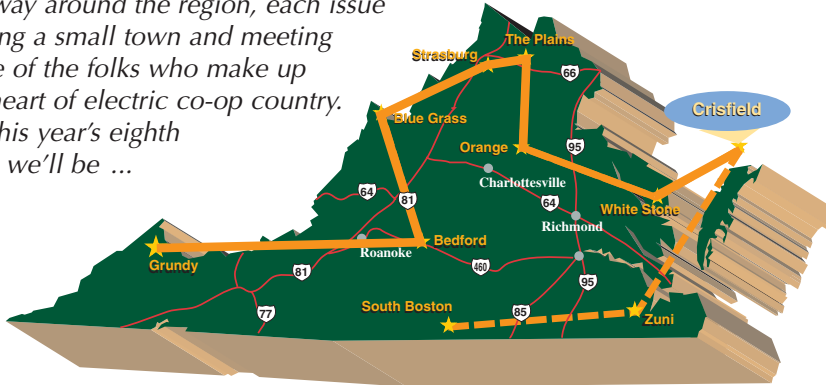


## DOWN HOME SERIES

by Jason Rhodes,  
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 eighth stop, we'll be ...



## Down Home in Crisfield

Crab is king in the “Seafood Capital of the World.”

Asked to sum up the small town of Crisfield, Maryland, in one word, Crisfield Area Chamber of Commerce Office Manager **Valerie Mason** obliges: “Crabby.”

No, that’s not the general atmosphere in this fishing village of 2,500, but crab pro-

cessing is one of the major industries that helped build the town’s economy in the 1800s and early 1900s, earning it the nickname “Seafood Capital of the World.”

Located at the southernmost point of Maryland in Somerset

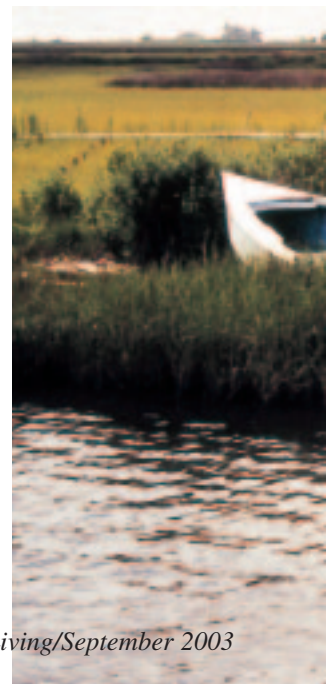
County on the Eastern Shore, the town pays homage to its heritage by including the crab on everything from its water towers and street signs to its police uniforms and official seal. Even Crisfield High School gets into the tradition, including crabs on its band uniforms and paying tribute to all things crustacean with a large crab monument just outside its front doors. The monument represents the school’s mascot, the Crabber.

While a strong connection to seafood is inherent in most small towns along the Chesapeake Bay, Crisfield owes most of its success in this area to its namesake, John Woodland Crisfield. As

JASON RHODES PHOTOS



Crisfield Area Chamber of Commerce Office Manager Valerie Mason answers visitors’ questions and helps coordinate local festivals at the chamber’s office on West Main Street.







**Barges are loaded down with oyster shells at the Crisfield City Dock in front of the Captain's Galley Restaurant, a popular waterfront dining spot.**

president of the Eastern Shore Railroad shortly after the Civil War, he extended the tracks into the fishing village of Somers Cove.

Easy access to refrigerated shipping cars led to a boom in the export of seafood. In 1867, residents of Somers Cove and the adjacent area known as Annemessex joined together to create a single town,



**A crab monument in front of Crisfield High School is a tribute to the school's mascot, the Crabber.**



**This portion of Maryland 413 known in Crisfield as "The Strip" serves as the city's main drag and gathering area. On any given evening, dozens of cars cruise the highway with no particular destination, beginning at one end, making their way to the cul-de-sac at the Crisfield City Dock, then starting all over again**



named Crisfield in honor of the man who helped build the area's economy.

Popular early exports included crabs, clams, waterfowl, terrapin and most predominately oysters, about one million gallons of which were shipped daily from Crisfield through the early 1900s. The southernmost portion of Crisfield is built on a bed of oyster shells, piled out into the Chesapeake to give early seafood processors more solid ground on which to build their packing houses.

