Tangier Island often has been described as “the land time forgot,” largely because its simple existence does not include ATM machines, movie theaters, shopping malls or more than a handful of vehicles, which travel on small roads with a speed limit of 15 mph.

But the media have never forgotten this Chesapeake Bay island of nearly 500 people. How many towns in Virginia can boast of having a cover story for National Geographic and being featured in countless other magazines, including Southern Living, Life and Look, plus hundreds of major newspaper articles and TV documentaries? That’s not to mention at least two books written solely about Tangier Island.

And then just last year, ESPN filmed eight television commercials on Tangier, naming it the Biggest Sports Town in America — per capita, that is. The commercials were aired on the Internet and made local celebrities of many town residents.

However, Tangier has its limits in welcoming the outside world. In 1998, to the shock of many, the town council said no to the Warner Brothers studio, which wanted to film a movie on the island. Then-Mayor Dewey Crockett, also a minister, said the script contained drinking, cursing and sex, elements that went against the islanders’ strong religious principles. Still, Paul Newman, one of the stars of the movie, visited the island, saying he regretted the decision because the island was ideal for “Message in a Bottle.”

Gov. Bob McDonnell, who visited Tangier this year to discuss the island’s erosion problems, refers to the town’s mayor as “Mayor Ooker,” because that is the name James Eskridge has been called since he was a child and had a pet rooster, which was somehow translated to “ooker.”

A waterman by day, Mayor “Ooker” is also on a first-name basis with Congressman Scott Rigell, who also visited Tangier recently to further his plan of sinking barges to act as breakwaters near the main channel leading into Tangier Harbor.

Since Capt. John Smith first visited Tangier in 1608, the island has steadily shrunk and was twice as wide as it is today and half again as long in the earliest-known map in 1859.

Most historical accounts say it was 1686 before John Crockett and his family of four sons and four daughters first settled on the island. In the early years of its history, the island supported farming and was populated by tall pines.

Today, the Crockett name is prominent among the islanders, along with surnames like Pruitt, Parks, Thomas, Wheatley, Dise, Charnock and Marshall. Because Tangier has been relatively isolated for several centuries, many of the natives speak with a thick accent that linguists connect to some places in England, where those 17th-century settlers originated.

Almost any view of Tangier includes water and boats, as the island is divided by guts that separate two main ridges where residents live. Swain United Methodist Church is the social center of the community. High-school graduations are held here.
But in addition to the declining land mass, the island’s population has shrunk from a high of about 1,200 in 1930 to fewer than 500 today. Most of Tangier’s men work on the water in some capacity for their livelihood.

A $4.1 million seawall built with federal, state and local funds in 1990 protects Tangier Island’s airstrip — built in 1969 — and wastewater treatment plant. The Army Corps of Engineers also is studying the placement of a new jetty on the fast-eroding north end of the island, but that project would take years to finish.

“We can’t wait but so long,” says Mayor Eskridge. “We need something soon to protect the harbor. We were losing 30 to 35 feet a year on the west side before the seawall was built. Now we need to have something on the north side of the seawall before we lose the entrance to the harbor and many of our docks and crab shacks.”

Eskridge says the island also is losing land on its east side. “We are not eroding as fast on the east side, but when it gets closer to you, you notice it a lot more,” he notes.

Located about 15 miles from Onancock on Virginia’s Eastern Shore and an equal distance from Reedville on the western shore, Tangier relies heavily on tourism in addition to the seafood industry. However, it is Crisfield, Md., — only 12 miles to the northwest — to which most islanders travel for goods and services. Ferries from all three destinations bring tourists to Tangier to sample the island’s seafood at five restaurants and step back in time for a day, or maybe even longer as the island has two bed and breakfasts and two homes that offer rooms.

Dennis Crockett is often fueling up the island’s watermen at Tangier Oil Company, located on the channel that leads into Tangier from both the west and the east. A retired island school principal of 21 years, Crockett and his wife Glena also operate Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House.

Crockett has seen the number of islanders making a living harvesting seafood from nearby waters decline greatly over the years. “Many of the men have gone to working on tugboats,” he says. “Regulations were making it tougher and tougher to work on the water. The tugboats pay a good salary and provide benefits, something you don’t have working on your own.”
Crockett also says more and more of today’s youth are leaving the island to make a living elsewhere.

