

■ DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2011, 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 sixth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

BRACEY

by Tucker McLaughlin, Jr.,
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What might be the best way to describe Bracey to a first-time visitor?

It's the kind of place its people love.

Part of Mecklenburg County, Bracey is near South Hill, the first exit leaving North Carolina off Interstate 85, with Richmond and Raleigh easily within driving distance. Lake Gaston and the interstate are vital parts of the community's story line.

Bracey has a small but proud business base, a thriving community center, retirees who are passionate about the place, lavish

lake properties, and scores of fishing tournaments, all bathed in Southern serenity.

Lake Gaston has played a critical role in Bracey's development, bringing tourism and a strong recreational and real estate base. This part of Virginia's Lake Country affords fishermen, water-sports enthusiasts and hunters tremendous opportunities.

BRAGGING ON BRACEY

While Bracey is no longer an incorporated town, resident Marilyn Johnson could very well serve as its unofficial mayor. She

and her husband David have lived here since 2002.

She serves as the president of the Bracey Community Center, after migrating from Plymouth, Mass.

"We were in North Carolina, and we came back, and we saw this, and we decided to jump off and see what's there. We were looking for a place to retire," Ms. Johnson recalls. She had grown up next to the sea. When she was ready to retire, Bracey and Lake Gaston seemed ideal.

"Growing up on the ocean, I said, 'I need water.' I don't care if it's the ocean, a lake, a creek, I don't care. That's how we found Bracey and Lake Gaston," she says.

This transplanted Yankee loves the people here.

"They're so ... down home. They have welcomed us into the community. They have been more than helpful in us building our home, settling us in, making us a part of the community," says Johnson. She had no family ties here, but found warm-hearted neighbors to make her transition to Bracey comfortable.

"The weather down here is beautiful. One thing that did surprise us was the red mud. We had nice, really black dirt. Having red dirt that turns into a pudding when it gets wet was just one of the things we had to get used to," she says.

"I can't explain how much Bracey means to me now," continues Johnson. "We've been taken in and made to feel welcome. I don't know what more you could ask

Residents gather at the thriving Bracey Community Center. Massachusetts transplant Marilyn Johnson (inset), president of the center, is full of praise for the community that opened its arms to her and her husband.





AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: Community includes approximately 1,550 people.

LAND AREA: The village proper covers about half a square mile.

ORIGINS: Bracey is unincorporated, but includes the same area as the town once known as St. Tammany, established in 1792 as the first incorporated town in Mecklenburg County.

ELEVATION: Highest point is 390 feet above sea level.

FACTOID: The community's name was changed from St. Tammany to Bracey to expedite railroad telegraph transmissions.



1. Much of life in Bracey revolves around beautiful Lake Gaston. **2.** Old buildings stand as a reminder of the community's history as a center of commerce. **3.** Literary agent Lisa Hagan spent summers here as a child, and later moved from Manhattan to embrace a slower pace of life.

for. Wonderful friends, when you know nobody. Just wonderful neighbors and friends in the community to lean on.

"People know who you are, okay? And even if they don't, they make you feel welcome.

"You have that personal contact, that personal feeling," she concludes.

Lisa Hagan is a highly respected literary agent and lecturer, a person who appreciates expanding her mind and spirit.

She spent her summers here as a child and returned from Manhattan eight years ago. Her mom is Sandra Martin, who has become the local Lake Gaston photographer.

Hagan is involved in organic gardening, community activities, and the appreciation of nature. She's made a complete adjustment from a much faster pace.

She savors the gorgeous qualities of Bracey, ranging from late-afternoon swims to sunrise boat rides. Hagan understands the meditative, healing qualities and the opportunity for spiritual enlightenment characteristic of the community.

A HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

Life often revolves around change, and Bracey exemplifies that theme.

Susan Bracey Sheppard, a local historian with deep family roots in the area, has written an excellent history of Bracey.