In 1915, 88 seafood processors lined Crisfield's

**A crane makes his temporary home among a few relics left to die in the marshes of Jenkins Creek.**

shores. Legend has it a person could walk from one end of Crisfield Harbor to the other using the decks of various boats vying for positions to dock and sell their daily catches. Today, a decline in crabs and oysters in the Chesapeake Bay has left fewer than a dozen local seafood packers and only a handful of working shanties.

That's not to say the seafood industry is dead in Crisfield. Hundreds of watermen still go out early most mornings during crabbing season and return later in the day with their catches just as their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did throughout the past century.

Each Memorial Day weekend during the Soft Shell Spring Fair, the Crisfield Area Chamber of Commerce and Crisfield Lions and Lioness/Lions clubs induct four locals into the Watermen's Hall of Fame, paying homage to the hard work that goes into making a living on the water.

"The Soft Shell Spring Fair serves as a





But that's nothing compared to Crisfield's biggest annual event, the National Hard Crab Derby, which draws about 10,000 every Labor Day weekend. Serving as a homecoming for many Crisfield residents since its inception in 1948, the event includes such traditional fare as a carnival, fireworks and a Main Street parade.

However, Crisfield adds a twist to its festival. Crab cooking and picking contests, a boat-docking competition and even a Miss Crustacean beauty pageant all lead up to the main event: a 350-crab race down a specially designed ramp known as Crab Cake Track.

While such events welcome visitors, Crisfielders know who Crisfielders are. In the local vernacular, strangers are either "foreigners" (just passing through) or "come-heres" (moving in), and once a "come-herer" is in Crisfield long enough to be recognized, his or her name will probably come up at least once or twice among the crowd at Gordon's Confectionery.

Founded in 1927 on Main Street near Ninth Street, Gordon's is the place to find watermen and other locals stopping in for a quick bite and a cup of coffee. Its official opening time is "quarter to 4-ish" a.m.

Gordon's is said to be the birthplace of the chocolate zip, a confection consisting of milk, crushed ice and chocolate syrup, and the fact that the restaurant championed such flavors as cherry, vanilla and ammonia Coke long before at least two of those flavors came in bottles is well documented. Those flavors are still available at Gordon's today, hand-mixed from the fountain as they always have been.

Most Wednesdays, **Charlie Adams** stands just outside Gordon's as he has nearly every week for the past 64 years. At age 69, he may well be the world's oldest living paperboy, hawking the *Crisfield Times* from that location since he was five. He signs autographs for those who ask politely.



kickoff for our summer events," Mason says. "We like to celebrate our seafood."

The chamber does just that the third Wednesday of every July during the J. Millard Tawes Crab and Clam Bake. Named for the late Crisfield native who was Maryland's 54th governor, the event offers an all-you-can-eat sampling of local seafood from steamed clams to hard crabs. Since its inauguration in 1977, the bake has become one of the premier political events in Maryland, serving as the official beginning of a number of campaigns every even-numbered year. Every bake day, the town's population nearly triples.

"We max out at about 5,000 participants," says Crisfield City Councilman **Daniel Thompson**, who has co-chaired the bake for the past 14 years.



(From top) 1. Founded in 1962, Somers Cove Marina serves as a temporary home for many boaters in the summer and a year-round home for a number of vessels. 2. Crisfield Heritage Foundation Executive Director Chris Tyler points out the details of an early aerial photograph of Crisfield on display at the J. Millard Tawes Museum and Visitors' Center. 3. Gordon's Confectionery co-owner Kenny Evans makes change at the register of Crisfield's oldest surviving restaurant.



"I've met a lot of nice people while I've been selling papers," he says. "I've signed a lot of autographs."

So many, in fact, that city officials have designated the corner of Ninth and Main as "Charlie Adams Corner" in his honor.

Adams is also caretaker of the Crisfield Veterans' Cemetery, where an original E.M. Viquesney "Spirit of the American Doughboy" statue stands watch over the graves of fallen Crisfielders from the Civil War to present day. Adams keeps the cemetery neat every day of the year, but one day is particularly special.

The week before Memorial Day, Adams follows in the footsteps of his father, Upshur, who began the tradition of placing American flags and roses on the graves of each veteran. His mission: to make the cemetery look its best for the annual Memorial Day ceremonies held by the local American Legion and VFW posts and auxiliaries. He hasn't failed yet.

