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During the year 2001, 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 Catawba

From healing waters to breathtaking views, this community is good for the spirit.



ANITA FIREBAUGH PHOTOS



shine, then the only cure for tuberculosis. The Catawba Sanatorium took in its first TB patients in 1909. The facility converted to a state mental hospital in 1972.

Healing Powers Abide

Catawba still offers the healing powers of serenity to those who stop to enjoy breathtaking views of rolling green hills and tree-covered mountains. The farms of yesteryear remain, slightly smaller and more modern, but keeping to the routine of cattle and crops.

Nearly 100 years ago, the restorative wonders of Catawba were apparent to state officials seeking a healing place for folks with "consumption." They found Roanoke Red Sulphur Springs tucked

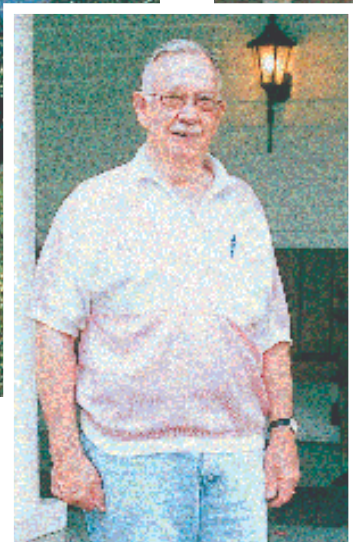
between the mountain ranges. The resort touted mineral waters and offered relief of hay fever, dyspepsia, and female troubles. Developed in 1857, the spa was for people in need of fresh air and sun-

With the Appalachian Trail topping the mountains and the Transamerica Bicycle Route traversing Rts. 785 and 779, the area is a haven for nature lovers. Catawba is seven miles from Interstate 81, but the mountains hide the valley.

June Keffer Sarver, who for 54 years owned the former Catawba Mercantile, remembers that years ago her husband, Minor Keffer, spied a highway worker



Marie Saul (inset), who has owned the Catawba Valley General Store (left) for seven years, takes pride in her service to both her neighbors and the nature lovers who pass through.



The views in Catawba are breathtaking. Hikers and bikers come from all over the world just to see the valley. The Homeplace Restaurant (above), established in 1982 by Harold Wingate (left), put Catawba on the map.

walking Rt. 311. “It got our curiosity up, he looked so perplexed,” Sarver says. “Finally Minor went down and got him. The man looked up and down Rt. 311 and scratched his head. ‘They say it’s here but I can’t find it!’ he said. He was looking for Catawba!”

After that, a sign on Rt. 311 indicated the community’s location.

When Minor Keffer passed away, June Keffer Sarver sold out to **Marie Saul**, who renamed the grocery the Catawba Valley General Store. Saul meets more than 400 hikers each year. Folks from as far away as Germany and Australia have bought supplies from her.

The local folks are “sort of like family,” Saul says as she makes a sandwich for a customer. “When people come in, they need to know who can do this or that, and have you heard about so-and-so. This is sort of a landmark.”

The store once housed the post office, and there’s an area where the dry cleaning used to hang. The grocery is cooled with a ceiling fan, and the wooden floors and clapboard decor speak of times forgotten.

“Everybody wants to live in Catawba,” Saul says. “It’s a beautiful area. At least two times a week people come in asking about buying, renting, living here. You’re close in, about 15 minutes from Salem, but it’s a different

world when you cross that mountain. You’re leaving all that asphalt and heat behind.”

Down-Home Dining

North of the Catawba Valley General Store is The Homeplace. The family-style restaurant with the best food on the Appalachian Trail is open Thursday-Sunday. The Homeplace has a special down-home charm that makes going to Catawba a savory all-afternoon outing. The

