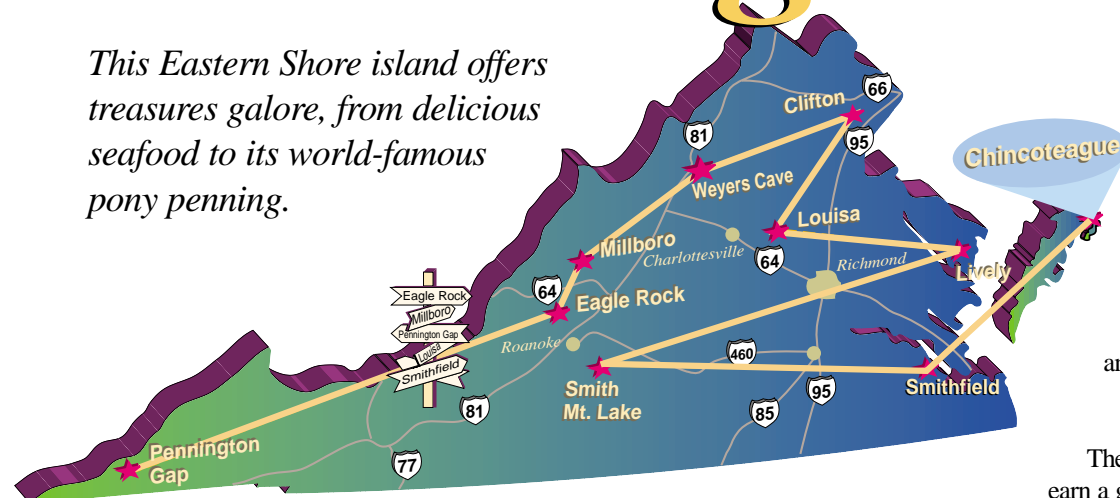


by Jane E. Daisey,
Contributing Writer

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 tenth and final stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Chincoteague

This Eastern Shore island offers treasures galore, from delicious seafood to its world-famous pony penning.



By the early 1900s not only oysters, but clams, crabs and fish were also part of the seafood industry. Sport fishing provided some with work, while others hunted and marketed wildfowl.

A Natural for Decoys

The interest in hunting led some locals to earn a good living carving decoys to be used in their expeditions or to be sold to hunt clubs. Ira Hudson made his mark as a boat builder and decoy carver, becoming one of Chincoteague's most famous artists. His grandson **Jay Cherrix** says he was a humble

If once you have slept on an island you'll never be quite the same." The residents of Chincoteague Island, nestled between Virginia's Eastern Shore peninsula on the west and the barrier island of Assateague on the east, understand the meaning of this quote from Rachel Field's poem. Surrounded by the sparkling waters of Chincoteague Bay and Assateague channel, the island is home to about 3,500 full-time residents, and thousands more visit this resort town annually.

Chincoteague boasts a rich history of a resilient people who lived off the land, braved the harsh elements, and became fiercely independent. Its settlers faced isolation from the mainland, and fierce storms like the 1821 hurricane and tidal wave that crossed Assateague Island to engulf Chincoteague. Hurricanes in 1933 and 1936 also flooded the island. These early hardships strengthened the villagers and created a strong sense of survival and camaraderie that has been passed down through the generations.

In 1671 the first white settlers laid claim to the island, which was used as a livestock range for the next century and a half. Villagers made a living farming and raising cattle and sheep. By the mid-1800s seafood

was the main source of income. Northern cities were major markets for the famous Chincoteague oysters, influencing islanders to vote in 1861 not to secede from the Union.



Jay Cherrix stands in his decoy shop in front of a pony he carved for fun. His unique carvings include shorebirds and fish, and range from primitive working decoys to refined pieces that resemble modern sculpture.

JANE DAISEY PHOTOS



Memorial Park views Assateague Channel and Island. Its lighthouse, built in 1867, stands 142-feet high and is open for tours on selected weekends.

man who would be embarrassed to know that his carvings have sold for as much as \$80,000. In the early days, he sold them for only a few dollars per dozen.

