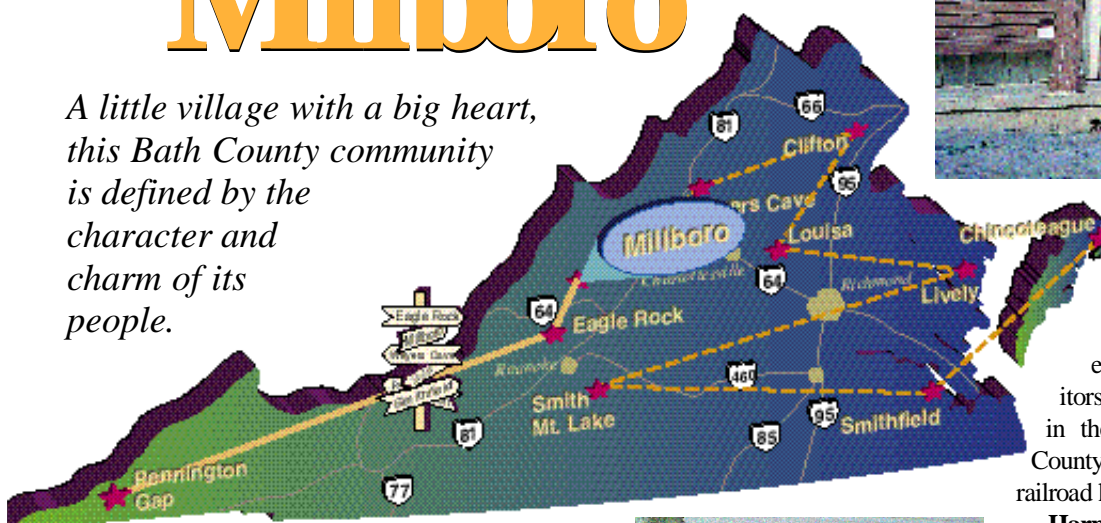


by Margo Oxendine,
Contributing Writer

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 third stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Millboro

A little village with a big heart, this Bath County community is defined by the character and charm of its people.



The little village of Millboro is the big heart of a community that knows how to overcome hard times, work together, care for its own, and welcome visitors with its down-home charm. Nestled in the eastern corner of historic Bath County, at one time, Millboro was the chief railroad hub of the region.

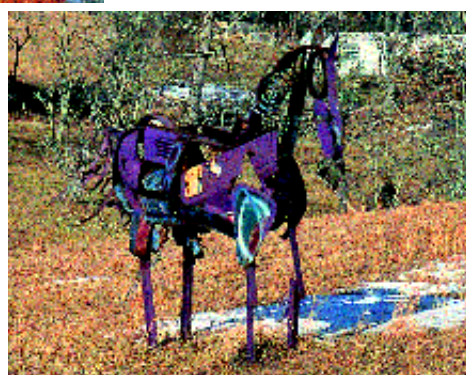
Harper Wagner, whose family has operated Wagner's Citgo at Millboro Springs for more than 50 years, will tell you, "If it didn't come into Millboro on the train, it didn't come into Bath County at all. Dad used to tell me that in the old days, when Route 39 was known as the Harrisonburg Turnpike, folks in wagons from as far as West Virginia would pass by here on their way to the Millboro depot. You could get on the train in Millboro and ride all the way to New York."

But that was then. Nowadays, trains rumble through the village, but they don't stop. The once-bustling railroad depot has been torn down, along with its once-fashionable hotel. The village and its surrounding area have had to make a different mark on the map; that mark is recreation, enhanced by sheer natural beauty.

To fully appreciate Millboro, it is important to realize that the village is not all there is to it. What folks around here call "Millboro" is really much of the eastern half of the county. It encompasses the village and the communities of Millboro Springs, Fairview, and Mill Creek; the southern settlements down Route 42 to Interstate 64; and the northern region, with scattered farms and gorge-torn terrain. The area spans more than 200 square



Harper Wagner's family has operated the gas and convenience store in Millboro Springs for more than 50 years.



Don Blanchard's wood carvings (above) are displayed in Millboro, throughout Bath County, and in yards across the country. Marmalade, part basset hound and part pug, enjoys watching the artist at work.

This whimsical horse sculpture (right) graces a pasture at River Ridge Ranch, home of artist Ann Sams.



Everything from snow shovels to gas and groceries can be found at the Millboro General Store (left), where Cora Bell Kennedy (above) does a brisk food business and Ernestine (below), who arrived years ago as a shivering kitten, rules the roost.



miles. And there's not a traffic light or strip mall to be found.