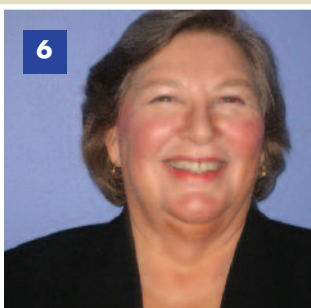
"Bracey began life in 1762 when a ferry across the Roanoke River began operation and the area surrounding became a commercial center. This community became the Town of Saint Tammany in 1792 when the General Assembly made it the first incorporated town in Mecklenburg County,"

according to the historical account. (Bracey is no longer incorporated.)

In its prime, Saint Tammany was an important site for commerce and the tobacco trade.

"Thirty-nine people bought lots in the town during its first year of existence. From the tobacco warehouse, the tobacco, some of it transported there by the bateaux on the river, was stored until it could be carried by wagon to Petersburg to be sold. The two-story stone and frame building also housed a store and the post office. Another store, a blacksmith, a tankard, a tavern run by Samuel Lambert, and several houses comprised the remainder of the original town. In 1798, a post office was established at Saint Tammany," the history notes.

"In 1816, Virginia chartered the Roanoke Navigation Company to work in



1. Pieces from the Vintage Rose Art Glass Studios are displayed at local art shows. **2.** Artisans Buck and Jo Ann Courtier, who own the studio, have been working in glass for more than 20 years. **3.** Local residents are mighty proud of the Lake Gaston Fire Dept. **4.** Sandra Towne migrated from Vermont to raise cattle “living the way nature intended.” **5.** Buddy Harper was born and raised next door to the site of the community center and attended the old Bracey school. **6.** After a lengthy career as a literary agent and television producer in the Big Apple, Sandra Martin retired to the tobacco-and-dairy farm where she grew up. **7.** Claude Bennett is one of many long-time Bracey residents with lore to share. **8.** St. Mark’s Episcopal Church is part of the vibrant spiritual life in the community.

conjunction with North Carolina's existing company of the same name to reach for the dream of a water outlet to the rest of the world by means of canals and locks around the rapids of the Roanoke. One of the loading stations was Saint Tammany, at which the company had a storage house," the account continues.

The Richmond, Petersburg and Carolina railroad later brought change in 1900, with shifting commercial patterns. Eventually, the name Saint Tammany was no more. Railroad officials needed a shorter one for telegraph purposes. They chose the name Bracey, in honor of A.H. Altamont Hart, or "Mont" Bracey.

Mont Bracey's legacy lives on in his granddaughter, Carol Bracey Corker, who is happy to share local folklore about her hometown. And ask about her granddaughters, Carol and Susan.

Bracey became a tourist destination in the 1920s, with Florida-bound vacationers camping overnight behind one of the Bracey schools, among other options. (This Bracey history is adapted from Ms. Sheppard's history of Mecklenburg County, *Life by the Roaring Roanoke*. The book was published in 1977 and authorized by the Mecklenburg County Bicentennial Commission.)

Bracey was once a small village revolving around commerce and trade.

RESIDENTS REMEMBER

Beverly Lee Hendrick recalls watching the train pass through town in 1939-'40, and he remembers when the first electric pole was placed in Bracey in the early 1940s.

Hendrick remembers one of the most famous citizens of Bracey when he was growing up, "Uncle Nonnie" Algood, a blacksmith. Hendrick recalls learning such skills as stripping tobacco, picking cotton and raising sugarcane and peanuts. Hendrick left the area, returned and has a 28-acre farm. He enjoys the people of the Bracey community.

Another longtime Bracey resident, Buddy Harper, was born and raised next door to the site of the

community center. He attended the old Bracey school. Harper remembers Tom Wortham, who sold fresh fish on Saturday mornings, provided homemade ice cream in the stifling summers, and then sold beef in the fall. Wortham was versatile and ingenious, using a steam engine to cut firewood when that fuel was necessary in winter.

