

by Rebecca Jackson,
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2003, 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 second stop, we'll be ...



Down Home in **Bedford**

One of Virginia's fastest-growing communities, picturesque Bedford is home to the national D-Day monument.

Bedford, Virginia, is a rich motherlode for history buffs, with its restored late-19th-century downtown historic district, antique shops welcoming customers on nearly every corner, and abundance of antebellum and Victorian-era residences, all of which have a story to tell.

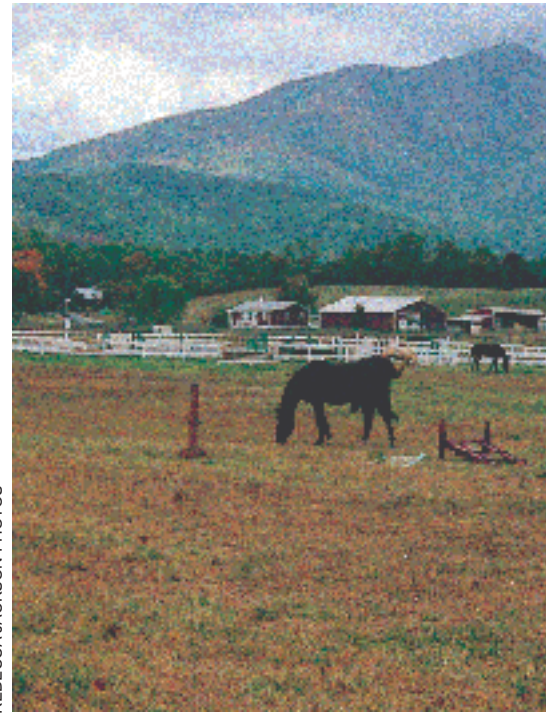
At the same time, the City of Bedford and Bedford County, which surrounds it, are witnessing explosive residential, business and industrial growth. The county, according to demographers, is developing at a pace almost rivaling that of Virginia's urban crescent.

Yet with its low crime rate, comparative-

ly reasonable real estate taxes, and hospitable, friendly people, Bedford's a place that is easy to call home, whether you're a descendant of some of the area's 18th-century settlers, or a newcomer from another region of the country.

A decade ago, Bedford was listed in a publication called "America's 100 Best Small Towns," praised as an ideal place to put down roots, raise a family, or start a business.

Located between the metropolitan areas of Roanoke and Lynchburg in the western Piedmont of central Virginia, Bedford is



REBECCA JACKSON PHOTOS



Bedford-area officials open the annual Elderfest, an event for active senior citizens in the community. At right is The Cedars, one of many restored homes in Bedford County.





The majestic Peaks of Otter provide the backdrop for wide expanses of farmland in Bedford County.

home to the National D-Day Memorial. Bedford was selected for this honor, and the majestic monument constructed to commemorate it, because the region lost 19 soldiers the first day of the D-Day assault in World War II. This was the highest per-capita loss of life



Patriotism and national pride abound in Bedford. (Inset) Civic-minded residents pitch in to bag potatoes for the needy.



Victory Plaza, surrounding the massive arch, includes five points of inlaid granite representing the five Normandy beaches. Flags of the 12 Allied nations supplying forces or materials during the invasion stand at the perimeter of the plaza.

Water cascades down a 16-foot granite wall, representing the wartime architecture

for a community its size during the June 6, 1944, invasion of the coast of Normandy, France.

On June 6, 2001, President George W. Bush and 20,000 others, including local and foreign dignitaries, gathered atop the City of Bedford's highest pinnacle to dedicate the \$25 million memorial. The memorial site covers 88 acres.

Overlord Arch greets each visitor as an impressive, 44-foot structure with a polished, green granite façade that bears the word "Overlord," the code name of the Normandy landing. Below the arch, a featured piece of statuary called Final Tribute stands as an acknowledgement of the sacrifices made during the assault.

Crowds gathered on June 6, 2001, for the dedication of the National D-Day Memorial.



If You Go...

National D-Day Monument

Purpose: To memorialize the valor, fidelity and sacrifices of the Allied forces on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Memorial Hours: Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Closed on Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Thanksgiving Day. Openings before or after normal operating hours by special arrangement.

Foundation office hours: Open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Thanksgiving Day.

For more information, call 540-586-DDAY.