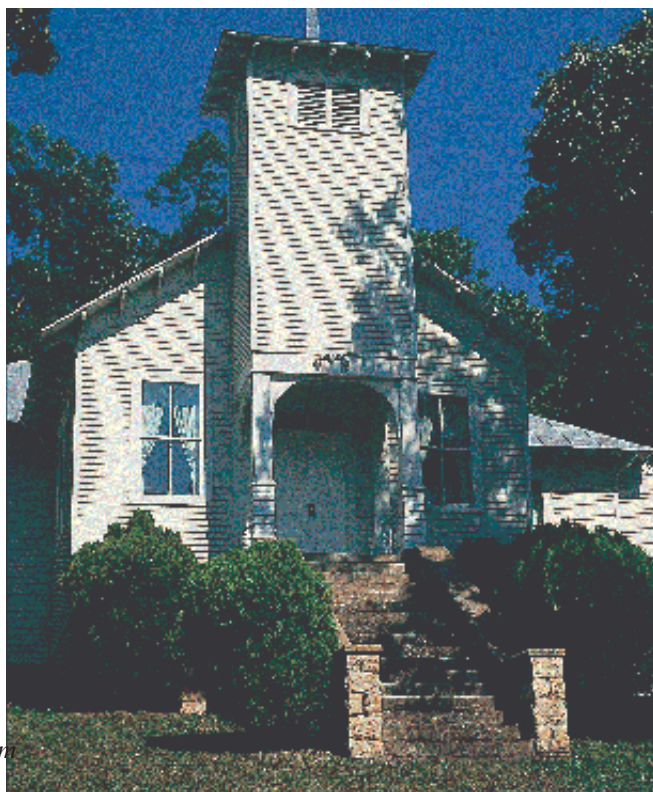
scrumptious food — fried chicken, country ham, home-cooked vegetables and desserts — is as healing to the palette as the views are to the eyes.

Harold Wingate established The Homeplace in 1982. The good food and Wingate’s friendliness made the restaurant a local favorite. Several expansions later, the old farmhouse has space for 200 guests in the dining room where Wingate feeds about 2,500 people weekly.

The Homeplace is part of the history of Catawba and now a big part of its present. When the Catawba Sanatorium opened, the Morgan family who owned the house “served meals and rented rooms to local school teachers and patients’ families,” Wingate says. The house, known as “The Summit,” had nine bedrooms prior to the business renovation. Wingate declined to use the former name for the house, calling it “too pretentious for me.”

The restaurant stays busy, and long waits are common. “We think this place really put Catawba on the map,” Wingate says proudly.

Two miles from The Home-



The congregation of Catawba Valley Baptist Church was established 142 years ago.

place, up Rt. 785, CrossTrails Bed and Breakfast lies adjacent to the Appalachian Trail and on the bike route. Innkeepers **Bill and Katherine Cochran** give weary guests respite and offer enchanting conversation about Catawba. Cochran, a former outdoors writer for *The Roanoke Times*, says, "The area is so great it should be shared."

The Cochrans opened their business six years ago. "The area draws geographically from all compass points," Cochran says. "The average resident probably doesn't realize we have all these visitors." Hikers from the northern United States especially are crazy about the Blue Ridge Mountains, he adds.

Visitors are also welcome on Rt. 311 at the Down Home Bed and Breakfast. Avid backpackers **Dave and Lucy Downs** fell in love with the valley and opened their B&B two years ago.

A Hiker's Haven

The area has phenomenal hiking. McAfee's Knob, named after one of the area's early settlers, and Dragon's Tooth, which has unusual rock formations, offer splendid views from mountain overlooks.

"I'm always amazed at how dark it is at night," Lucy Downs says. "How quiet." She loves seeing the deer. The wildlife "is pretty amazing."

Catawba is thought to be the oldest settled area of Roanoke County. A cabin-fort was built in 1722, and property owners are listed as early as 1740. No one knows how the name originated, but Indian artifacts are found all over the valley.

"Legend has it Catawba Indians camped along Catawba Creek," Wingate says. The freshwater stream heads on Rt. 785 near the Great Eastern Divide. "So it's reasonable to me that's where the name has come from."

The area also is the site of the first known Baptist church in the greater Roanoke Valley.



Down Home Bed and Breakfast (top) on Rt. 311 offers respite to weary travelers in an area void of commercialism. Catawba Hospital (center) is the area's major employer. The Catawba Community Center (bottom) serves as a meeting place for civic groups.

The church reportedly began in 1780 somewhere along the creek.

Catawba Hospital is the area's major employer, with 350 full-time employees and 110 patients. The only remaining structure

from the Roanoke Red Sulphur Springs is a gazebo. A few structures from the early days of the Catawba Sanatorium, built in the early 1900s, can be seen from the road. The main hospital facility was built in 1954.