Like Adams, most Crisfielders value hard work. But in the evening, many let their hair down, relaxing at home or cruising "The Strip."

By day, "The Strip" looks like about a three-mile stretch of Maryland 413 leading to the Crisfield City Dock. By night, dozens of headlights line this road, making the same circuit through Downtown Crisfield hundreds of times. Drivers and passengers chit chat, listen to the radio or remain on the lookout for friends or potential friends who might also be on The Strip, with no particular destination in mind.

At twilight, The Strip is the only road leading to the City Dock, the best spot in town to catch a glimpse of the sun setting on the Chesapeake Bay.

Of course, driving is just one way to get to Crisfield. The presence of the Crisfield-Somerset County Airport off Jacksonville Road and Somers Cove Marina in the heart of Downtown Crisfield makes the town accessible by land, sea and air.

While Crisfielders enjoy their small part of the Earth, they are not afraid to share it with others, whether they be "foreigners" or "come-heres."

Thompson explains: "I've done a lot of traveling and seen a lot of places, big cities and small towns. Crisfield has something unique. We've got a small-town atmosphere. You get up in the morning and you just feel good."

And it would be a shame not to share something like that. ■



## If You Go...

### Crisfield Heritage Foundation

Through its holdings, the Crisfield Heritage Foundation preserves the history of Crisfield and its most famous residents, including the late Lem and Steve Ward, collectively known as the Ward Brothers, two of the world's most renowned decoy carvers.

The **Ward Brothers' restored workshop** on Sackertown Road is one of the heritage foundation's major holdings, along with the **J. Millard Tawes Museum and Visitors Center on Ninth Street**. Housing a collection of artifacts from Crisfield's maritime heritage, the museum serves as the foundation's home base.

From there, during the summer, visitors may take a tour of the town's most historic locales aboard the **Crisfield Heritage Trolley**. One popular tour site is the **J. Millard Tawes Library**, a foundation-owned research facility housed inside Tawes' restored 1887 birth home on Asbury Avenue. Tawes was a powerful early proponent of civil rights as the first Southern governor to promote equal accommodation in his home state in the late 1950s.

The museum that bears his name is also the place to obtain permits to kayak the **Cedar Island Marsh Sanctuary**, one of the best places around for marsh life photography.

The **Somerset County Tourism** desk inside the museum provides visitors with information about attractions in surrounding areas. A list of local charter fishing boat captains is available upon request. **For more information, call (410) 968-2501.**

### Somers Cove Marina and Janes Island State Park

With room for both transient and permanent boaters, the 450-slip **Somers Cove Marina** is one

The restored birth home of the late Gov. J. Millard Tawes on Asbury Avenue serves as a library and research facility containing the governor's papers from his many years in Maryland politics.

of two recreational facilities in Crisfield maintained by the **Maryland Department of Natural Resources**. The other, **Janes Island State Park**, serves as a mecca for campers, hikers and kayakers looking for a rustic getaway where water and forest are just footsteps away from each other.

The marina offers fuel, electric and laundry facilities, and access to local shops and restaurants. It serves as a home port for many fishermen and women during the fall fishing season from late October through November in the Tangier Sound. **For more information, call (410) 968-0925.**

The park is home to Maryland's first terrapin sanctuary and includes an overnight area for recreational vehicles. **For more information, call (410) 968-1565.**

### Crisfield Area Chamber of Commerce Festivals

The **Crisfield Area Chamber of Commerce** celebrates each summer with a trio of seafood festivals, starting with the **Soft Shell Spring Fair** at the Crisfield City Dock each Memorial Day weekend. Events include arts, crafts, musical entertainment and seafood. Admission is free.

During the third Wednesday of every July, the chamber sponsors the **J. Millard Tawes Crab and Clam Bake** at Somers Cove Marina. Admission is \$30 per person. Advance ticket purchases may be made by phone and are recommended.

The chamber rounds out its event season with the **National Hard Crab Derby at Somers Cove Marina** each Labor Day weekend. Admission to the derby grounds is \$4 per adult, \$2 per child 12 and under. Separate admissions may apply for some events. **For more information, call (410) 968-2500. ■**