

by Audrey Hingley,  
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 ninth stop, we'll be ...



## Down Home in

# Zuni

It's the people who keep this community going.

Back in the 1950s and '60s, people connected Zuni, Virginia, to Wright's Barbecue, a must-stop for travelers on Route 460 before Interstate 64 made parts of the route ghost-like. Today the building that housed Wright's houses a church, and "old Zuni" is little more than a bend in the road with a collection of houses. Few recall the days long ago when Zuni was a thriving village, complete with stores, hotel, and train depot.

Seven miles west of the town of Windsor in Isle of Wight County, Zuni abuts the Blackwater River that serves as a boundary with Southampton County. According to **Lucy Robinson** of the Zuni Post Office, 105 post office boxes and 742 rural deliveries bear Zuni addresses, but no one really knows the village's exact population. Long-time residents estimate no more than 150 people live in the "bend in the road" that old-timers refer to as Zuni.



AUDREY HINGLEY PHOTOS

"Elder" **Frank Johnson**, 80, describes Zuni today: "A little place off Route 460 ... if you don't watch it, you'll run through it before you know you got to it!"

To find what's left of "old" Zuni, driving east from Petersburg on Rt. 460, go through Wakefield and Ivor, cross a small bridge over the Blackwater River, and turn right. You'll drive down a street with houses, a Presbyterian church, a dental office, and an old peanut storage facility with a falling-down silo — all that remains of once-bustling Zuni.

Also in Zuni: a smattering of small businesses and Zuni Gourmet Peanuts & Plants, an enterprise of Presbyterian Homes and Family Services that provides sheltered employment to mentally challenged adults in conjunction with Zuni Presbyterian Homes. The surrounding area includes farms, pastoral land, individual houses, and a half-dozen churches. Residents farm, operate small businesses like the recently opened Pearl Line Press Inc., or commute to employment.

**Jane March**, a Portsmouth native and widow, came to Zuni in 1967 when she "married into a Zuni family," she says with a laugh. The self-employed March is working on a book on Zuni's history.

"I'm doing it so people will know there was a Zuni, a thriving community where four passenger trains stopped every day,"

**A dentist's office in what was once "downtown Zuni."**



**Ronald Dodd of Chesapeake volunteered for the barbecue grill at Zuni Day.**

**Crowds gather for Zuni Day each August. Lucy and Jackie Newby (inset) host Zuni Day at their home.**

March says. “Whenever I talk to the old-timers, I’d think, all this is going to be lost. I think it’s important to save this history.”

The origin of the town’s name remains mysterious. Local Indians were the Nottoways, not the Zunis, a New Mexico tribe. But what’s not mysterious is the village Zuni used to be.

“There was an old hotel three stories high, with a walkway from the second floor to the top of the railroad,” recalls **Walter “Jiggs” Butler**, 87, who traveled to 27 countries and 43 states during a 20-year Army career before coming home to Zuni. “They had 13 artesian wells that would flow continuously and a well, now gone, where people would bring horses to water them. There was a peanut factory that worked a hundred people, a cotton gin that worked about 25 people, and a soap factory.”

According to Butler, The Happy Days Soap Factory was a sad tale: “Two people came here from out west and sold bonds to

build the factory. It worked about 25 people. After they got it running good, they took off with all the money. Everyone lost their jobs, and the bonds were worthless.”

**Evelyn Joyner Warren** remembers the soap factory; the 100-year-old widow also remembers, “You could ride the excursion train from Zuni to Norfolk for one dollar.

Both freight and passenger trains stopped in Zuni.”

Warren, who married at 24, farmed with her husband. When he died at age 46, she continued farming by herself to support her children.

**Monica Whitney of nearby Ivor** shares a song at Zuni Day.

Talking to locals and reading old newspaper clippings, one can see the elements of old Zuni: a hotel, cotton gin, a peanut factory near the railroad tracks, a barber shop, and several stores. Zuni served as a coal-and-water refueling stop for steam-engine trains. The village was mentioned as early as 1745 in one history, although March says Zuni didn’t make it to a map until 1864. In one 1907 account, Zuni was described as having “three general stores, one blacksmith shop, one livery stable, one hotel, and in recent years has become a very fine peanut market, made so by the bustle of its businessmen, often rivaling Smithfield in prices.”

March displays an undated newspaper clipping reporting on a fire that destroyed “half of Zuni’s business section.” The article reported a filling station, poolroom, barber shop, general store, and the post office were “razed to the ground despite heroic



**(Right, 1-r) Alisa Joyner, 9, Romane Joyner, 6, and Endia Butler, 8, enjoy the celebration.**



efforts of citizens who formed bucket brigades to save them.”

March says the fire occurred in 1931. Butler remembers the fire vividly, adding, “I’d always heard the smoke stacks of the steam train caught the grass on fire and it spread to buildings.” Other reports blamed a discarded smoldering cigarette.

More fires, flooding, and the 1999 flood rampage created by Hurricane Floyd continued to wreak havoc on Zuni. But Zuni remains a community, thanks to its strongest point: its people. The people are friendly, their sense of community anchored by their churches.

“The flood of 1999 was devastating,” admits Shirley Harris, director of Zuni Senior Center, who moved to Zuni when she married Emory Harris. “Some friends lost everything they had. We lost probably about six or eight houses in Zuni, and the lower level of my house was flooded out. We had no insurance, but the government helped tremendously.”

Despite the flood, Harris says she wouldn’t live anywhere else: “It’s really a paradise here, peaceful and quiet, with churches that are not competitive but work for the people.”

