

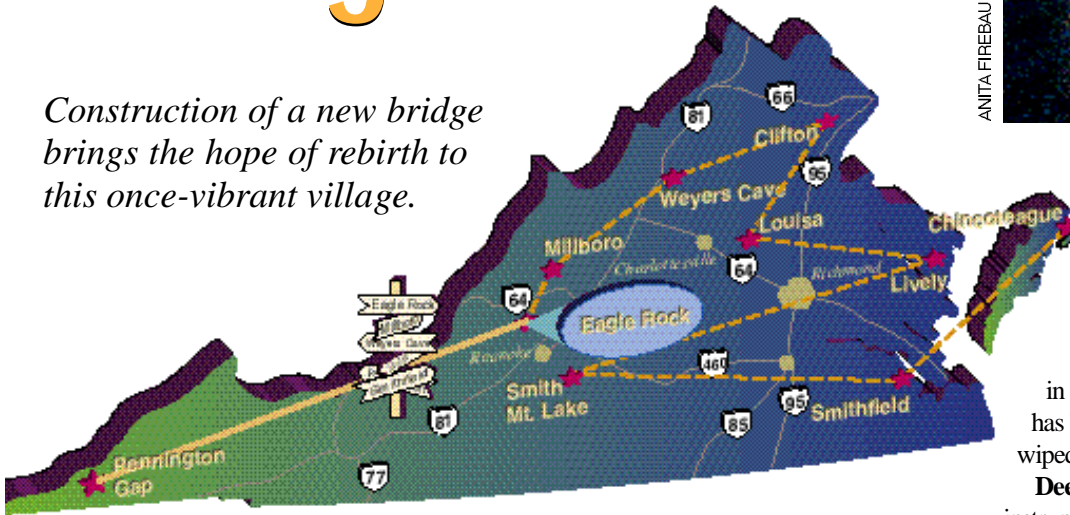
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Anita J. Firebaugh,
Contributing Writer

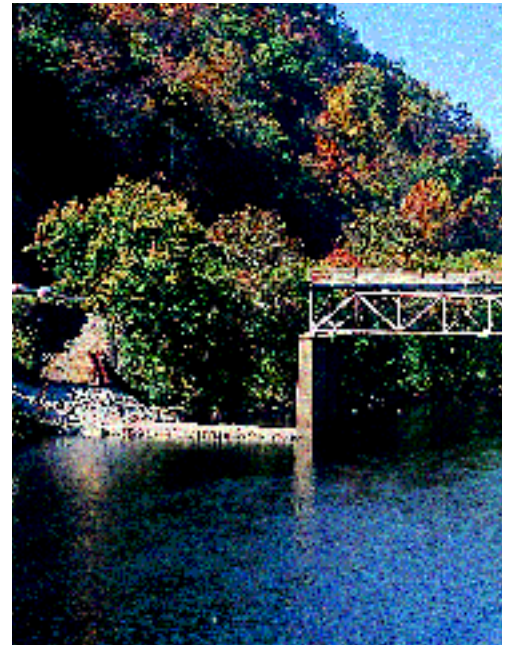
During the year 2000, we're making our way around Virginia, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's second stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Eagle Rock

Construction of a new bridge brings the hope of rebirth to this once-vibrant village.



ANITA FIREBAUGH PHOTOS



A new bridge in 2001 will offer a renaissance for Eagle Rock. A bridge built over the James River in 1932 serviced this once-vibrant village until 1997, when the bridge closed for safety reasons. Demolition began in 1999. Construction of the new bridge has brought hope to a town that was nearly wiped out by flooding in 1985.

Dee Dee Bruce, a lifelong resident, was instrumental in ensuring that there would be a new bridge after the state indicated that it would not be rebuilt. She says closing the bridge would have meant an extra five miles of travel for emergency vehicles and school children.

Joe Stinnett, who owns the Eagle Mountain Cafe, says, "A lot of people don't like driving that extra distance." The new bridge will end a feeling of isolation and help the town grow, he adds.

