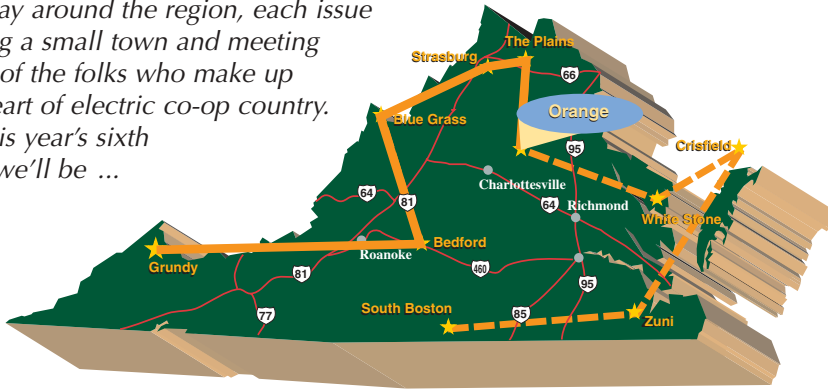


by Jeff Poole,
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2003, we're making our way around the region, 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 sixth stop, we'll be ...



Down Home in **Orange**

Sandwiched in an area of high growth, this traditional community's motto is "sweet living, steady progress."

It doesn't take too long to realize that Orange is a traditional town, representative of a time when life was simpler, people were nicer and everyone spoke to you, whether they knew you or not.

A traditional Main Street community, Orange is a town steeped in history with the unique ability to serve up a steaming cup of nostalgia as well. Sure, the stoplights are modern, the traffic through the town's pri-

mary intersection can be troublesome, and there's a big green coffee cup that lights up the night over a popular eatery, but Orange is definitely a town that offers a glimpse into the past from a 21st-century window.

Orange originated as and remains a courthouse town. When the county was formed in 1734, it stretched from its present eastern boundary 15 miles west of Fredericksburg infinitely west to the Mississippi River and north to the Great Lakes. A county now 342 square miles once included the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky and West Virginia. The town became the county's judicial seat in 1749, when Culpeper County carved itself from Orange, leaving the courthouse location



JEFF POOLE PHOTOS

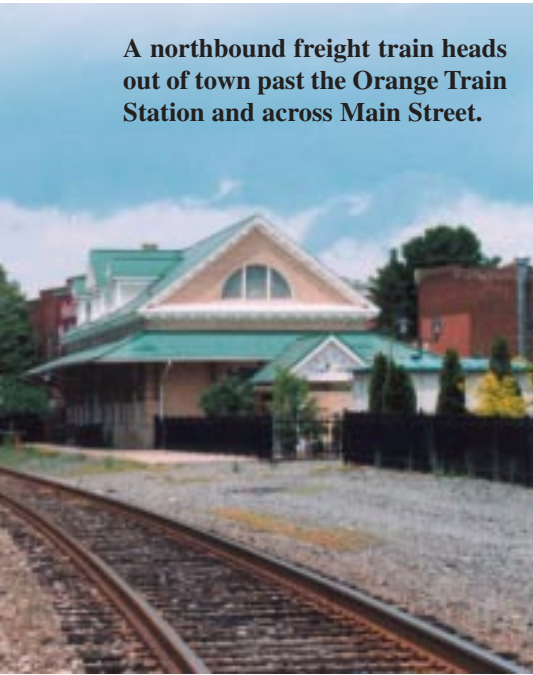


Jimmy Darnell assists Louise Colvin at his nursery, The Garden Patch.



Mayor Ray Lonick looks upward toward the historic Sparks building in town.

A northbound freight train heads out of town past the Orange Train Station and across Main Street.



of Raccoon Ford far from the center of the county.

Orange has enjoyed a front-row seat on American history, watching a British raid on nearby Antioch Church and Lafayette's march through the county during the American Revolution, and viewing countless Civil War battles, including the nearby Mine Run campaign and Wilderness battles. General Robert E. Lee and many of his staff worshiped at historic St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in town and a cavalry battle took to the town's streets in 1862.

Just minutes from town lived James Madison, the fourth U.S. president. And 12th President Zachary Taylor was born 15 miles



June Robinson, a local rescue squad volunteer, looks across Main Street.



Looking east on Main Street.

from Orange. Colonial governor Alexander Spotswood and state governors James Barbour, James Kemper and J. Lindsay Almond all have called Orange County home.