“When I was growing up, pretty much all we knew was here on the island. Today, with the Internet, easier travel and more access to the outside world, many kids want to go elsewhere.”

In fact, the Crocketts’ daughter, Shelli, is director of international studies for Texas Tech University. “She has traveled all over the world in her job,” says Crockett, whose love of hunting and fishing has made the tiny island the ideal place for him to live.

It is Dr. Nina Pruitt who today educates the island’s schoolchildren. Taking over when Crockett retired, Dr. Pruitt has been the principal for eight years and is now in her 30th year in education, all on Tangier. Her faculty of 22 — all either born on Tangier or married to islanders — teaches a school population of 71 students, which includes five seniors and two kindergarten students.

“As our population has shrunk and gotten older, so has our school population,” says Dr. Pruitt. “We did have four babies born over the winter,” adds the principal, who counts 17 children on the island who are preschool age.

Even as she sees more and more islanders pursue careers off the island, Dr. Pruitt has never wished to be anywhere but Tangier.

“I told my husband I want to be buried on Tangier, even if he has to put me in the front yard. He said, ‘That might hinder me from getting a second wife.’ I told him she would just have to get used to seeing me,” says Dr. Pruitt, with the hearty laugh that often dots her conversation.

Among the natives buried on the island are eight men who gave their lives in World War II. A total of 139 Tangier men fought in that war and are listed proudly on a plaque outside Swain United Methodist Church, along with plaques for troops in other wars.

It was said during World War II that islanders purchased more war bonds per capita than any other community in Virginia.

**REVERED NON-RESIDENT**

One man buried on the island who was neither born nor lived there is one of the most revered men in Tangier history.

For 31 years, Dr. David Nichols visited Tangier weekly from his home in White Stone, Va., to provide medical care to the islanders. He first flew an airplane and later a helicopter to the island, usually on Thursdays, and worked from a cramped, dilapidated clinic. With his leadership, a public-private partnership built a $1.4 million, state-of-the-art health center that was dedicated in August of 2010 and named in his honor. Sadly, Dr. Nichols already had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer and passed away four months later, having never been able to practice in the new 4,000-square-foot facility.

In a Richmond-Times Dispatch article upon his death, Dr. Nichols said of the island, “When you’re on Tangier, you’re a little closer to heaven.”
Inez Pruitt, a high-school dropout whom Dr. Nichols encouraged to return to school and become a physician assistant, worked with Dr. Nichols for 23 years and now provides medical care on a daily basis, with three doctors taking turns visiting the island weekly.

“Dr. Nichols was loved by the people of Tangier, and he loved them as well,” said Pruitt.

Working in more modest quarters is Renee Tyler, the town manager whose weathered, one-room office sits by the airstrip, shortened from 3,600 feet to 2,426 due to safety issues regarding the proximity of the seawall. Tyler oversees a variety of operations for the town, including the one-man police force.

“Crime is not a big issue here,” says Tyler, “A few minor arguments here and there and some speeding tickets when they get reckless.”

Speeding is relative, however, because most of the transportation on the island’s small roads is by golf cart or motor scooter. The island’s inhabited areas can be walked easily in 30 minutes or less.

COOPERATIVE STAFF OF ONE

Denny Crockett is the A&N Electric Cooperative employee on the island, working at an office with an A&N boat docked to the rear. Crockett checks some meters and answers calls on the island, as well as Smith Island, Md., five miles to the north. Power is provided to the island by submarine cables that run across the Chesapeake Bay from the Virginia mainland. However, in the event of an outage, two generators stationed in the A&N office can provide power to both Tangier and Smith islands.

“I worked on the water for 15 years,” says Crockett, “but I just love this job. I feel like I am providing a service to the islands.”

Milton Parks, 81, was in high school before Tangier even had electricity. Today, he owns and operates the island’s only public marina and can be seen helping dock boats that can be called yachts down to skiffs at his 40-foot facility.

“I built this marina by night when I was crabbing by day,” says Parks, who lives in the only brick house on the island, adjacent to the marina.