Peaks of Otter, Blue Ridge Parkway

Nestled between two of the three mountains that make up the Peaks of Otter in Bedford County is the Peaks of Otter Lodge and Restaurant, located at Milepost 86 on the Blue Ridge Parkway and open all year. The lodge is the flagship of a chain of visitor concessions strung along the Virginia portion of the Parkway. All are owned and operated by the Virginia Peaks of Otter Company under contract with the National Park Service.

In addition to the lodge, other visitor locations include: The Camp Store and Bus Station, located near the Peaks of Otter Lodge; a service station, also located at the Peaks of Otter Lodge; The Otter Creek Restaurant, located at Milepost 60.8, about 27 miles from the lodge and restaurant.

The Peaks of Otter also has scenic shaded picnic grounds, campgrounds, cabins and hiking trails, including one that offers a vigorous hike to the top of Sharp Top Mountain.

Call 540-586-1081 or 800-542-5927 for more information.

Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest

Poplar Forest, Bedford County home of third U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, offers



Antique Boat Show at popular Smith Mountain Lake.

40-minute guided tours of Jefferson's octagonal house from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, from April through November, except Thanksgiving Day.

Tour topics include Jefferson's design and construction of his retreat, located off U.S. 221 in Forest (Bedford County), his landscape design, the plantation community, the rescue of the property and its restoration.

Tours also include the hands-on history pavilion, which is available daily Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend,

11 a.m. to 2 p.m. The pavilion features activities from Jefferson's era, including brick making, building a bucket, and writing with a quill pen. There is also a toddler's corner with puzzles and coloring pages. Adults must accompany children to the hands-on area.

Self-guided grounds tours are also available. Visitors can walk the grounds with brochures describing the site and the enslaved workers. They also can view the exhibits at the restoration workshop, archaeology laboratory, slave-quarter site, and in the lower level of the house. Also available in the lower level of the house is a 15-minute film on the restoration work and archaeological excavations.

For ticket prices and additional information, call 434-525-1806.

Smith Mountain Lake

Beautiful, 23,000-acre Smith Mountain Lake, with approximately 500 miles of shoreline, lies along the southern border of Bedford County. The lake offers

water sports, outdoor recreation, and a variety of other leisure activities. You can call the Welcome Center at 540-721-1203 or 800-676-8203.

Smith Mountain Lake State Park, on Va. 626, covers 1,506 acres with 16 miles of shoreline, a public beach, fishing, boating, swimming, hiking trails, picnicking, camping, a public boat ramp, furnished cabins (off-water as well as lakefront) and interpretive programs. Call 540-297-6066 for more information. ■

of German bunkers, to what is surely the most moving part of the memorial. It is here, amid water jets zipping like machine-gun fire from a pool at the base of the wall, that statuary has been placed depicting the struggles and deaths of soldiers on the Normandy beaches.

A peaceful and reverent site, the memorial offers panoramic views of the city below, as well as the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Future plans for the memorial include construction of a 49,000-square-foot educational center that will showcase a theater, lecture hall, galleries, compelling exhibits, programs and projects designed to preserve and interpret the history and lessons of D-Day.

First Called Liberty

First called Liberty when it was founded in 1782, tradition says the city took its name for one of two reasons, namely, because of Patrick Henry's great speech on "liberty" or because of the newly gained freedom the colonies had so recently won from England. The county, and later, the city, adopted the current name from John Russell, Duke of Bedford (Bedfordshire, England).

Today, through a new organization called the Bedford International Alliance, and because of its ties to European communities developed during and after World War II, Bedford has forged twinning relationships with several villages hugging the beaches of

Normandy, France, and Bedford, England.

Most of the buildings along both sides of Bridge Street in the city were at one time constructed of wood, so that when a fire was discovered early on the morning of Oct. 12, 1884, very little could be done to save the heart of downtown. There was no organized fire department and a meager water supply, so soon the core of the city succumbed to a huge blaze. The fire, however, proved a blessing in disguise, for when the owners rebuilt, the business establishments were made larger and of more permanent material such as brick.

Those buildings, occupied by book shops, antique, hardware and furniture

stores, quaint eateries and other businesses, stand today, refurbished to their late 19th-century splendor thanks to Bedford's designation as a Virginia Main Street city in 1985.

