

by Judy Hare,
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 ninth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Smithfield

Hams, history and hospitality define this close-knit community whose foundation is built on locals with deep roots.



to build another parking lot — there is a corner where tradition means stability, and where change occurs slowly, thoughtfully. In Smithfield, you are constantly reminded of your link to the past. Through its history, its homes, its landmarks, and especially its food.”

From the ham smokehouses in this little Virginia town on the Pagan River comes one of the world's unique gourmet delicacies. The tradition goes back three centuries to the early days of the newly formed Colony of Virginia. The settlers had prized the old razorback hog and



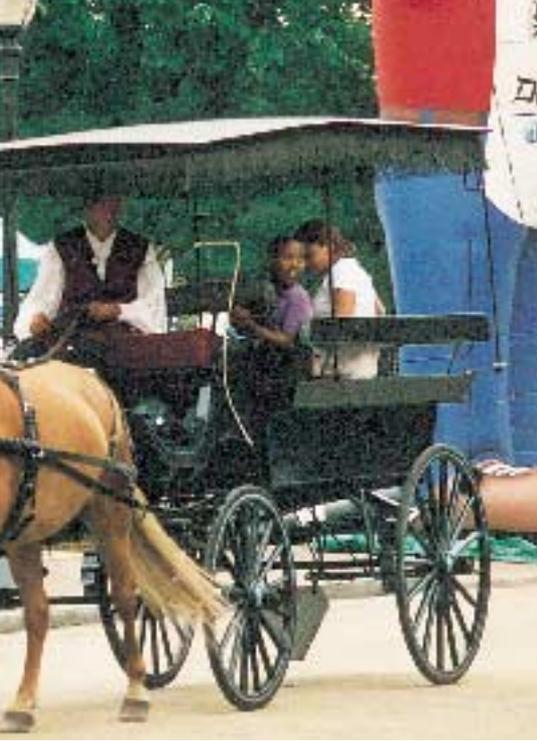
Says town manager, Peter Stephenson, “We are lucky in Smithfield. We are one of the only towns our size to have a Fortune 500 company plopped directly in the middle of it. And Smithfield Foods has been a benevolent corporate citizen. They have contributed greatly to the historic revitalization of our downtown, and of course, because of the popularity of Smithfield ham, our town has reaped the benefits of world-wide recognition.”

With a few tweaks, the brochure for the town of Smithfield says it best — “In a world where we are buffeted with change, where progress seems to be clearing land



The Smithfield Inn and Tavern provides lodging and meals in the Southern tradition.

JUDY HARE PHOTOS



Every Memorial Day weekend the town hosts the Smithfield Olden Days Festival. Take a step back in time for this weekend-long event featuring carriage rides in the historic district.

understood the art of curing hams and bacon as a source of great eating. The succulent, amber, dry-cured hams made from peanut-fed hogs started a tradition that would make Smithfield, Virginia, famous worldwide.

Today, Smithfield is still known for its prized hams. By law, in order to be called a "Smithfield Ham," the piece of meat in question must be cured within the town limits of Smithfield. Smithfield Foods, a corporate giant and the leading producer of Smithfield hams and other meat products, is located within the small town of Smithfield.

The "great eating" tradition continues at the town's most enduring haven of hospitality, the elegantly appointed, original Smithfield Inn and Tavern. The inn is still providing lodging and serving meals in the Southern and Smithfield tradition. Recently voted "Best Plate in Virginia" by *USA Today*, The Smithfield Inn and Tavern is proud to feature classic wafer-thin slices of Smithfield ham on Southern-style biscuits.

"Yum!" Betty Thomas, marketing director of the Smithfield Inn gushes, "Mozell Brown gets up and makes those fresh, wonderful ham biscuits every morning at 6 a.m. for our guests. We think the 'Best Plate' designation is a real compliment and says a lot about what great taste the folks at *USA Today* have!"

October 2000/www.co-opliving.com



Elizabeth Goldman and her husband Larry have made their home on South Church Street for years. She enjoys the close-knit community feeling she shares with her neighbors. "I love living in old town among friendly, caring people. Local residents and visitors are so curious and interested in these historic houses. We feel a sense of pride and responsibility to be good caretakers of our home so future generations can enjoy its grace and beauty."

But today's Smithfield offers much more than flavorful ham. Its history and well-preserved historic homes are an additional beacon to visitors and its hospitality has turned many visitors into residents. Unlike many historic towns, Smithfield has known repeated periods of prosperity which has resulted in a charmingly eclectic mix of handsome colonial, stately federal, and elaborate Victorian homes. The Smithfield historic district, which is both a Virginia Historic Landmark and on the National Historic Register, is a fashionable address for locals.