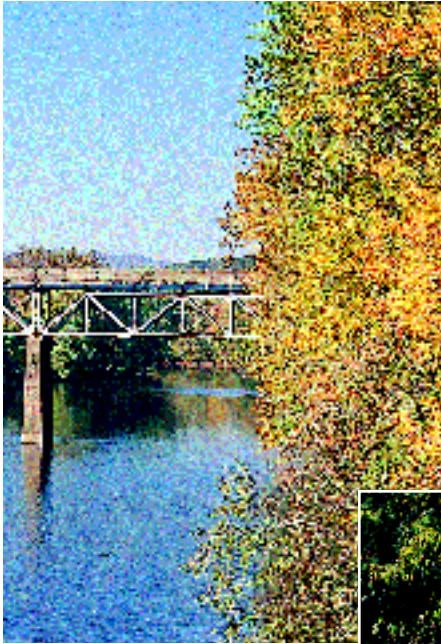
Bringing back the bridge is a big project. But the townspeople are not waiting on the new route to breathe life into old buildings. An active Eagle Rock Improvement Association has cleaned up the streets and beautified the town with hanging baskets. A new post office and a playground are also under construction.

"When the bridge opens back up, people will be more likely to come into the town," Bruce says.

Transportation, whether by river, rail, or road, has always been important to the community. Just west of town an original canal face stone, donated by the Eagle Rock Garden Club, stands in a park by the James River as a monument to Lock 10, the last lock of the



(Above) Joe Stinnett (right) and Marion Clark are two of the characters in Eagle Rock. Stinnett owns Eagle Mountain Cafe and Eagle Mountain Welding. This original face stone (left) is one of the few remaining from the last lock of the James River and Kanawha Canal. Most of the stones were removed and used by the railroad in bridges.



The bridge to Eagle Rock from U.S. Route 220 was closed in 1997 for safety reasons and is now being demolished. The bridge was built in 1932.

James River and Kanawha Canal system. "George Washington's dream ended here," **Nadine Rankin**, one of the town's historians, says. "Washington's dream was that this transportation system by water would go through to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to open up the west." The canal system was used to float goods down river to Lynchburg and Richmond. It was also used in the area's lime industry.

A lime kiln existed in the area as early as 1847, but residents trace the official foundation of Eagle Rock to 1883. By the 1880s, F. E. Sheets and Company operated several lime kilns at the mouth of Craig Creek on the James River. In 1885, the Moore Lime Company took over. The Eagle Rock Lime Company formed in 1905, and ultimately bought out its competitor. It ceased operation in 1954.

As the railroad made its way up the James River, moving the lime became a primary goal. The area, first known as "Sheets," then Eagle Mountain, and finally Eagle Rock, became an industrial hub of iron ore mines, lime industries, and milling in northern Botetourt County. Hundreds of local residents earned their living working the kilns and moving stone. A town came to life to support the workers.

A quarry on the other side of the river provided the rock. The lime, transported by mule,

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The Adam Rule house, located two blocks off Route 43, is one of the older homes in Eagle Rock. Adam Rule and his wife, Mary, are considered to be instrumental in the founding of the town.

"In 1881, Eagle Rock was owned basically by three women, Mary Rule and her daughters," says Bruce, who traces her lineage back to the founders of the town. The Rule house still stands a block off Route 43 in the heart of the town. Built in 1844, the home passed from daughter to daughter for nearly a hundred years. Bruce's grandfather, William Bell Mays, an only child, ultimately inherited the property.

The first bridge in Eagle Rock, used to transport lime from the mines to the kilns, was built prior to 1880. A second bridge, built in



Nadine Rankin, one of the local historians, delights in recounting the history of Eagle Rock.

ferry, cables, and rail, was placed into red-hot kilns and made into whitewash and used to make pig iron. The kilns burned 24 hours a day.

A trio of kilns on the west side of town pays homage to the limestone history. In a small park, the kilns guard the town like sentries. Visitors still can see the railroad spur which carried cars loaded with stone to the top of the kilns.

According to Bruce, "With the kilns going, that's what the whole town was about." Nine kilns operated in the vicinity during the early 1900s. With the railroad, the canal, and the limestone, "it was a good place to start something," Bruce says.

Three lime kilns are part of a small park on the west side of town. The kiln property was donated to the Stoner Eagle Rock Garden Club for historic preservation by Mr. and Mrs. A. Anson Jamison in 1991.



the 1880s, spanned the James River until 1932 when a new bridge was built. The second bridge was badly damaged in the 1985 flood.

The industrial boom that came with the bridges meant growth for Eagle Rock. In 1905, the Eagle Rock Milling and Manufacturing Company began production of flour and corn meal and supplied farmers with feed, fertilizers and seed. The Eagle Rock Bank Inc. was also established that year. The Eagle Rock Hotel housed the increasing number of visitors to the growing town. Many of the major businesses located on Railroad Avenue, which followed the train tracks and the river.

Over time, businesses like Whitten & McKalester's General Merchandise store, a furniture factory, a dry goods store, a butcher shop, a wheelwright, a drug store and soda fountain, a barber shop, and a bowling alley sprang up to service the people who came to Eagle Rock to work and purchase goods.