Bedford Main Street, Inc., a tax-exempt organization empowered as a public-private partnership to help Centertown Bedford promote a positive image, revitalize the economic base and preserve local character, organizes or co-sponsors a variety of public celebrations and events each year. These include street festivals such as Centerfest (held the last Saturday in September and attracting as many as 10,000 spectators to downtown for the event); the Christmas parade; retail sales; public concerts, most recently "blues and barbecue" and July 4 jazz concerts, with part of the proceeds benefiting the National D-Day Memorial; and Memorial Day ceremonies. Bedford Main Street manages and schedules events at the Bedford Farmers' Market, where local growers market their produce from spring until the end of the year. The organization also manages events at the community stage.

On the historical stage, third president Thomas Jefferson and Con-

Stan and Lisa Butler (below) represent Bedford's Little Town Players. The group garnered a U.S. Presidential Volunteer Action Award.



federate General Robert E. Lee played prominent roles in 19th-century Bedford. Jefferson's Bedford County retreat, the octagonal Poplar Forest estate, completed in the first decade of the 19th century, is a popular tourist destination near Lynchburg. Avenel, built in the 1830s and once the centerpiece of a thriving southern plantation, was visited frequently by Lee, a close friend of the home's original owner. Avenel, also reputedly the haunt of a lady ghost attired in mid-19th-century garb, also is open to tourists. Both Poplar Forest and Avenel are favorite sites for community club meetings, special dinners, weddings and receptions.

Bedford's reputed location as the site of the legendary Beale treasure has lured fortune seekers for genera-



Bedford County is the most rapidly developing locale outside of Virginia's urban crescent.

tions, each claiming to have deciphered a secret code pinpointing the hiding place of the cache.

Bedford has witnessed many improvements and positive developments during the last decade, all aimed at quality of life and services for its residents and entrepreneurs. Among them were construction of a new Bedford central library and several branch libraries in the county, a new Bedford Elementary School, renovation of the old Bedford Elementary School for use as a middle school, Liberty Lake Park, which includes ball fields, a lake stocked with trout and other game fish, a community center, picnic shelters and hiking trails, one of them spe-



Bedford students work hard to beautify their school.

cially designed for disabled visitors. The community also boasts a new visitor and tourism center, jointly owned by the city and county, near the site of the National D-Day Memorial, an expanded central YMCA with a branch in Moneta on the south side of Bedford County near Smith Mountain Lake, and another YMCA facility planned in Huddleston, also near the lake.

Health-care needs are addressed by Bedford Memorial Hospital and several emergency medical crews throughout the county. The hospital is a modern, full-service, 166-bed facility, employing more than 380 full- and part-time employees. It has grown into one of the largest employers in the community, contributing more than \$7 million annually to the local economy. The hospital has come a long way since its early beginnings in 1955. Its newest addition, dedicated in October 2000, encompasses 32,000 square feet, has spacious quarters for modern imaging and mammography suites, an outpatient physical-therapy unit, pre-surgery and outpatient testing areas, and a comprehensive laboratory. Thirty-three physicians currently staff the hospital.

Bedford's booming public education system includes 21 schools, including three high schools and three middle schools. An

award-winning Bedford Science and Technology Center also offers local secondary students two-year vocational certification programs in auto technology, electricity, drafting and design, carpentry and a host of other trades.

The lovely 1895 Masonic Building housing the Bedford City and County Museum was restored to its former glory during the past decade.

The museum's new, three-story addition includes an elevator, restrooms for disabled persons and fire exits. With the recent opening of the third floor for exhibit space, the museum now has more room to display many objects that are rarely seen. There are a new Native American exhibit and a refurbished Civil War exhibit. A Black History room is planned.

The museum hosts about 7,000 visitors a year with about 1,500 of them Bedford County school students. About 1,100 visitors make use of the museum's extensive genealogy library each year and many more write the Bedford Genealogical Society with inquiries.

Blessed with Natural Beauty

Bedford is blessed with natural beauty, situated in a picturesque valley at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It is bordered on the north by the majestic Peaks of Otter, part of the Blue Ridge Parkway system and offering a lodge open year-round, fishing, hiking, camping, and bus-shuttle service to the summit of Sharp Top Mountain, one of the twin peaks on the community's northernmost horizon. To the south lies the 500 miles of shoreline of Smith Mountain Lake, its azure waters and upscale, lakefront developments attracting some 21,000 visitors annually. The lake, created in the mid-to-late 1960s as a hydroelectric impoundment, also is one of the most noted retirement Meccas in the eastern United States.