According to **Diane Howard**, director of tourism for Smithfield and Isle of Wight County, "Tourism has become a real growth industry in our area. Smithfield has become a mecca for tourists looking for an escape from the hustle and bustle of city and sub-





urban life with its food, its history, its homes, its attractions and of course, its recreational possibilities.”

A River Town from Way Back

From its very beginning, Smithfield has been a river town, and its whole life and growth have been conditioned by the river. Commerce and trade were born on the banks of the Pagan, and nurtured by the men and women whose lives and lifestyles depended on it. It was this waterway which first attracted merchants and made it one of Colonial Virginia’s busiest and most prosperous communities. Today,

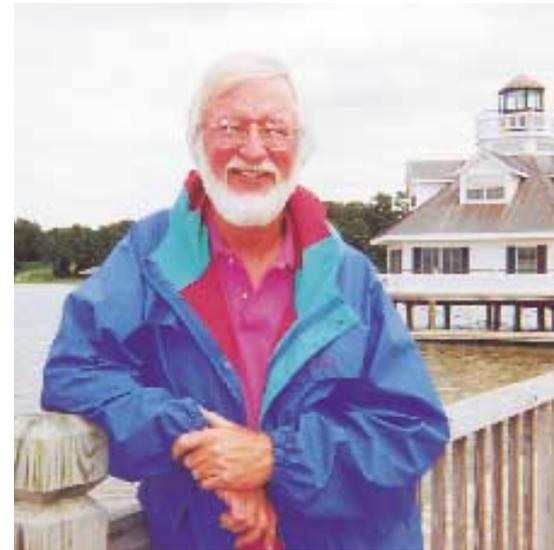
Diane Howard, director of tourism for Smithfield and Isle of Wight County, not only promotes the pleasures of Smithfield, she enjoys them! Diane and Barbara Williams enjoy a relaxing repast at the Smithfield Gourmet Bakery.

trade continues on the water at one of Smithfield’s best-known landmarks, Smithfield Station.

Smithfield Station, perched on the banks of the Pagan River, is a unique waterfront inn, restaurant and marina built in the spirit of a coastal life guard station.

This popular watering hole is a gathering place for locals and a popular place to tie up on the weekends to sample delicious seafood and pork specialties. The hotel is a favorite romantic getaway spot and even has its own lighthouse that you can spend the night in!

But if you really want a slice of life in Smithfield, you must spend some time with the gang at The Twins Restaurant. The “boys” start gathering in the wee hours of the morning to play the “coffee



Ron Pack, owner of Smithfield Station, looks the part of the Gorton’s fisherman, but is a savvy businessman and one of the first proponents of a successful tourism program in Smithfield and Isle of Wight County.

If You Go...

The first place to begin any visit to Smithfield is at the Isle of Wight Tourism Bureau, currently located in the Old Courthouse on Main Street. Reach them by phone at (757) 357-5182 or (800) 365-9339 or visit their Web site at www.smithfield-virginia.com. The friendly folks there can give you maps for the self-guided historic walking tour, brochures on the major area attractions and recommendations for shopping and dining. Don’t miss the video! You’ll be able to get the flavor of the area by enjoying this 10-minute presentation. They are open daily.

Special events abound in Smithfield. Every Memorial Day weekend the town hosts the **Smithfield Olden Days Festival**. Take a step back in time for this weekend-long event

featuring carriage rides in the historic district, arts and crafts, antiques, antique and vintage cars, concerts, a ghost walk, special children’s activities and a closing outdoor concert in the natural amphitheater on the grounds of Windsor Castle.

Summer brings the annual **Friday Night Summer Concert Series** in Times Square (the aptly named gazebo stage at the *Smithfield Times* newspaper office on Main Street)! This series offers something for everyone with big band concerts, bluegrass, folk music, military bands, gospel, teen night, and a variety show by the local theater troupe.

Don’t miss the **Isle of Wight County Fair** the 3rd weekend in September (Thursday through Sunday). Attractions at this popular family-oriented event include a carnival, music, gas and steam engines, children’s activities, mule pulls, livestock and lots of homemade items. For more info contact: Isle

of Wight Parks & Recreation, (757) 357-2291.

The holiday season is magical in Smithfield and features a multitude of special seasonal events including a **tree lighting, boat lighting on the Pagan River, Historic District Decorating contest, and much more!** Call the Isle of Wight Tourism Bureau for specific dates and times.