"It was a booming place," Joe Stinnett says. His father and grandfather lived and worked in Eagle Rock, and he vividly remembers the blacksmith shop and a theater.

Stinnett, who operates Eagle Mountain Welding as well as the town's only eatery, adds, "When I was a kid, you could hardly walk up the street, with the mill and all." Stinnett hopes to see the town return to its former splendor. Now, only a few of the buildings housing these once-thriving businesses remain.

Devastated by Flood

The unincorporated town has lost many buildings to natural disasters. Fires in 1917 and 1952 wiped out whole residential and business districts. However, the flood of 1985 left the community devastated.

During the flood, water reached the pulpit of the Eagle Rock Methodist Church, the highest level ever recorded in the town. Homes vanished down the James River. The Eagle Rock Volunteer Fire Department was essential to the well-being of the people during this crucial time, Rankin says.

The flood wiped out most of the businesses on Railroad Avenue. The raging waters took out the town's remaining grocery, as well as a farm supply store. The busi-

nesses were unable to recover from the losses sustained in the flood. For a long while the heart of the business district remained nearly vacant.

One business which survived the flood was the bank. "The bank is our landmark," Rankin says. "It is one of the buildings that has not changed."

According to Rankin, the Bank of Botetourt illustrates "what an old bank used to look like." The interior teller's line, which has bars in front of the tellers, is so unique and well-constructed that a modern duplicate of the wooden caging is on display in the First Union Tower in Roanoke.

G. G. Burgess, the bank's first president, opened the facility in 1905 as the Eagle Rock Bank Inc. Now a branch of the Bank of Botetourt, the bank is operated by three sisters who are the daughters of the bank's founder. **Betty B. Wright**, the assistant vice president and branch manager and **Patsy Craft** and **Kitty Lee Bryant**, both tellers, have worked at the bank since 1957. The sisters "were sort of grandfathered" into the establishment each time the bank changed hands, Wright says.

The three sisters are representative of the good feelings residents have about the town. "I think right now [we're] more on an up. A little more optimistic. We're getting our bridge," Wright says. "I feel good about the community."

The Bank of Botetourt has plans to renovate portions of the building, Wright says, so it too will be a part of the renewal of Eagle Rock.

The business district on Railroad Avenue is beginning to recover from the effects of the flood. Though the post office will soon move into new quarters on Route 43, a garage, a welding and machine shop, a laundry, and a beauty shop have filled some of the empty space on the street. The signs of growth are heartening to the citizens. Revitalization and an economic boom can't be far behind the opening of the bridge.

"Positive things take a lot of time, but no one's sitting around not doing anything. It's a community effort," Bruce says of the town improvements.

Eagle Rock is still a nice little town in which to raise a family. New families are moving in, filling once-vacant houses. "The houses are big," Bruce says. "They are family houses, and they need to have families in them."

Wright echoes Bruce's sentiments. "I really feel like our community is more or less a family. We all care for each other." ■

If You Go...

To begin a full day in northern Botetourt County, follow U.S. Route 11 to Buchanan. Be sure to view the swinging bridge across the James River and take in the antique stores. Call (540) 254-1212 for more information.

From Buchanan, go west on Route 43, a Virginia Scenic Byway. Along the way visit the cemetery in Shiloh, where Malcolm Allen, one of the area's first settlers, is buried.

Eagle Rock is nestled in the curves of Route 43

against the mountain by the James River. While in town, be sure to visit the Bank of Botetourt. A drive off the main road reveals many lovely Victorian-style homes with ornate trim and intriguing decor. Cemetery Hill has a monument to the Monacan Indians, who lived in the area hun-



One of the few eagles found in Eagle Rock is on the Bank of Botetourt. No one knows where the name of the community originated. Guesses range from a rock formation that was removed when U.S. Route 220 was built to nests of eagles on the mountain.

walking tour of the county seat. Call Historic Fincastle Inc. at (540) 473-3077 for more information.

For more information on Botetourt County, call the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce, (540) 473-8280, or visit the Web site at www.bot-co-chamber.com. ■

dreds of years ago.

Different denominations of churches dot the town. Visitors are encouraged to see the churches, because each has a different style and decor. After a visit to the kilns, travelers can move west on Route 43 to the last lock monument. Large grain silos are also located here.

Following Route 43 to U.S. Route 220, take Route 615 to Oriskany and the Roaring Run Furnaces for a hiking trip to a scenic waterfall. Or follow U.S. Route 220 south to Fincastle for a