Since the village is the heart, it's a good place for visitors to start exploring the bucolic countryside, with its rolling meadows, rocky bluffs and peaceful river. The ancient Cowpasture River and its feeder creeks and streams snake through much of eastern Bath County and offer recreational opportunities to



fish, canoe, picnic, swim and just plain relax. Nearby is Douthat State Park, with a 52-acre lake, 40 miles of hiking trails, campgrounds, and year-round cabins.

But first you'll need provisions. The purveyor of all necessities is the Millboro General Store, known as "Ernie's." The domain of Millboro's unofficial mayor, **Ernie Townsend**, it is the hub of the village where news is shared, directions and advice are given cheerfully, and all you'll need for an adventure awaits on the well-stocked shelves. Gas up, get your bait, propane, picnic lunch, city newspapers or *The Recorder* local weekly, even a Millboro sweatshirt. Don't forget to say hello to Ernestine, the cat who lives the good life on the store's front porch.

Herman and A.H. "Mutt" Cauley can tell you all about the good life in Millboro. They've seen the place transform through the ages, and they helped make it happen.

After he finished delivering Meals on Wheels one recent afternoon, Herman, who'll be 90 in September, stopped by the old Millboro school, which is on the docket for renovation into a community center. The transformation is already taking place; a new community pool opened to great acclaim last summer, and the campus features the area's own medical clinic and the Millboro Ruritan clubhouse.

Joined by Mutt, who at 87 likes to remind you he's "the younger brother," the Cauley boys reminisced, and then they mused about the future.

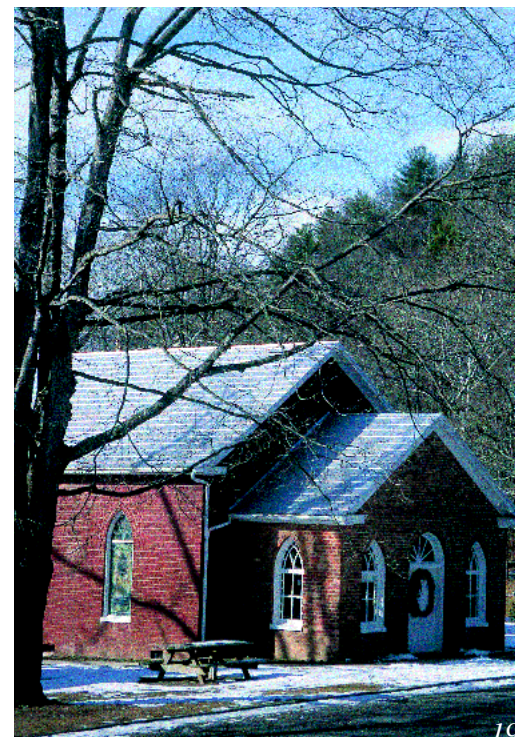
The Windy Cove Presbyterian Church (right), founded in 1749, is a spiritual and social center.

The pastoral, historic Cowpasture River wends its way through much of the Millboro area.

The Cauley brothers, Herman in the red cap and A.H., known as "Mutt" have helped Millboro change through the decades. Mutt, 87, helped organize the Millboro Ruritan Club, and was general manager of BARC until he retired in 1978. Herman, 90, still delivers Meals on Wheels to shut-ins.

"I'd like to see them put a bowling alley in that old school auditorium," says Herman. He's confident it could happen if the people of Millboro put their minds to it. It's that kind of thinking that makes Millboro what it is today.

Back in July 1939, Mutt went to work for the rural electric company that is today BARC Electric Cooperative, Bath County's fourth-largest employer. The cooperative employs about 50 people and makes its home in Millboro, just across from the old school. After being hired "as a bum," Mutt says, "I worked to get people signed up for electricity and get



easements. Back in those days, none of the homes up and down the countryside were wired for electricity."

Mutt Cauley also helped organize the Millboro Ruritan Club in 1939; Herman didn't join until 1975, when he retired and moved back home from Maryland. "But I do have perfect attendance since then," he laughs.

The Ruritans are the glue that bonds the community and the dynamo that drives it into the future. They established the volunteer fire department, then organized and helped build the medical clinic. The Ruritan clubhouse provides a community meeting place, along with the new elementary school just down the lane. Ruritans also built what Herman proclaims is the best softball field in the county, the tennis courts, and the community picnic shelter.

That shelter is a busy place in spring, summer and fall. The Ruritans' barbecued chicken is downright famous. Folks flock from 50 miles for "halves" or the full dinner, which includes long-stewed green beans, homemade rolls, and a hard-to-decide-which slice of fresh cake. Some take it home, but most head for the long tables, joining strangers who soon become friends.