For the enjoyment of residents and visitors alike, Virginia created a state park on the Huddleston waterfront of Smith Mountain Lake. The park covers nearly 1,500 acres, including 16 miles of waterfront. In addition to a full range of water activities, the park offers miles of hiking trails, places to fish, a public boat-launching area, camping and picnic spots, a white sandy beach, concessions, a visitor's center and waterfront cabins available year-round. ■

Memories of a Native Son

by Audrey T. Hingley,
Contributing Writer

For Bedford native Boyd Wilson, 81, memories remain vivid: "They [the dying] were falling all around you ... you were scared, and any man that said he wasn't was a liar."

On June 6, 1944, some 30 Bedford soldiers participated in the D-Day Invasion with over 154,000 others from a dozen Allied nations. Bedford lost 19 sons that day (with two more dying later in the Normandy campaign, as did two others assigned to other companies), earning the town of 3,200 (in 1944) the sad distinction of suffering the highest per-capita D-Day losses in the nation.

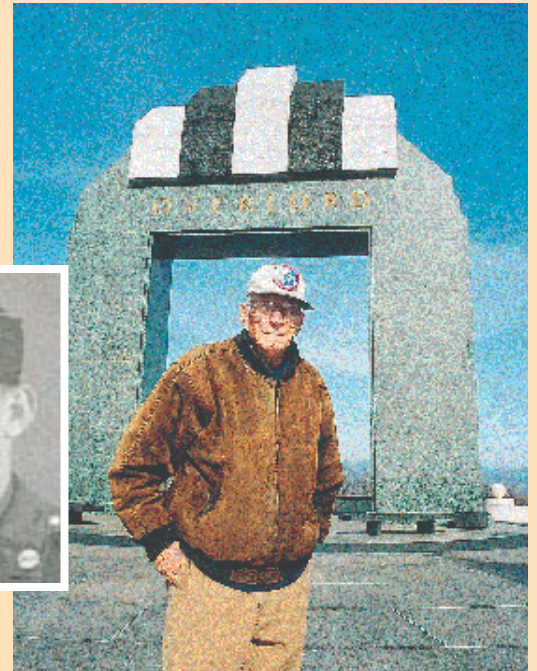
Today Wilson is one of only six Bedford D-Day veterans still alive. The community's loss was his loss, too, because "I knew every one of them."

Given its losses, Bedford was a logical choice for The National D-Day Memorial, dedicated June 6, 2001. The nine-acre memorial captures the D-Day experience, with three plazas commemorating specific stages in the invasion that reversed the course of World War II. A watery landing scene, complete with simulated enemy fire, landing craft, and bronze soldiers struggling toward shore, is particularly haunting.

Boyd Wilson can be found most days at the memorial, a thin man, cap in hand, hovering almost ghost-like as he pauses to talk to many of the over 400,000 visitors who have come since the memorial opened. The old soldier is a haunting reminder of the terrible sacrifices made to establish an Allied foothold in Normandy, France, that could push out across occupied Europe and bring the war with Germany to an end.

"I think I owe that much respect to those boys," he says of why he comes. "I think people should know what happened, and I think it helps them to talk to someone who was there. Tourists walk up, shake my hand, and tell me they appreciate what I did.

"They ask, 'How did you survive?' I say, the Man up there looked out for me. No



The memories of D-Day remain vivid for Bedford native Boyd Wilson. Bedford lost 19 sons that day, and Wilson knew every one of them.

other reason. I called on Him, and I called on Him a lot," he adds.

Bedford provided a company of soldiers (Company A) to the 29th Infantry Division when the National Guard's 116th Infantry Regiment was activated. Wilson, who'd enlisted in 1938, had already landed in northern Africa and Sicily before coming ashore on Omaha Beach. A squad leader, only half of his dozen-member squad made it out alive.

"The landing craft took us all the way to the beach. Everywhere you turned, there would be rifle fire coming at you. We lost 162 men in the first five minutes of that battle. I was thinking 'Kill me and get it over with' but at the same time I was moving forward," Wilson recalls. "There was a beach house 500 yards off shore, and my goal was to get there; when I got to the house, it almost surprised me I was still alive."

Wilson, who also served in Korea, spent 21 years in the National Guard. He went on to work 18 years as a traffic manager for Del Monte Foods before retiring at age 65.

He has no regrets about D-Day: "If you could've seen the [Nazi death] camp in Dachau, Germany ... I walked in there, the bodies were just stacked up, it was so terrible people couldn't believe it. D-Day was a turning point."

As for the memorial, Wilson says, "It's worth the trip."

The National D-Day Memorial is open daily 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Call 1-800-351-DDAY or visit www.dday.org. ■