

DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2004, 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 ninth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN EMPORIA

by Teresa Welch, Contributing Writer

If you ask anyone who lives in the community, they will tell you it's the people who make the City of Emporia and Greensville County special.

Although history is unclear as to the origins of the communities' names, we know who established the character of Emporia/Greensville, at least the way we know them today.

Eugene Bloom, known by everyone as "the nicest man I ever met" did much not only to make life better for his family, but for his community.

During World War II, Bloom earned two Bronze Stars, two Purple Hearts, a Silver Star for "gallantry in action," and two field promotions.

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 5,700

LAND AREA: 6.6 square miles

INCORPORATED: 1967

ELEVATION: 100 feet

FUN FACT: The towns of Hicksford and Belfield merged in 1887 to form Emporia, which was chartered in 1967.



The decorated war hero served his community with the same dedication. He founded the annual Virginia Peanut Festival, which attracts about 20,000 people annually, served as president of the local chamber of commerce, and was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Founders Award, among many other accolades.

Bloom also founded Greenville Memorial Hospital, a non-profit hospital, by rallying community groups and businesses to get everyone to donate money that was taken out of their paychecks. This hospital has become



Eugene Bloom

The Greenville County Courthouse is listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

Cooperative Living/October 2004



Recruiter Sgt. Lee Cohen of the U.S. Marine Corps, left, and Captain Todd Anderson of the Emporia Police Department lay wreaths at the foot of a memorial in Veterans Memorial Park to honor local war heroes.

Southern Virginia Medical Center, which opened a \$35 million, state-of-the-art facility last December.

He was the founder of the Little Senators and other local youth baseball leagues, such as the Emporia Nationals, who were the champions of their league in 1950. The team was a farm club for the original Washington Senators and a member of the Class D Virginia League.

The 92-year-old died in 2001, but his legacy lives on in such community leaders as **Robert C. "Bobby" Wrenn**, after whom the local campus of Southside Community College was named.



Bobby Wrenn

Wrenn has been clerk of the court for more than 30 years and is known as "the most photographed man in Emporia."

He has set the example for leadership by taking charge when he sees something needs to be done, whether it is serving for the past 20 years as bloodmobile chairman and donating 183 pints of blood, or serving on the local chamber of commerce board for more than 20 years.

Wrenn belongs to almost all of the local civic organizations and helped found some of them, such as the Meherrin Ruritan Club. He has served in many capacities, including past national president.

His accolades, including lifetime achievement awards, are too numerous to list, although he is proudest of being an Eagle Scout with 54 merit badges.

Wrenn started the local bicycle club, which sponsors the Great Peanut Ride and Bike Tour that has grown to include about 1,200 bicyclists annually.

The Emporia-Greenville Historical Museum, built in 1902, houses artifacts of the community.

When the Virginia Peanut Festival became too large for the chamber to manage, Wrenn gathered up a team to put on the event.

Bloom and Wrenn are only two of the many people who have made Emporia-Greenville a great place to live.

A Caring Community

Mothers on a Mission, the mothers of local service personnel, decorated a fence in front of the old Emporia Elementary School with yellow ribbons, photographs, flags, flowers and wishes of good luck.

The Fence of Honor says a lot about the community – it says that a lot of people care about their neighbors and their families.

The area hosts many festivals and events that draw large crowds.

For 26 years, the Virginia Pork Festival has been combining pork dishes with continuous live music from multiple stages, attracting 15,000 hungry people annually.

The Great Peanut Ride and Bike Tour, for the past 26 years, has been drawing more than 1,200 bicyclists from all over the country. About 300 volunteers help with the event sponsored by the local bicycle club.

For the past 26 years the Meherrin River Arts Council has brought such stars as Crystal Gayle, Lee Greenwood, Barbara Mandrell, Glen Campbell, Dionne Warwick, The Temptations, the Oak Ridge Boys and others to town.

Life in this charming rural community centers largely on what the people here feel is important – for example, family. It isn't unusual to see a child and his dog playing or a mother pushing a baby stroller or the locals gathered at Anderson's Pharmacy, eating breakfast and reading the *Independent-Messenger*, the only local newspaper, which was started in 1896.



IF YOU GO ...

The best way to explore Emporia is on foot. Like the rest of Virginia, Emporia is also rich in history.

The recently renovated 1781 **Greensville County Courthouse** on South Main Street is the focal point of downtown Emporia and is one of many local buildings on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

On its grounds are three markers – the Confederate memorial featuring a statue of a Confederate soldier, a German cannon from World War I and the local clerk's office.

The main room in the old **Greensville Bank** is sheathed with highly decorative stamped sheet metal produced by the renowned local sheet-metal manufacturer and artist H.T. Klugel.

Nearby, the **Masonic Temple**, erected in 1905, is a highly visible Colonial Revival building near **Village View** (ca. 1795), a federal-style home with significance in the War Between the States. Directions to tours of these and other historic sites and markers can be arranged through the Chamber of Commerce, (434) 634-9441.

Every year red, white and blue flowers are laid at the foot of a marker in **Veterans Memorial Park** honoring local war heroes. The park also serves as a site for special events.

