

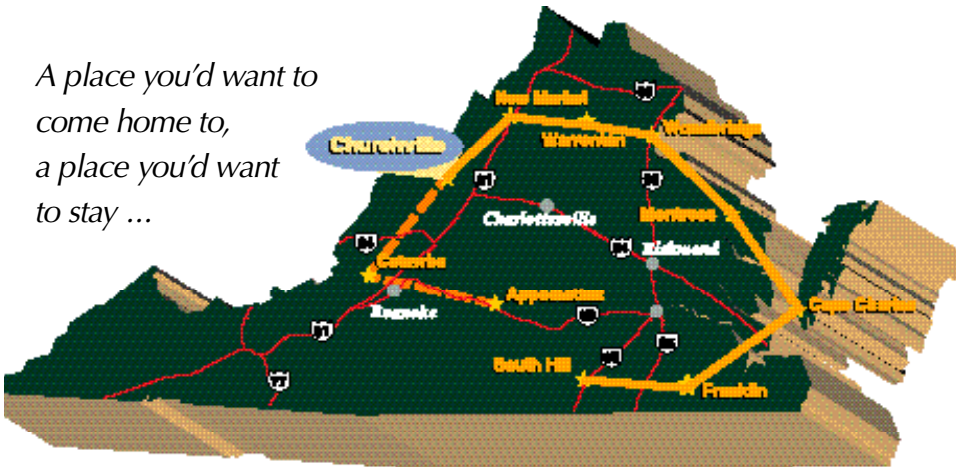
## DOWN HOME SERIES

by Nancy Sorrells,  
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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 eighth stop, we'll be...*

# Down Home in Churchville

*A place you'd want to  
come home to,  
a place you'd want  
to stay ...*



If you happen to be driving west of Staunton, heading toward the Allegheny Mountains of western Augusta County and Highland, you can't miss Churchville. It's the neat, orderly little village that straddles U.S. Rt. 250 just after you cross Whiskey Creek. Frame houses, brick cottages, a few businesses and four churches

cluster along this tree-lined crossroad community. Here the houses are painted, the yards are manicured, and seasonal touches like flags, flowers and wreaths are common.

It's a place you'd want to come home to or a place where you'd want to stay if you were born here. Perhaps **Tracy Pyles**, a member of the Augusta County Board of Supervisors

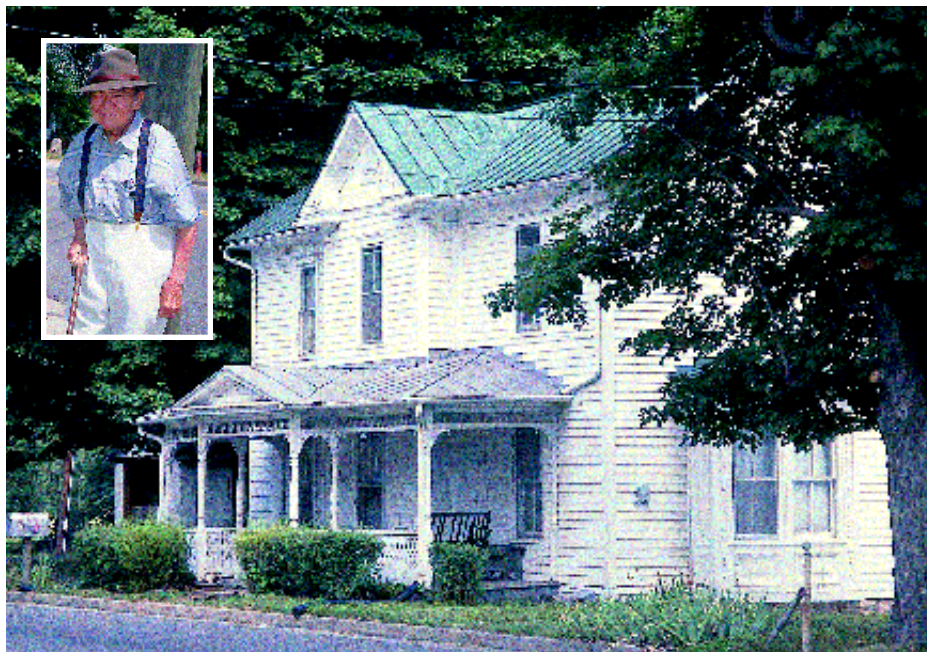
and a Churchville resident, says it best: "To understand what makes it special, I think looking at our name helps ... 'Churchville' gets us started with the right foundation. It lies in the 'Pastures' District of Augusta County. Could a place have a more peaceful-sounding name than Churchville in the Pastures District?" he asks.

