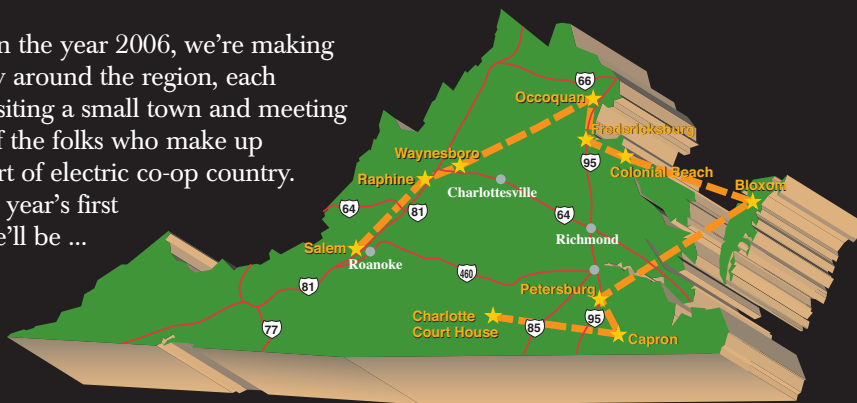


DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2006, 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 first stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

SALEM

by Meg Hibbert, Contributing Writer

AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: 24,747 as of the 2000 census

LAND AREA: 14.31 square miles

FOUNDED: 1802

ELEVATION: 1,075 feet

FUN FACT: During World War I Salem won national prominence as one of the few towns in the country in which every child owned at least one War Saving Stamp. Due to fuel shortages, churches suspended Sunday night services, but the mayor called on residents to pray silently at the sound of church and fire bells during a lights-off moment at nine o'clock each night. Fifteen Salem men were killed in World War I.

People joke about needing a passport to get into Salem, Va.

They're not far wrong. If more people knew what an ideal community it is, everybody would want to come.

In charming neighborhoods throughout the city nestled in the Roanoke Valley and surrounded by the Blue Ridge and Appa-

lachian mountains, time seems to stand still. A hundred years ago children played safely outside their homes, neighbors knew each others' names and talked across backyard fences. They still do.

Children ride their bicycles to school. Adults walk and jog along the sidewalks at 10 at night.

Grown children move back to Salem to buy houses next door to their families – or frequently, move into the houses where their parents used to live.

The city spends its money the way most jurisdictions wish they could: first on their children's education, then fiscal improvements, and recreation and beautification.



MEG HIBBERT PHOTO



BRIAN HOFFMAN PHOTOS



Four-year-old Telia Harris enjoys a sunny winter day at one of Salem's well-known landmarks, the duck pond at Lake Spring Park. High school students have their prom pictures taken at the park's gazebo, and it's a popular spot for outdoor weddings.



In the fall, life in Salem revolves around Friday-night Spartan football, when families tailgate on a scale usually seen at colleges.

Many compare the 204-year-old community to Mayberry, Andy Griffith's television show hometown. Although Salem is 25,000 people instead of the much smaller Mayberry, Salem residents are still getting their hair cut by Floyd the barber, who cut their daddy's hair and even their granddaddy's. **Floyd Howell** started barbering 51 years ago. He and his wife **Sue** cut men's and boys' hair exclusively.

"Salem's just a friendly, safe community to live in, with a great educational system," brags Mayor Carl E. "Sonny" Tarpley (left), himself a product of the schools. "The school system, Salem City Council, the city staff, all work together as a team ... I can just keep going on about Salem."

Make no mistake. It's Floyd and Sue's Barber Shop, not a salon.

"I'm not going to change. I've never, ever, put stylist on my sign," Floyd says emphatically.

It's not just the adults who appreciate Salem. "Salem is really small and exclusive. You feel really welcome," says Salem High School ninth-grader **Claire Allison**. "There's a lot of places for friends to hang out," adds classmate, **Amanda Giles**.

"Salem is about family," continues high school secretary **Trina Bateman**, who graduated from the same school and met her future husband, **Richard**, there. "It's a very small hometown where your children do come first. At events downtown, there is always something geared for children."

Ask anybody in the Roanoke Valley what Salem means to them and the answer is usually football, the duck pond and the Salem Fair, that attracts more than 100,000 people for 10 days in June and July.

The duck pond is what people call Lake Spring Park. People of all ages delight in feeding bread to the ducks and visiting gulls during the winter. High school kids get their pictures made in the gazebo before prom and couples get married there.

On a bright winter day, four-year-old **Telia Harris** feeds ducks at the pond, with her mother, **Glenda**.



MEG HIBBERT PHOTOS



MEG HIBBERT PHOTO

"I think there is a big difference in being snotty and being proud," says Howard "Mooch" Semones, owner of Spartan Silk Screen. Semones outfits his proud fellow Salemites in their beloved maroon-and-white Salem jackets.