Nearby, the **Meherrin River Park** features a trail for bikers, walkers and joggers along the Meherrin River.

The **Emporia Post Office** has a mural painted in 1941 depicting a working sawmill and nearby, the **Emporia-Greensville Historical Museum**, built in 1902, houses items related to the community. The architecture is unique Queen Anne style.

History buffs might want to check out the 1869

BOB WRENN PHOTO



The Great Peanut Ride and Bike tour attracts more than 1,200 bicyclists a year. The four-day ride kicks off the Virginia Peanut Festival, which draws more than 20,000 people.

Emporia Cemetery on Brunswick Avenue – which has a common grave of Northern soldiers killed in a skirmish during the War Between the States – or the many markers along the streets noting local history.

Main Street is the center of revitalization efforts. It is a mix of professional services, retail and commercial businesses, many of which are historic or have architecturally significant structures.

Old homes are always of interest. Cross the railroad on **Hicksford Avenue** and enjoy the varying architecture of the homes. Fine examples of Victorian, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles predominate the neighborhood.

The **Klugel building** on East Atlantic Street, built in 1902, is distinctive for its metal front, while nearby, the **Chamber of Commerce** is located in a historic train depot, circa 1900.

There are also some beautiful old churches within walking distance. The **Main Street Methodist Church** was built in 1910 and reflects the Romanesque Revival style, which incorporates semi-circular arches and brick or stone. The stained-glass windows are among the most beautiful in Southside Virginia.

Monumental Methodist Church on Southampton Street was erected in 1922 and is an excellent example of Classical Revival-style architecture. ■

The pace of life may be relaxed, but the community's central location along the eastern seaboard places it within a day's drive of over 50 metropolitan areas and nearly two-thirds of the United States' population.

Gateway to the South

Positioned along the Virginia-North Carolina border on the crossroads of I-95 and U.S. Route 58, the region is within 90 miles of three of *Money Magazine's* "Best Places to Live" – Richmond, Hampton Roads and Raleigh.

The community is an ideal stopover point for thousands of travelers on Interstate 95, as well for those heading to the coast on U.S. 58. Much of the local retail economy is, therefore, strongly tied to the travel industry. Emporia was recently ranked among the top five cities in the nation for retail sales per capita.

The area offers nearly 1,000 motel rooms and many national restaurants have located here.

Emporia City Manager **George Morrison III** is impressed with the community spirit.

Whether residents are rallying in support of the local basketball team or trying to pick up the remains from a disaster – people pull together, he said.

The local Greensville County High School Eagles basketball team ended the season last year with their only loss, finishing 29-1. But the community cheered for them and came out to greet them in the middle of the night after their loss – because to the community the team is – and always has been – a winner.

"When Hurricane Isabel hit Emporia the area was left devastated. People were without power for several days – but they cleaned out their freezers, pulled out the grills and held neighborhood cookouts," Morrison says. It was simply amazing to see how everyone pitched in and worked together for the good of the community.

"People lent generators to their neighbors or helped them clean up debris in their yards. Everyone worked together as a team and Emporia recovered from the devastation a lot

quicker than some other localities with about the same amount of damage.”

Morrison invites anyone traveling through the area to get off at the Emporia exit and explore the downtown area to enjoy some of the community’s local history.

A Proud Heritage

About 16,000 people call Emporia-Greenville home and are proud of its heritage.

Historic events occurring in the county since its formation include General Cornwallis and his army marching through in May 1781, and General Tarleton raiding throughout the region with small skirmishes.

During the War Between the States, Confederate General Wade Hampton spent much time defending the railroad and railroad bridge that crossed through the county.

Prominent persons generally associated with Emporia-Greenville are John Y. Mason, legislator, twice Secretary of the Navy, Attorney General and Minister to France; William McKendree, first American-born bishop of the Methodist Church; Henry Tazwell, U.S. Senator; and John R. Chambliss, a general in the Army of the Confederacy.

Now, the most notable residents are NASCAR drivers Elliott and Hermie Sadler. Elliott has twice been named NASCAR USG Person of the Year for his fundraising efforts for autism and the Victory Junction Gang.

Working to Stay Competitive

Greenville County has been working to stay competitive. Its Geographic Information System has been completed using aerial photography to compile a base map with about 80 different data layers – information needed in case of an emergency – which will be placed on the Internet.

A new Jarratt Water Treatment Plant has been completed; Love’s County Store is building a facility off exit 4 from I-95; a truck-driving school is planned for development in cooperation with Southside Virginia Community College and an adult-education center will offer a campus for the college, a workforce development center and a business incubator to foster the development of commercial and industrial activities.

A group of community leaders recently established the Emporia Downtown Development Association to promote preservation and use of the downtown district.

“Greenville County is committed to improving the quality of life for its citizens, as is demonstrated by the projects being completed as well as those being planned,” says County Administrator **Dave Whittington**.

For more information about the Emporia-Greenville County area, visit these Web sites:

- www.ci.emporia.va.us
- www.greenvillecountyva.gov
- www.emporiagreenvilleidc.com ■