Orange is a town defined by its history and much of that history is defined by the town's location. These ingredients marinate the town with a desirable appeal and a traditional feel that make it both a great place to visit and an enjoyable place to live.

"Orange is a well-kept secret," **Jimmy Darnell** says, sort of hoping that secret doesn't get out too much. Darnell runs a nursery in town and has lived in Orange most of his life. "It's safe and quiet and has most every-

thing we need. We're really lucky. We're between these areas of such high growth. And I don't envy that. But we have a good quality of life. It's peaceful."

The Heat Is On

Development pressures Orange from nearly every direction. To the east, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County creep ever closer to Orange County's tranquility along Route 3 West. To the north, Culpeper County is burgeoning with a Northern Virginia workforce that is moving ever further south. To Orange's west,



Orange Downtown Alliance Director Jay Harrison looks west on Main Street.

If You Go...

Any visit to Orange should also include a trip to nearby **Montpelier**. The lifelong home of fourth President and Father of the Constitution James Madison, Montpelier is a National Trust for Historic Preservation property located just five minutes from Orange. The 2,700-acre estate highlights the accomplishments of Madison and his wife Dolley, the first "First Lady." In addition to the restored mansion, Montpelier features a **formal garden, an old-growth landmark forest, a slave cemetery and a post-Civil War log home built by freed slave George Gilmore**. Montpelier is located on Route 20, four miles west of Orange at Montpelier Station. Call (540) 672-2728 or log on to www.montpelier.org.

For still more Madison or glimpses into other elements of Orange's historic past, visit the **James Madison Museum** at 129 Caroline Street in Orange. The nation's first museum commemorating Madison, the museum regularly exhibits highlights of the fourth President's life and times as well as describes his contributions to America's political system. Additionally, **the museum features the "Hall of Transportation and Agriculture"** with historic tools, farming machinery and an 18th century cube house." The museum also features rotating exhibits that highlight various elements of local and regional history, from displaying antique teddy bears, dolls and toys of area residents, to a current exhibit featuring the contributions of local women to the



The Arts Center in Orange offers a variety of shows and instructional courses.

countless farms in the area. The museum can be reached by calling (540) 672-1776 or logging onto its Web site at www.jamesmadisonmus.org.

Just down the road in Gordonsville is the **Civil War Museum at the Exchange Hotel**. In 1860, the hotel offered a stopping place for travelers of the Virginia Central Railway. But two years later, the Army of the Confederacy turned the hotel into a Civil War receiving hospital where wounded soldiers were transported in by rail and treated at the elegant hotel. The museum features **Civil War medicine displays, correspondence from sick and dying soldiers to their loved ones, and annually hosts medical living history displays offering glimpses into the state of mid-19th-century med-**

icine. The museum is located off of Route 15 south in Gordonsville and can be reached by calling (540) 832-2944 or by visiting its Web site at www.hgiexchange.org.

The Orange Train Station is an architectural and aesthetic highlight of any trip to downtown Orange. Built in the early 20th century in a colonial revival style, the train station currently houses the county's department of tourism and serves as its visitor's bureau. With passenger services discontinued in the 1970s, the station fell into disrepair until the town renovated it through a federal grant coupled with a local commitment. The station is located at 122 East Main Street and can be reached by calling toll free 1-877-222-8072, or logging onto the Internet at www.visitocva.com.

On weekends, visit the **Orange Farmers' Market** located near the intersection of Route 20 and Route 15 on the Orange Volunteer Fire Company fairgrounds. Local vendors offer a variety of homegrown vegetables, baked goods and handcrafts. The market runs from May through September. A Wednesday market is also held in the afternoon in Taylor Park on Main Street. For more information, contact the Orange Downtown Alliance at (540) 672-2540.

The Orange Downtown Alliance also hosts a **summer concert series in Taylor Park** featuring a variety of local musical talent. Upcoming concerts are scheduled for July 10, August 7 and August 21.

The Orange County Fair, a celebration of agriculture, is hosted annually at Montpelier, home of James Madison, who Thomas Jefferson proclaimed "the best farmer in the world." The fair is held **July 25-27**. ■

Charlottesville and Albemarle County residents retreat from their growth toward the peaceful borders of the county.

Darnell's well-kept secret is getting out.

In a town of just more than 4,100 people, Orange is recognized for its slower pace and simple lifestyle. The town's motto is even "sweet living, steady progress." Nothing fancy. Not too much progress, but just enough.