Sandra Martin is a Bracey native, born in 1946. She moved away, landing in New York City. After a lengthy career as a literary agent and a television producer in the Big Apple, Martin retired to the tobacco-and-dairy farm where she grew up.

Sandra's dad died shortly before the tragic events of 9/11 and her mom still lived in the family home, built in 1862 by Judge John Wright King. Her brother, Thomas Martin, Jr., still farms.

According to Sandra, "When I was growing up most, if not all, of the women of the community were homemakers and worked on the farms right alongside their husbands, and children worked too. I was an excellent hander of tobacco leaves. Now Bracey has many women business executives and entrepreneurs. We have an amazing array of people from all walks of life who have retired here. There are nuclear physicists, NASA engineers, CIA and FBI retirees, filmmakers, executives from IBM, and State Department officials who have traveled the earth to retire in Bracey, Va." Bracey is home to a thriving community of artisans as well.

Martin is semi-retired and has a publishing company, and the appeal of the community was strong enough to compel her to bring her daughter here. Martin's friends developed an appreciation for the quiet evenings on the lake. She has also developed a sideline, teaching classes in meditation.

Martin laughs, remembering a story of a friend who was visiting from New York City and couldn't sleep the first night she was here.

"She said, I didn't close my eyes all night ... it was so quiet, it was so dark, I was so scared ... I'm used to hearing all this noise ... now she loves it." ■



Hailey, the unofficial mascot of Bracey.

IF YOU GO...

There are lots of reasons to visit Bracey, including renewing ties with Hailey, a black Newfoundland dog who's the unofficial mascot of the community. Townspeople drop into **The Barber Chair** frequently, bringing a bone to Hailey, who likely has more visitors than business owner Larry Parson has customers.

Simmons Auto & Truck Terminal opened in 1965 along the Interstate. The business, owned by Parker Oil Company in South Hill, evolves constantly, adding more outdoor-sports supplies for visitors to complement the vibrant fishing and recreational tourism-related strengths of the community. The management team is led by manager Brenda Jones and supervisor Angie Clary.

The community is home to **Bracey Beef**, a pasture-raised, healthy Piedmontese-cross beef. The idea is to promote Farm Finished Beef, "Cattle living the way nature intended," according to promotional materials from the company. Sandra Towne migrated from Vermont to make this a reality. Towne purchased one of the Bracey farms and has restored many of the old barns on the home place.

Bracey has welcomed many new business and recreational attractions, such as **Rosemont Vineyards and Winery**, featuring tastings, tours, weddings, private events, and an art gallery.

Shirley Bennett Curtain, who returned in 1971, asserts Bracey is a great place to live, and should be considered the Garden Spot of the Commonwealth.

There's **Tanglewood Land Company**, where Pete Rudd has developed many subdivisions on the lake; the **Lake Country Home Center**, owned by Ross Harper, a descendant of the original Harper family of Bracey; **OceanSprings Seafood & More**; **Toppers' Pizza**; **Exit Town and Lake Realty**; and **Lake Gaston AmeriCamps**, with ample camping opportunities; and **Under The Sun**, which provides outdoor products and services for the Lake Gaston visitor. **Holly Grove Marina** has the kind of amenities you would expect from a resort area.

Buck and Jo Ann Courtier "bring out the artist in their friends. They are the creative center of our community ... They own the **Vintage Rose Art Glass Studios** in Bracey and have been working in glass since 1989," notes local Bracey expert Sandra Martin.

There are historical churches, including **St. Mark's Episcopal**, where you can find Claude Bennett, another resident with lore to share. **Kingswood Methodist Church** is also a vibrant part of the spiritual life of this community.

The folks in Bracey are also mighty proud of the **Lake Gaston Volunteer Fire and EMS Department**, which recently celebrated two decades of service. These dedicated responders answer various emergencies. And, by the way, there's a big yard sale at the **Bracey Community Center** on Oct. 8. Everyone's invited. ■