Today, Jay and many others earn their income carving decoys that are decorative only and will never be used for hunting. Jay combines the skills of his father, who had been a boat captain, and his grandfather. He runs "Tidewater Expeditions," featuring morning and evening kayak tours, and a quaint decoy-carving shop called "A Work of Art." He says he feels blessed to work at something he loves every day of his life, surrounded by the beauty of his home.

In 1918, native John B. Whealton Jr. pursued his dream of building a road to connect the island with the mainland. He formed the Chincoteague Toll Road and Bridge Company and, after years of hard work, the road and its six bridges (including a swing bridge as you reach the island) were opened with much ceremony in November of 1922. The toll has since been removed and the road now bears the name John B. Whealton Jr. Memorial Causeway, in honor of the native son who had the vision to end the island's isolation from its neighbors.

The aging swing bridge crosses the channel as you approach the island and is soon to be replaced by a modern structure.



The beautiful Christ United Methodist Church was built in 1922 by Italian stone masons. It is one of six churches on the island.

In 1920 and again in 1924, Chincoteague suffered disastrous fires that destroyed several of the largest and most important buildings in the town, as well as many homes. The men organized the existing fire brigade into a larger and better volunteer fire company. In order to help, the women formed the Ladies Auxiliary in 1924. At the first meeting, they decided to have an annual pony penning, rounding up the ponies on Assateague Island and swimming



Stones bearing the dates 1930 and 1957 mark the growth of the Chincoteague Fire Department building on Main Street.





The annual pony penning, which has provided funding for the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company for years, is eagerly anticipated by locals as one big homecoming.

them across the channel to Chincoteague to be sold at auction. Over the years, the fire department added a carnival to the pony penning activities. In 1946 author Marguerite Henry came to the island, attended the pony penning, and bought a pony for herself. Her book *Misty of Chincoteague* was based on the experience and became a classic in children's literature. With the release of a movie version in 1960, the island and its annual pony penning became famous. The pony swim and auction, along with the carnival, has provided all the funding for the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company

through the years. The event is held the last Wednesday and Thursday in July, with the carnival running for that entire week, as well as every Friday and Saturday in July. It's a tradition that locals eagerly anticipate. Relatives living away come home to enjoy the festivities; it's like one big homecoming. This year marked the carnival's 75th anniversary, and a spectacular fireworks display was held on the last night to celebrate the platinum anniversary.

The volunteer firemen and ladies of the auxiliary give generously of their time, energy and resources throughout the year serving

the community as firefighters, emergency medical personnel, and ambulance drivers. **Pete and Ellen Richardson** have served together for over 35 years, and say they've enjoyed working with and helping their friends and neighbors.

Paving the Way for Tourism

By 1960 the seafood industry was declining and many of the young people were leaving to find jobs elsewhere. Some citizens thought of expanding the small tourist industry that existed. Leaders such as Robert N. Reed, Chincoteague mayor from 1949 to 1963, worked tirelessly to gain approval to construct a bridge from Chincoteague to Assateague Island, location of the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and Assateague Island National Seashore. This bridge opened in September of 1962, and literally paved the way for Chincoteague's modern tourist industry.

Ralph Daisey and his wife Lois were working at the NASA base on the mainland when a co-worker dared him to find something to sell to the tourists, if they came. He says her words stuck in his mind. They opened PonyTails, the island's first souvenir shop in 1965, featuring homemade saltwater taffy and copper-kettle fudge. The business thrived and they left their jobs with NASA to run it full-time. Lois says, "We have tried to be a family business in every sense of the word, never selling anything in the shop we wouldn't want sold to our own children or grandchildren. We've never been open for business on Sunday; we wanted that day for family activities and church services."

If You Go...

Chincoteague Island offers a wide range of accommodations, restaurants, and activities to suit all ages and interests. Make reservations well in advance if you plan to visit during the height of the tourist season, from June through Labor Day.

For information and a list of annual events, festivals, and shows, contact the **Chincoteague Chamber of Commerce** by mail at P.O. Box 258, Chincoteague, VA 23336, by phone at 757-336-6161, or visit their Web site at www.chincoteaguechamber.com.

For conferences, reunions, weddings, etc., contact **The Chincoteague Center** at P.O. Box 52, Chincoteague, VA 23336, phone 757-336-0614, fax 757-336-0615, or at www.chincoteague.org.