Other events throughout the year include: **art shows and exhibits sponsored by The Collage Arts Center: (757) 357-7707; The Smithfield Little Theater presentation of three show runs per year.** (The first show, generally a musical, runs the first three weekends in November. The second show runs the last weekend in February and the first two weekends in March and the third show runs the first three weekends in May.) Box office: (757) 357-7338; **Monthly antique auctions held the first Wednesday of every month** by local auctioneer and funny man,

game,” get the latest crop reports, or solve the country’s latest economic crisis. The “ladies” of Smithfield visit The Twins at a much more respectable hour of the morning! Or, join Smithfield kids of all ages for a scoop of sweet ice cream from the Smithfield Ice Cream Parlor. And, the good eats are not just found in Old Town. Plenty of locals “in the know” swear by **Robert Cox** at the Battery Park Grill, **Ken Brown** at Ken’s Bar BQ, and **Charlie Webb** at C.W. Cowlings for American chow and **Anna’s Risto-rante** when in the mood for something a little spicier!

Attractions Abound

Attractions abound in Smithfield — from the visitor’s center itself, which is housed in the Old Courthouse of 1750, to the Isle of Wight Museum, which includes the history of the world-famous Smithfield hams, Indian artifacts, Civil War relics, and fossils from the James River — to Fort Boykin Historic Park (a historic fort that

has been involved in every major campaign fought on American soil) and historic St. Luke’s Shrine, the nation’s oldest existing Gothic Church (1632) of English foundation in America.



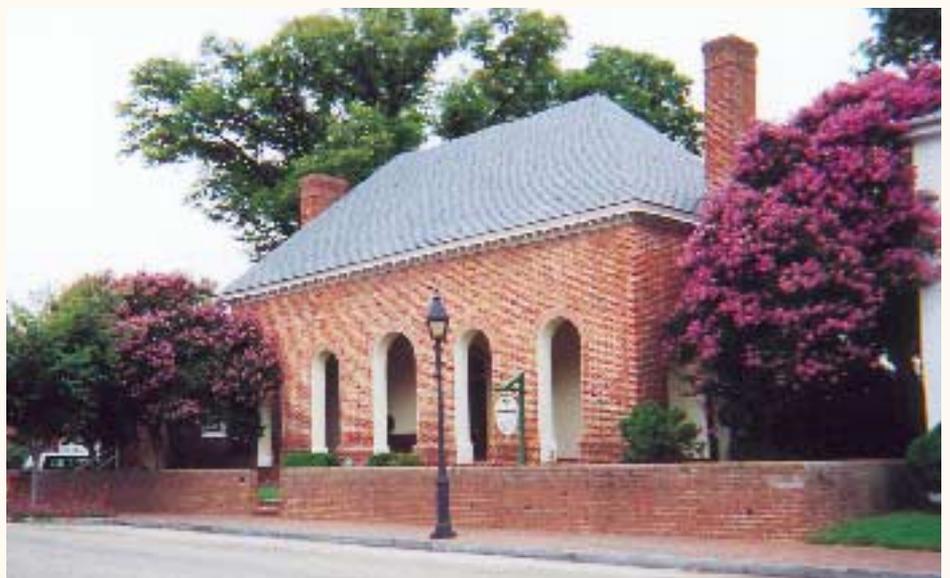
The “gang” starts every morning communing at The Twins Restaurant.

Yes, the hams and the history are the defining framework of what makes Smithfield fun to visit and an incredible place to live, but the defining “H” is the “hospitality” Smithfield has to offer to visitors and residents alike. There is a rare quality in the South that, in this day and age, has lost ground in most states, regions and towns — but Smithfield has held true to its roots. What truly defines Smithfield is the people that are its infrastructure. It’s the locals whose roots run deep and are the foundation upon which today’s town soci-

ety is built. It is the newcomers who have come to build a family dream of community and giving, not just taking of public bounty. It is a sense of responsibility and giving something back to a common collection of souls living in the same place at the same time. It is the visitors who are in awe of the gifts that Smithfield residents live with everyday and hope to restore to their own lives by touching and taking a little piece of the graciousness and spirit of what is truly “Smithfield” home with them. ■

Jim Abeicht, at the Smithfield Antique Center (757) 365-0223.

A variety of accommodations are available in Smithfield and the surrounding area to suit every taste and budget. **Smithfield Station Waterfront Inn** ((757) 357-7700) is located on the Pagan River and includes a marina, lighthouse and boardwalk suites and dining facilities. **The Smithfield Inn Bed and Breakfast** ((757) 357-1752), circa 1752, is located in the historic district and has been continuing its legend of hospitality since 1752. **The Isle of Wight Inn Bed and Breakfast** ((757) 357-3176) is located on one of Smithfield’s main thoroughfares and envelopes its guests with colonial charm. **Porches on the James** is a newly opened bed and breakfast located just outside of town complimenting Smithfield’s river-port heritage. Also available are an **Econo-Lodge** ((757) 357-9057) and a **Best Western** ((757) 562-4100).



The first place to begin any visit to Smithfield is at the Isle of Wight Tourism Bureau, currently located in the Old Courthouse on Main Street.