“That was when men really worked. I would go as far south as Nassawadox Creek (about 20 miles south of Tangier) and fish 400 crab pots, then go to Crisfield to sell them before coming home to Tangier.”

Although he was offered a college scholarship after being valedictorian of his class in 1949, Parks says he learned quickly that the typical academic education doesn’t always apply to the ways of the water.

Parks, who lost his wife 60 years earlier this year, summed up the tight-knit community saying, “If someone here is sick or loses a loved one, the whole island grieves. If someone is having a hard time financially, everyone knows it and someone is always stepping up to help. That’s just the way we are.” And Parks should know — his family dates back to the 1700s on Tangier Island.

IF YOU GO ...

For transportation to Tangier Island, four ferries travel on seasonal schedules. The Chesapeake Breeze departs Reedville, Va., on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay during the tourism season, as do the Steven Thomas and Sharon Kay II, which depart from the Eastern Shore of the lower Chesapeake Bay at Crisfield, Md. The Joyce Marie II departs Onancock on the Eastern Shore of Virginia twice daily. Go to www.tangierisland-va.com for schedules and other information on Tangier attractions.

To get around, there are Tangier Golf Cart and Bike Rentals as well as Tangier Island Buggy Tours, with a number of drivers who will guide you around the island. Walking is another option.

There are five restaurants on the island, with Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House being the oldest. Started in 1939, the Chesapeake House still serves all-you-can-eat family-style meals, where diners sit at a table and pass numerous dishes as waitresses serve crab cakes and fried clam fritters and refill glasses with iced tea. If you have room, there is homemade pound cake for dessert.

For those who prefer to order from a menu, there are Lorraine’s Seafood Restaurant, featured in Southern Living magazine earlier this year; Fisherman’s Corner, the subject of an earlier feature in the same magazine; Waterfront Restaurant, which offers a bird’s-eye view of Tangier watermen coming and going; and the newest restaurant, Four Brothers Crab House & Ice Cream Deck. For pizza, nachos, ice cream and other desserts, there is Spanky’s Ice Cream Parlor.

Tangier Island has two bed and breakfasts, including Hilda Crockett’s Chesapeake House B&B and Bay View Inn Bed and Breakfast. Mimosa Vacation Rental and Island Girl Vacation Rental also offer rooms.

As ferries unload their passengers, tourists either walk the island, rent golf carts or take guided buggy tours given mostly by women of the island.

There is a beach at the north end of the island for tourists who want to swim in the Chesapeake Bay.

The stately buildings to your left as you enter from the east side of the island are located on 250 acres owned by The Chesapeake Bay Foundation on Port Isobel, an educational center for the foundation. In the 1800s, it was inhabited by families from Tangier Island, but rising sea levels in the 1920s forced them to abandon their homes. The land was donated to the CBF in the 1980s by a private owner.

Make sure you check out the Tangier History Museum, filled with interesting facts and memorabilia about the island’s history, including a famous 1814 scene of Joshua Thomas, Parson of the Islands, preaching to a then-reported mass of 12,000 British soldiers as they prepared to sail up the bay to attack Baltimore. Several times Thomas exclaimed, “You cannot take it.” And, indeed, the British later failed in their bid to overtake Baltimore, stirring Frances Scott Key to write “The Star Spangled Banner.”

And if you can’t go and want to learn about Tangier, there are two excellent books on the island. Tangier Island: Place, People, and Talk was written by native David L. Shores. God’s Island: The History of Tangier was written by historian Kirk Marinier. In addition, Earl Swift devotes a lengthy chapter to Tangier in his book, The Tangiermen’s Lament and other Tales of Virginia.

To help really understand and appreciate Tangier, most libraries have an archived edition of Harold Wheatley’s “My Tangier,” the cover story of the 1973 National Geographic November issue, with stunning photographs by David Alan Harvey, who spent six weeks on the island to compile his images.

Wheatley, the longtime principal of Tangier Combined School and now deceased, summed up the fabric of the island when he wrote, “Our lives are intertwined like the branches of the grapevine.”  ■

The Tangier History Museum is a must-stop location to see and understand the history of the island. Its displays include numerous photographs and stories by local and national media.