"Within Churchville we have a full range of homes old and new, small and large, apartments over storefronts. We have stores, medical services, a pharmacy, auto parts, a bank and a funeral home. We have streetlights and one-and-a-half miles of sidewalk, a three-mile round-trip. But more importantly we have a full breadth of good people," he adds.

The clusters of homes and businesses that evolved into the hamlet began sprouting up in the early 19th century. One history says that "Churchville assumed the character of a village about 1830" and acquired a post office in 1847. The name comes from the fact that there were as many as five churches in the village at one time and even today there are four churches — two Methodist, a Presbyterian and a Lutheran.

The village could just as easily have been called Millville because at least four mills are known to have existed in the community. Among the area's first settlers was Christian Bear, who brought his family from Pennsylvania into the Shenandoah Valley. The Bears have operated a mill just behind the village's main street since at least 1812. That first mill harnessed water power for cabinetmaking, wool carding, grain grinding and

**Beautiful old structures like the home of Dr. Fred Dalton (inset) add charm and character to Churchville's main street.**



NANCY SORRELLS PHOTOS





**Lifelong resident Harold Armstrong and his wife Kitty outside Loch Willow Presbyterian Church.**

Although the furniture and woodworking businesses long ago took a back seat to the funeral business, Bill has recently gotten the waterwheel turning again after a flood three years ago took his source off-line. At one time earlier in the century, the mill was used to generate electricity for the village.

"When ice got on the waterwheel it would go fast on the downturn and come up very slowly because of the weight of the ice. The lights would get bright and then go dim," recalls Bear with a laugh.

Bear has never known anything but life in Churchville, having spent his entire life in one or the other of two houses that sit side by side.

**Harold Armstrong**, who graduated with Bear from the Churchville school in 1943, actually grew up a couple of miles outside the village limits.

"It was a big deal to come all the way to Churchville on a Saturday

**W. T. "Bill" Bear, his daughter Judy Delp and her daughter Mary Porter Delp (2 yrs. old) stand behind the Bear mill. Note the water-wheel behind them.**

night. All the country people came to the 'village' and would sit in the stores and listen to people talk, and a few had guitars so they would pick and sing and buy their weekly groceries," Armstrong recalls.

For about a decade, Armstrong operated a hardware and feedstore in the village, and he likes to brag that his store is where country music legends, the Statler Brothers, got their start. "We would bring out musicians and they would climb up on the sacks of feed and play. Those boys came out and played for half an hour or so in the late 1950s," he says.

Harold's wife, **Kitty**, is not native to Churchville, but after nearly 50 years she has plenty of perspective on life there. "It's the only place I ever heard of called 'The Village' and it reminds me of an English village. The people here really take pride in their houses and their land," she says.

Volunteerism in Churchville comes naturally on an organized and individual level. Setting an example for others has been the Churchville Women's Club, which has been a part of the village's life off and on since the Civil War when the ladies made uniforms, knapsacks and even a flag for local soldiers. In World War I they gathered again to make bandages and knit sweaters and socks. They also descended upon Green Hill Cemetery, the town's community burial ground, with picks, shovels, scythes and sickles to clean up and maintain the area.

In 1929 the women formally organized under the motto "In Unity There Is Strength." Through all their years of hard work and charitable projects, there was only one time the group faced disappointment — that was

cider making. The woodworking end of the business evolved into the funeral business when customers began requesting wooden caskets.

"People came in with two sticks, one for the length of the person and the other for the width. That would tell how big to make the casket," explains **Bill Bear**. He is the fifth generation to operate the business, and now that his son, **Will**, is the funeral director and his daughter, **Judy Delp**, is office manager, the company's future has been assured for another generation. Bear Funeral Home is now the oldest family operated funeral business in the state of Virginia and among the oldest in the nation.

**The view from a church cemetery of M.J.'s Café, a gathering spot where locals meet to discuss politics and swap stories.**







**Isabel Strickler stands among the flowers she has cultivated on the east edge of Churchville.**



**Francis Chester, local attorney/sheep farmer, tends his flock at the edge of the village.**

when they tried to change the name of Whiskey Creek to Castle Creek. The temperance-loving women felt that a village called Churchville shouldn't have a creek named Whiskey flowing through it. They were thwarted in their efforts by the state map-makers, who refused to reprint with a new name.

