for over 100 years, (his grandparents were Whitelocks) he prefers the independence of being a boat captain. He also wears the hat of fire chief. Otis remembers the winter of 1976-'77 when the Bay was frozen for a 13-week period. The National Guard flew the mail in.

## **A Precarious Compromise**

For many, the Chesapeake Bay is synonymous with the blue crab. Watermen explain that the Chesapeake has provided more crabs for human consumption than any body of water in the world. The difficulty in catching these tasty crustaceans is due in part to their interesting and complex biology. Their mating is indeed a beautiful tale. This knowledge is handed down from the older, crustier fishermen to the younger generation. Most of it is gleaned from experience. The women finish the crab-harvesting operation, using their skills as pickers.



**There are no taxis, but tourists can travel in rented golf carts.**

Make no mistake, the process is complicated and the Smith Island watermen would prefer to be left alone to work their trade as they have done in the past. But the Environmental Protection Agency has vowed to protect the waters and the environment. The compromise between watermen and environmental protectors is precarious. Both sides must strive to understand the other's position.

The state health department has in recent years began enforcing regulations for facilities used in picking crab meat. The changes and financial burdens disturb people who have accomplished tasks safely by their own methods. It is a delicate balance between progress and independence.

In contrast to the crabbing and oystering industries that have been on the island for hundreds of years, there are several recent structural additions. The Center, in conjunction with Crisfield and Smith Island Cultural Alliance, offers visitors an overview 20-minute film and a variety of exhibits. It is a bright, cheery building with museum, gift shop and rest rooms. On the wall is a 30-foot mural of sunset at Rhodes Point by local artist, **Reuben Becker**. L. Marsh Boatyard, which has built and repaired boats for 50 years, exhibits a work boat.

Other exhibits display the roles of women in the community. There is also an interactive audio tape.

On the water in Tylerton, an ex-theologian and his wife opened their Inn of Silent Music. **Leroy Friesen** and **Sharrryl Lindberg** offer guests serenity, prayer and a place to unwind from the chaos of ordinary

living. In addition, in Ewell there is one motel with eight rooms and two other bed and breakfasts. However, what is missing on Smith Island are sidewalks, beaches, convenience stores, boat rentals, movie theatres, liquor stores, bars, fast-food chains, boutiques, amusement parks, laundromats and taxis. Unfortunately, there is no doctor. A visiting nurse comes once a week. In the interim, the islanders concern themselves with family, church, work and nature.

Chris Parks, the writer, speaks of his childhood with awe. He played out on the marshes, climbing and building treehouses. There he watched wild goats and eagles. At the local dump, he discovered treasure and he had a skiff like all the other kids. The best time was at Christmas when everyone returned to the island. There were pageants and church activities that bound people together. After seventh grade, he rode the boat to high school with his contemporaries.

As children mature, the lure of the crab pot with its hard physical labor dims and an outside world beckons. But no matter how long or how far the child travels from Smith Island, there remains that strong bond to family and to nature. Nowhere else can native sons practice allegiance to home, church and work in exactly the same way. Nowhere else affords that intense freedom to live a serene life. As pollution and the decline of shellfish threaten the Chesapeake, and as erosion causes the island to diminish, we salute the watermen and families of Smith Island in their battle with nature. Like their ancestors before them, they strive to live a simple life in peace on their interesting island. ■



**Be sure to pick up a souvenir at one of the island's unique gift shops.**