That progress is immediately apparent at the town's primary intersection of Main Street and Madison Road. Heavy earthmoving and construction equipment renovates the town's 1865 Italianate courthouse. Across town, a new middle school is under construction and is halfway completed. Downtown, a new bakery and jewelry store have opened and a popular dance studio, the Orange School for Performing Arts, is turning the town's original fire station into a community theater.

An Eye Toward the Future

"This is a town that's interested in its future," Orange Downtown Alliance Executive Director **Jay Harrison** notes. "The town is traditional, but not complacent."

Even with all the growth and development pressures from neighboring communities, Orange still manages to provide that

simple lifestyle and quality of life its residents expect.

“People are still so friendly,” **June Robinson** explains. Robinson, a long-time resident, also volunteers with the local rescue squad. “People don’t even know each other and they speak. It’s definitely a southern, country town.”

Letitia Franklin agrees. She taught school for more than 30 years and spends much of her time now in community service.

“This is a nice, quiet and aesthetic community. It’s respectful of its heritage and traditions,” she says. “It’s a good community to live and raise a family in and retire in.”

“This is a town that gives people a sense of ‘neighborhood,’ ” Mayor **Ray Lonick** adds. “Across America, downtowns and neighborhoods disappear and people grow impersonal. But Orange has a core — the downtown — and that brings people into town and helps them get to know and recognize a lot of people.”

In fact, many of the town’s amenities are within an easy morning walk. The post office and one of half-a-dozen banks are at the west end of the street. Behind the post office are the town’s offices. The old courthouse presides over the middle of town, across from the county offices. Divided by Route 15, the east end of Main Street features a restored early 20th-century train station (that serves as the county’s visitors bureau) and the dynamic Arts Center in Orange.

Anchored in the Arts

Harrison notes the town is anchored on either end with fine-arts establishments — the dance studio on the town’s west end, the arts center, with its regular shows and instructional courses, at the other.

A short walk north on Madison Road opens the door to a variety of eating establishments, the library and the requisite small-town businesses and shops.

“I like walking down the street and going into the hardware store and not just asking where I can find something, but having someone take me to it and find it,” Lonick notes. “You find that in a small town like Orange.”

It’s that small-town, down-home feel that draws thousands of people to Orange annually. Tourism director **Karon Keith** says Orange offers visitors a sort of nostalgia, where they can enjoy modern conveniences in a setting reminiscent of the town of their childhood.

“Many people come to visit from Northern Virginia to get away from the hustle and bustle of a bigger town,” Keith explains. “They like the tranquility. They

like the pace. Sometimes, they like to come and just do nothing but relax.”

Orange can appeal to whatever taste a traveler has. If they're interested in history, they've come to the right place. Within town, there's a historic-building walking tour and the James Madison Museum. Five minutes west on Route 20 is the historic Montpelier estate, home to James Madison. A 15-minute drive to Gordonsville brings travelers to the Gordonsville Civil War Museum at the Exchange Hotel, a former Civil War receiving hospital. A 20-minute drive east on Route 20 reveals the rolling

countryside of the Wilderness Civil War battlefield.

If a traveler is interested in the arts, there are the aforementioned studios in town as well as a prominent, nationally known sculptor who lives and works on Main Street. Other art galleries are only a 15-minute drive from town.

An Ideal Location

Additionally, Orange County is the state's second-largest producer of grapes and two nationally recognized wineries are available for tastings and tours just up the

road in Barboursville. “Orange is in the middle of a lot of things,” Mayor Lonick notes. “People can do anything they want to do or go anywhere they want to go — except the ocean — within an hour or an hour and a half. This is the ideal location.”

But for those who get to town and stay in one of five bed-and-breakfasts or its new award-winning hotel, there's plenty to do and see in town as well. A morning cup of coffee at Not the Same Old Grind is always a good way to start the day. Enjoying a fresh pastry or muffin from the nearby Downtown Bakery is a good compliment to that cup of coffee. The James Madison Museum is just a short walk away, where an exhibit currently highlights the accomplishments of women on the farm in this agriculturally based community. Nearby, enjoy a hamburger at Jean's Café or ride over to the Dairy Korner for a lunch special. If it's Tuesday, get the chicken fried steak special with the white gravy. Green or butter beans and mashed potatoes with gravy come with it. Spend the rest of the afternoon antiquing or working off lunch by taking the town's walking tour. If it's Saturday, stop by the Orange Farmers' Market for fresh vegetables, baked goods or handmade crafts from local vendors.

“Orange may be a simple town,” Keith notes, “but it sure isn't boring.” ■