The women's group disbanded in 2000 when faced with a dwindling membership, but many remain active in the Churchville Volunteer Fire and Rescue Squad, the Lions and the Ruritans. Others, like **Charlotte Young**, walk through the community each day and pick up litter. On the western end of the village the Ruritans now maintain flower beds at the crossroads, a project begun by the women's club. On the eastern gateway, the beautiful floral display is the work of **Isabel Strickler**, who has been tending her bank of flowers along Rt. 250 for about 10 years.

"My family farmed right here and I have lived here all my life. It's a nice, quiet town. I like doing the flowers and the people tell me it's like a nice welcome into Churchville," she says.

### A Successful Combination

Across the road is Mrs. Strickler's old family farm, now Chester Farms and the law office of **Francis Chester**. The combination of a sheep farm and a law office has worked well for Chester, who grew up as a backyard farmer in Long Island and peddled agricultural products to raise money for law school. Thirty-three years ago, he moved to Virginia and five years ago established his farm/legal business at the edge of the village.

"I've always had a farm and the two are a great combination," Chester says of his complex. "It is ideal to have a law office on the farm because it is tranquil and soothing for the clientele. They look out and see the sheep grazing and it calms them down." The dominant feature of the cluster of buildings is the

sales barn, where the Chesters direct-market their products: fleece, locally woven wool blankets, yarn-dyed in pleasing earthtones, hand-knit clothing, and meat.

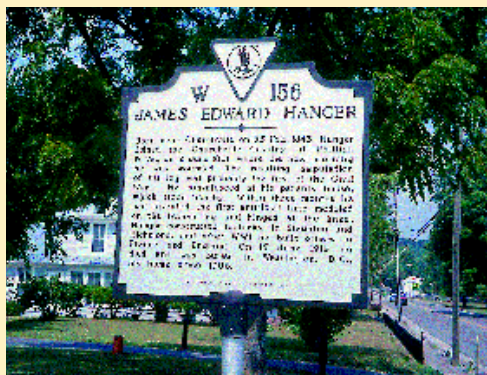
Twice a year, for the Wool Fair and the Pumpkin Fest, the place is bursting at the seams with people venturing out to get a taste of the country life. "Churchville's a great little town. It's country to the core, but also has a great sense of refinement. There are good people here and the vistas are breathtaking. The fall here is absolutely beautiful," sums up Chester.

Chester is not the first New Yorker to decide that Churchville was a special place. Back in the 1850s a school teacher named Jedediah Hotchkiss opened up an academy here. The Civil War disrupted his future, but earned him lasting fame as Confederate General Stonewall Jackson's mapmaker. After the war, Hotchkiss sold

his property in Churchville and moved into the big city of Staunton in order to pursue more lucrative opportunities.

The war brought fame of a different sort to James E. Hanger, a teenager who desperately wanted to enlist despite his youth. In early June of 1861 he latched onto a food ambulance corps taking supplies to Confederate troops in West Virginia. Hanger bedded down in a local barn and was awakened at dawn by gunfire from a nearby skirmish. The young man was jumping down from the hayloft in order to move his horse when a cannonball struck him in the leg. The severely injured youth was discovered by Yankees late that afternoon and they amputated his leg above the knee, giving him the dubious honor of being the first Civil War amputee.

When he had sufficiently recovered to return to Churchville, he sequestered himself



**The James Edward Hanger historic highway marker is located in the middle of Churchville. Hanger, the first civil war amputee, later went on to create a prosthesis company that still exists today.**

is also the scene of the **Wool Fair** during the last two weekends in April and the **Pumpkin Fest** during the last two weekends in October. For more info, check [www.chesterfarms.com](http://www.chesterfarms.com) or call 540-337-7282.

For something a little different, simply follow Rt. 250 west over the mountains into **Highland County**, the least-populated county east of the Mississippi River. By far the biggest event in Highland is the **Maple Festival**, which has been held for 44 consecutive years during two weekends in March. The event has been listed among the Southeast Tourism Society's top-20 events

## If You Go...

**T**hink outdoors and farmland when you come to visit Churchville and you won't be disappointed. **Chester Farms** is the place to be if you want homegrown products and a look at farm life. Although open year-round, the farm





**The morning coffee club at M.J. Café in Churchville: (l-r) Cliff Stogdale, Roy Collins, Riley Shiflet, and Harold Carwell.**

in his room for three months while whittling and tinkering with wood and barrel staves. At the end of his self-imposed seclusion, he walked down the stairs on the world's first artificial leg that was hinged at the knee. That freak accident led him to his life's work. His prosthesis company gained international fame and is still in existence today.