The sense of community is felt at the annual “Zuni Day,” held the second Saturday of August. Hosted at the home of **Lucy and Jack Newby**, this year’s event started with a gospel group singing, “He allowed us to come together one more time.” Hundreds gathered under a big red-and-white tent for music, food, and fellowship. **Michael Perry**, who offered a reading from Psalm 133 (“how blessed it is to dwell together in unity”), told the audience with a laugh, “This time last year I was in the desert in Afghanistan ... it’s better here!”

Lucy Newby says six families (Butler, Saunders, Simmons, Harris, Warren, and Newby) comprise the committee organizing each year’s event. Committee members pro-

vide groaning tables of cabbage, string beans, and fried chicken, while men barbecue pigs, fry fish, and grill burgers. The event is funded by donations, and has a strong Christian emphasis.

The Newbys, who moved to Zuni 23 years ago, say Zuni’s people and serenity attracted them. Lucy Newby adds, “Everybody keeps to themselves, but if you need the community to come together for you, they will. This is a place where you can let your children play outside [and not worry about them].”

**George Joyner**, 77 and retired from the Norfolk Naval Shipyard,



**Walter “Jiggs” Butler remembers a fire in Zuni that destroyed half of the village’s businesses. “I said, ‘Daddy, get up, Zuni is on fire!’ Daddy said, ‘Feel the walls, if it’s not hot, go back to bed,’” Butler recalls with a laugh.**



**Evelyn Joyner Warren, 100, has lived in Zuni all her life. “In the old days, everybody farmed — peanuts, corn, tobacco,” she says.**

still lives in the Zuni house where he was born: “I was never tempted to move to the city. I never liked city life.”

A long-time presence is Zuni Gourmet Peanuts & Plants, in Zuni 28 years. The 300-acre Presbyterian Homes & Family Service site includes four homes for mentally challenged adults, three new independent-living apartments, the peanut shop, and a greenhouse. Zuni home residents work in the peanut shop and greenhouse.

“We operate year-round but our main business is seasonal, fall through Christmas,” explains peanut and plant shop manager **Nancy Winslow**. “In the spring we work in the greenhouse for six

months, selling bedding plants and hanging plants. The peanut shop sells its homemade product, produced one batch at a time, to locals as well as through mail-order and Internet sales.”

Newcomers **Shirley and Ron Nelson**, both in their early 50s, are part of a new wave of people moving to Zuni. Employed at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, the Nelsons are relocating from Virginia Beach to a Christmas tree farm in Zuni. A desire for land led them to purchase a 35-acre site with six acres of Christmas trees. They plan to open Zuni Tree & Alpaca Farm, Inc., the Saturday before Thanksgiving, with a shop featuring Christmas decorations, gifts, and personalized children’s books. Their eastern white pine “choose and cut” Christmas trees will also be available. They will also offer gift products made from the fiber of the llama-like alpacas that graze in their pastureland.

“Virginia Beach was too congested. Here it’s peaceful and quiet, and we have nice neighbors,” Shirley Nelson explains.

Several co-workers had moved to the area, they add, noting that rural lifestyle, reasonable prices, and lower taxes prompted their move.

Showing off bags of recently sheared alpaca fiber, Ron notes, “I do all the shearing. It’s very hard work, but it’s actually helped me, and our health, physically.”



**“Elder” Frank Johnson recalls, “In the old days, you could buy a 12-lb. sack of flour for 50 cents. Zuni had five or six stores, and they all did good business.” Johnson is an elder at Walnut Grove Baptist Church.**

Many children and young people were at the annual Zuni Day, which is reminiscent of a community-wide family reunion. But Shirley Harris says Zuni has few young people; many move away for employment opportunities. She calls the lack of younger people in a community she describes as “primarily 40s, 50s, and up” Zuni’s biggest challenge.

Locals also worry about what they believe is coming growth in Zuni. March says, “People who grew up in cities are starving

for the country, and those people are coming here.”

The downside, which March says is most visible in nearby Smithfield where subdivisions are mushrooming, is people who say they want country living, but move to rural areas and demand “instant 911 and water and sewer systems.”

“People here, we want to see the stars,” she explains.

“The reason I am here, I love gardening and the outdoors,” says Walter “Jiggs” Butler.

He adds, “We had nothing when we came along, and we helped one another. I plant four gardens, and open them to people for free vegetables. I’d rather be in the country. I’ve been in some big cities, and I can’t stand that bumpin’ shoulders in the street.”

Many old buildings may be gone, but Zuni citizens continue to keep this rural community alive. ■

*Jane March is working on a book focused on the history of Zuni. If you have any information, or want more information about her project, please call Ms. March at (757) 242-3807.*

## If You Go...

If you’re planning a trip to the Zuni area, here are a couple of interesting stops you might want to include in your itinerary:

### Zuni Gourmet Peanuts & Plants

5213 Homegrown Lane, Zuni, Va.

Open 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Monday-Friday

Telephone: (757) 242-3112 or

1-800-965-4550

Web site: [www.zunipeanuts.com](http://www.zunipeanuts.com)

### Zuni Tree & Alpaca Farm Inc.

Opening the Saturday before Thanksgiving; after that, open Saturdays & Sundays 9 a.m.-5 p.m.  
Telephone: (757) 242-4780



(Above) Shirley and Ron Nelson of Zuni Tree and Alpaca Farm. Alpacas are rare, exotic animals originating in South America. They are related to llamas but have straight ears and generally produce a softer fur.