Along with the food, there's usually fun. The barbecues are just the icing on what can be a carnival, a giant community yard sale, a country auction, or a holiday celebration. Visit Millboro the last weekend in May and you'll find all of Bath County at the Relay for Life, fun that raises funds to fight cancer. Visit the first weekend in September and find a Labor Day festival. Come in early July and

relive the thrill of an old-fashioned carnival, complete with rides, bingo and a raucous parade.

A Cooperative Community

Millboro is more than a community that knows how to celebrate. It also knows how to cooperate for the good of all. The medical clinic is evidence of that; before it opened in 1991, those who needed general medical attention had to drive at least 20-30 miles. Now, a physician and nurse practitioner see patients every Wednesday, right in town.

When water service became a desperate need, "we just put in a system on our own," notes a nonchalant Herman Cauley. That system serves about 150 homes today.

And when concern arose about the lack of nearby emergency medical service, Millboro solved that, too. Last year, they organized the Millboro Area Rescue Squad (MARS). With set-up help from other Virginia squads and Bath County supervisors, the squad now operates three ambulances and boasts 43 hometown members. MARS is the perfect complement for the Millboro fire department; many of the volunteers pull double-duty in emergencies and roll up their sleeves when it's time for the carnival or other community event.

What Makes Millboro Special?

Ask anybody from Millboro what makes it so special, and the answer will be the same.

"It's the people," Herman Cauley says. "We've got some of the finest people around. Every time you look up, someone's coming to your door bringing you something."

Mutt Cauley smiles. "**Betty Jo Armstrong**, with warm bread right out of the oven. Mmmmm, I love it! **Gladys and Willie Ryder**, bringing you homemade soup. It's the people that make Millboro what it is."

Over at BARC headquarters, the people who see to it that calls are answered, bills are correct, and service comes with a friendly smile, agree.

"It's the people," **Becky Jenkins** and **Liz Harvey** say in unison. "If you have any trouble, there are just hordes of people who come and want to help you with it." Becky, BARC manager of finance and office services, adds, "When I broke my shoulder, everybody around cooked dinner for us for two weeks! That's the special thing about Millboro; it's almost like one, big family."

This is one family who loves to entertain visitors. If you've a mind to retreat, rejuvenate and enjoy, down home in Millboro could be a perfect fit: fun, food and friendly faces, amidst the best backdrop nature can muster. ■

If You Go..

To reach the village of Millboro, turn off Route 39 onto Route 635, T.C. Walker Road. At the end of that road, across from the BARC Electric Cooperative, turn left, and you'll quickly find Main Street.

In the village, Ernie Townsend's **Millboro General Store** (540-997-9497)

is the place for provisions and directions to other points of interest. It is open every day from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m., except for Sundays, when it opens at noon. The town's post office is on Main Street, too. Sandwiches, hot food, gas and groceries are available at **Ted's Place** on Route 39, west of Millboro Springs.

For lodging, consider **Fort Lewis Lodge**, open April through October, on Route 625. A delicious dinner buffet is served nightly to guests and the public. Call (540) 925-2314 for reservations and more information. There are several bed and breakfasts in the Millboro area, including **Peaceful River** (540-996-4256) on Route 39, which also has a campground near the Cowpasture River; **Big Bend Farm** (540-997-5661), a working 600-acre farm overlooking the river; **Wilderness Ranch** (540-996-4496) in Bluegrass Hollow, which offers secluded log cabins; the **Hemlock Guest House** in Millboro Springs (540-997-0308); **Sycamore Bend** (540-925-2426), another working farm on the Cowpasture River,



Fort Lewis Lodge offers cozy cabins with stone fireplaces and a lodge with gorgeous views from every room.

off Route 624 (Westminster Road); and **Hunter's Paradise** in Green Valley, (540) 996-4134.

Douthat State Park encompasses 4,500 acres on Rt. 629 south and features year-round cabins, campgrounds, hiking trails, nature programs, and an amphitheater and restaurant overlooking the 52-acre lake with a swimming beach. For more information, call (540) 862-8100.

If you're considering a visit to Millboro, you may want to explore a little further, to the historic towns of **Warm and Hot Springs**, a short drive west on Rt. 39, and then south on Rt. 220. The Bath County Chamber of Commerce (1-800-628-8092) can provide all tourist-related details and brochures. The office is located about one mile south of Hot Springs and is open from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. For more information about Bath County, visit their Web site at www.bathcountyva.org. ■