Jack L. Wood, acting director and CEO of Catawba Hospital, welcomes anyone interested in the historic nature of the state-owned facility.

"We have people who continue to come back here, who were children of residents who were here when this was a TB facility," Wood says. Security escorts visitors around to see the buildings. The Brauer Chapel was one of the first buildings constructed after the state took over the 880-acre resort.

The hospital was "a premiere facility in the early 1900s," Wood says. "We had the first X-ray machine in the Roanoke valley." The hospital was particularly up-to-date for that period, with a full operating room and a complete laboratory.

The staff is a unique blend of "generational employees," Wood says. Mothers, daughters, husbands and wives all work at the facility. "It really is a large family. There is a sense of community here that you do not get other places." Some of the employees have been with the hospital more than 40 years.

Occasionally, history books extend the Catawba valley all the way to Fincastle. Some residents, like Sarver and Wingate, claim Catawba takes in parts of four counties, encompassing pieces of Botetourt, Craig, Roanoke, and Montgomery. To outsiders, it's just a crossroads with a store, a hospital, and a fine restaurant.

"It's the Whole Valley"

"I've always felt at home in Catawba," Sarver says. The 80-year-old former store owner sums up the community. "It's the whole valley. It isn't just right in this little area," she says, pointing toward the store and the post office. Even near the Montgomery County line, "they still have a feeling of Catawba." ■



If You Go...

Lodging can be found at **CrossTrails Bed & Breakfast**, 1-800-841-8078 or (540) 384-8078 or at **Down Home Bed and Breakfast**, 540-384-6865. Reservations are highly recommended. Hotel lodging is available via Rt. 311 across Catawba Mountain in Salem or down Rt. 779 into Daleville.

The Homeplace Restaurant is a must for food. They are open Thursday and Friday, 4-8 p.m., Saturday, 3:30-8 p.m. and Sunday 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Reservations are not required unless you have a large group. If you miss this, you can get a sandwich at the **Catawba Valley General Store**.

Backpackers will want to explore not only the **Appalachian Trail (AT)** but various other hikes, too.

You can reach the AT at **Dragon's Tooth Trail**, located about three miles from Catawba on north Rt. 311. The trek to the rock formations is 2.6 miles and considered a moderate to difficult hike.

The hike to **McAfee's Knob**, reached from the top of Catawba Mountain and marked by a parking lot and signs, is a moderate jaunt of about 3.5 miles. The views are among the most scenic along the AT. You can follow the AT approximately 20 miles and see the Catawba valley and the **Carvin's Cove Reservoir**. The hike takes you to Daleville and U.S. Rt. 220.

Turn at Catawba onto Virginia Rt. 779 and follow it into Botetourt County to reach the **Andy Layne Memorial Trail**. This 26-mile loop offers access to

CrossTrails Bed & Breakfast, built in 1994, is one of the closest B&Bs on the entire Appalachian Trail. This B&B has won awards for its service and the graciousness of hosts Bill and Katherine Cochran.

Tinker Cliffs and **Scorched Earth Gap**. The trail serves as a connector between the **North Mountain Trail** and the AT.

The **Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club** has additional information and can be reached by mail at P.O. Box 12282, Roanoke, VA 24024. The **George Washington and Jefferson National Forest New Castle Ranger's District Office**, (540) 864-5195, also has hiking information.

Bikers can travel part of the **Trans-america Bicycle Route** along Rts. 785 and 779. A good afternoon bike ride begins at the Catawba Post Office (parking is posted, however). From Catawba, follow Rt. 779, passing the fork at Rt. 600 (Moses Family Road) to the Roanoke Cement Co. Turn around and follow Rt. 600 back to Rt. 779 and the point of beginning. Aside from Catawba Valley General Store, there is no place to get a drink, so take plenty of fluids. For additional biking information, contact **Blue Ridge Bicycle Club** at www.blueridge-bicycleclub.com.

Other activities within 30 minutes of Catawba include the **Hanging Rock Civil War Battlefield** and interpretive hike/bike trail, **Hanging Rock Golf Course**, (540) 389-7275, the **City of Salem's great antique shops**, trout fishing in **Craig County**, and picnicking at **Carvin's Cove**. Contact the **Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau** at (540) 342-6025, (800) 635-5535 or www.visitroanokeva.com for additional information on the area. ■