Although Hanger's company eventually had offices in all 50 states, he was all but forgotten in Churchville in the late 20th century until **Harold Carwell** swung into action. Carwell has a keen interest in history, especially about his native Churchville, and it was his drive that resulted in a state historic highway marker being erected in the middle of the village to honor Hanger.

Carwell is one of half a dozen or so retired natives who gather at M.J.'s Café, the local restaurant, every morning to discuss politics, the weather and the community. Four of the

group who gathered there for coffee one recent morning, Carwell, **Roy Collins**, **Cliff Stogdale** and **Riley Shiflet**, are bound together by a common history. All four were born the same year, went to school together and share many of the same local memories.

Like when Carwell was part of the group that launched the Churchville Volunteer Fire and Rescue Squad — the first in the county — in 1958. "We had purchased two old firetrucks from a place up in Maryland and went up to get them. One of the trucks was an open cab and it was wintertime and we 'bout froze to death bringing it home. We got back to Churchville and thought we'd turn on the siren, and the thing died right there in the middle of the road," he recollects with a laugh.

Despite the rocky beginnings, the fire and rescue department has thrived and the annual summer carnival is the high point of



**Ninety-one-year-old D. M. Houseman does yardwork on his main street residence, one of the oldest houses in Churchville.**

Churchville's year. Ninety-one-year-old **D. M. Houseman** has lived in the oldest house in the village, right on main street, for about 50 years. "The carnival is a big time and everyone sits right here in my yard for the parade," he says, as he trims the flowers and bushes along his front walk.

### **Rural Setting Is Cherished**

The parade and carnival are part of the small community atmosphere that Churchville's residents cherish. "It hasn't changed much because there's no place for industry. This is a rural setting and we like it that way," says Carwell. "It's so ordinary that it's hard to find words for it," adds Stogdale.

One of the few recent changes in the village is the completion of the new Churchville Elementary School, at a cost of \$9.5 million. Part of the old school is being used for a new western branch of the county library.

for over a decade. An important Civil War battle, McDowell, was fought in the county's high country in the spring of 1862. The battlefield remains one of the most pristine Civil War sites in the country. **McDowell Days**, held every May, commemorates that historic clash. Highland County is also known for its **local fair** in early September and its holiday celebrations in early December. For more visitor information on Highland, log on to [www.highlandcounty.org](http://www.highlandcounty.org).

Much of the county west of Churchville is part of the **George Washington National Forest**. Here hunting, fishing, hiking and mountain-biking opportunities abound. **Ramsey's Draft Wildemess Area** within the national forest offers hiking trails past stands of virgin hemlock trees. At the top of **Shenandoah Mountain** on the Augusta-Highland border is an excellent interpretive trail through a **Civil War fortification (Camp Johnson)**. The **Deerfield Ranger District of the George Washington**

**National Forest** (540-885-8028) has maps and visitor information.

Venturing to the east from Churchville brings you into the city of **Staunton** where there are plenty of bed-and-breakfast and hotel choices. A downtown **walking tour of the city's Victorian architecture** is relaxing and takes the visitor past a variety of eclectic shops and dining opportunities. Also located in downtown Staunton is the **Woodrow Wilson Birthplace and Museum**, where the nation's 28th president was born (540-885-0897 or [www.woodrowwilson.org](http://www.woodrowwilson.org)). The **Museum of American Frontier Culture** is at the edge of the city just off the junction of I-81 and I-64 (540-332-7850 or <http://frontier.vipnet.org>). This living history museum has four working farms representative of the cultures that settled the Shenandoah Valley region. ■



**Matthew Cooper** (above), a fourth-grader at the new school, is quite proud of Churchville Elementary. "It is peaceful and you don't get that as much in the city. Also, it has air conditioning," he says.

From the youngest like Cooper to the old-timers like Houseman, and from newcomers like Chester to natives like Mrs. Strickler and the coffee club bunch, Churchville is the place to live.

"What can you say?" says Shiflet, as he drains his morning cup of coffee, "It's the neatest little village in the Valley." ■