Stay at family campgrounds, rental cottages, motels, or bed & breakfasts. A small sample includes **Tom's Cove Family Campground**, with fishing piers, a marina, wooded sites, and a recreation center and store (757-336-6498), **Uncle Joe's Cabins** (757-336-5107), **Island's Pride Cottages** (757-336-6345), **Island Motor Inn**, an all-waterfront resort featuring a world-class weight and exercise facility overlooking the Bay (757-336-3141), **The Refuge Motor Inn** (757-336-5511), **The Channel Bass Inn** (1-800-221-5620), and **The Watson House B&B** (1-800-336-6787).



Countless other natives opened a myriad of businesses to serve the tourists, adding to the economy, increasing the tax base, and providing youth and adults with jobs. The entrepreneurial spirit is still alive as new and unique ventures continue to start.

While some prepared for the future, other citizens worked hard to preserve the island's past. Eight island women raised money and did extensive research to create the Oyster and Maritime Museum, which opened in 1972, preserving the history of the seafood industry, and that of the Assateague Lighthouse. A citizens group restored the Wallace Jester Barber Shop, one of the oldest frame commercial buildings in town, and opened it in 1995 as the Chincoteague Island Library. It is operated by volunteers and funded by contributions.

Today a new generation is serving to improve their home. Mayor **Jack Tarr**, Town Manager **Jim West**, and Public Works Director **Jay W. Jeffries** have lived on the island all their lives. Jack owns his own electrical contracting business with partner and native **Dale Holston**. Jim previously served as Public Works Director for 10 years. Jay was a teacher at Chincoteague High School until his recent appointment with the town.

Many Improvements Made

Jim says the town has made many improvements in the last 10 years: the road and drainage systems have been vastly improved; the Curtis Merritt Harbor has opened on the south end of the island; and the town has its own 911 system that also serves Assateague Island. A large commu-



Town Manager Jim West, Public Works Director Jay W. Jeffries, and Mayor Jack Tarr (l to r) all work to improve their native community.

nity complex was built in 1996, housing the town offices, meeting rooms, and the police department. It includes a beautiful community center, available for rent, with space for meetings, trade shows, concerts, high school proms, and graduation ceremonies. A special source of pride is the recently improved Memorial Park. Situated on the shores of Assateague Channel, it features a fishing pier, boat launch, pavilion, picnic tables and grills, modern playground equipment, tennis and basketball courts, and a baseball field. This pristine park is a combined effort of the town government and

many citizen volunteers, and serves its community well.

In spite of tremendous growth and development, Chincoteague Island retains its quaint beauty, community spirit, and peacefulness. There is something special about living here, with the sound of waves lapping at the shoreline, the smell of salt in the air, the spectacular sunsets over the water, and the steady rhythm of the lighthouse beam at night. Nine-year-old **Lindsay Clark**, who describes life on an island in the book series *Kids in Their Communities*, sums it up when she says, "I hope I always live on Chincoteague Island!" ■



The island is famous for its fresh seafood and offers a variety of dining experiences. **Capt. Fish's Steaming Wharf** is an open-air deck restaurant (757-336-5528). **Pony Pines Restaurant**

(757-336-9746) and **A.J.'s on the Creek** (757-336-5888) are also popular.

Fun activities for the family include: miniature golf, bike rentals, boat rentals, ice cream parlors, charter boat fishing, parasailing, cruises around the island, and a movie theatre.

Swim and surf fish at **Assateague Island National Seashore**. On the way to the island, stop at the **NASA Visitor Center** to enjoy hands-on displays and special programs for children.

Adults can enjoy antique shops, art galleries, and a variety of unique shops and museums.

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge offers a visitor's center, walking and biking trails, and year-round bird-watching opportunities. ■

Clockwise from top left: 1) Outside the Island Roxy Theater, a visitor kneels to look at Misty's hoofprints, placed in the cement during the East Coast premiere of the movie in 1960. 2) Volunteers Harriet Lonergan and Dorothy Duthy talk with visitors at the island library. 3) One of several bed and breakfasts on the island, The Channel Bass Inn is a building with a long history as an inn and restaurant. 4) The Oyster and Maritime Museum is home to the historic lens used in the Assateague lighthouse from 1867 to 1961.