"I like the warmth of the community, that it's close knit, has good schools, is small enough you can be anywhere you want to be in 10 minutes but not feel like you are living on top of your neighbors," Glenda Harris adds.

There's no denying Salem is a sports city and proud of it. In the fall life revolves around Friday-night football, when families tailgate on a scale usually seen at colleges – but without alcohol – before cheering on the champion Salem High School Spartans in city-owned Salem Stadium.

City limits are marked by signs proclaiming championships. The most recent is state football AA Division 4 in 2004, and at press time, the team was vying to make that back-to-back championships. Others include state basketball, girls soccer and volleyball, tennis, softball and golf. Salem High also won the 2002-03 Virginia High School AA Scholastic Bowl. In fact, the school wins so many championships, the city put up new signs last year that leave room for future winning years.

Salem also has the Salem Avalanche, a fast-A affiliate of the Houston Astros. The

city hosts a slew of national college sports tournaments for Division III football and men's basketball and Division II softball.

One of the first things new residents do is head to **Howard "Mooch" Semones'** Spartan Silk Screen to buy their maroon-and-white Salem jackets.

"Salem people are proud people. That's why I have put hundreds of Salem jackets on these proud Salemites," Semones said. "*The Roanoker Magazine* once wrote Salemites have a snotty attitude. I think there is a big difference in being snotty and being proud," emphasizes Semones, who graduated from what then was Andrew Lewis High School.



MEG HIBBERT PHOTOS



"It's a community with a good sense of its roots," says John Long (left), director of the Salem Museum. He's been collecting, cataloging and telling people about the history since 1998 in the 1845 Williams-Brown House that houses the museum.

Stand on almost any hill in Salem and you'll see the brick buildings of Roanoke College, set in the heart of the small city.



Customers visit with him and wife **Beth** and admire the rubber tree that twists and climbs completely around the inside of the small shop, a variety of caged birds, and Peaches and Claudia – two Shih Tzu puppies who snuffle around customers' toes as they come in.

This day a steady stream of Salemites flows through the store. "What I like is the small-town feeling," says **Susan Bowles**, who's lived in Salem all her life. "Everybody knows everybody. I can't imagine living anywhere else."

Many of Salem's residents are second- and third-generation Salemites, like **Tammy Wickham**. "I grew up here. My dad's from Salem, my grandmother is from Salem," proclaims Wickham, as she purchases an embroidered Salem jacket for her husband **Mark**. "Everybody else in the family has a Salem jacket," Wickham says. That includes

son **Ryan**, 11, who got his first jacket when he was a year and a half old.

A couple of blocks away on Main Street, after-school customers line up for fresh-squeezed limeade, orangeade and lemonade at Brooks-Byrd Drug Store. Even in these days of supercenters, Brooks-Byrd remains an independent pharmacy, run these days by **Cameron Brooks**. Retired pharmacist **Ray Byrd** still lives in town and fills in in a pinch.

Salem High School student **Paul O'Neill**, 17, flips the handle adeptly to squish out a combination of orange-limeade for **Emie Weisman** and her art teacher, **Katherine Devine**, who has a studio across Main Street.

Paul O'Neill prepares fresh-squeezed limeade, orangeade and lemonade for a steady stream of customers at Brooks-Byrd Drug Store.



MEG HIBBERT PHOTO

For more information on Salem, contact the **Salem Visitor's Center** at 1-888-VASALEM or visit online at www.visitsalemva.com. It is located in the **Salem Civic Center**, 1001 Boulevard.

Besides having its own sports, Salem has the convenience of being only minutes away from:

- Hikers' paradise on the **Appalachian Trail**, including one of the most photographed overlooks, **McAfee's Knob** off Rt. 311. Take Exit 140 off I-81 and go toward New Castle. The easy-to-moderate hike to the knob takes 3 hours, round trip.
- **Dixie Caverns**, with cavern tours, a gift and rock shop and campground open all year. 5753 W. Main St. (U.S. 460-11), Exit 132 off I-81. (540) 380-2085.
- Two wineries that produce state and national award-winning wines. Both **Valhalla Vineyards** and **AmRheins Wine Cellars** have won the esteemed Governor's Cup in different years, signifying the winery has the overall best wine in Virginia that year. Valhalla is off U.S. 221, within 15 minutes of downtown Salem. Call (540) 725-WINE. AmRheins is in the community of Bent Mountain, 30 minutes out of Salem, off Rt. 221. Call (540) 929-4632. Within an hour's drive, wine lovers can visit **Chateau Morrisette** and **Villa Appalachia**, both just off the Blue Ridge Parkway in Floyd County. For more information go to www.virginiawines.org.

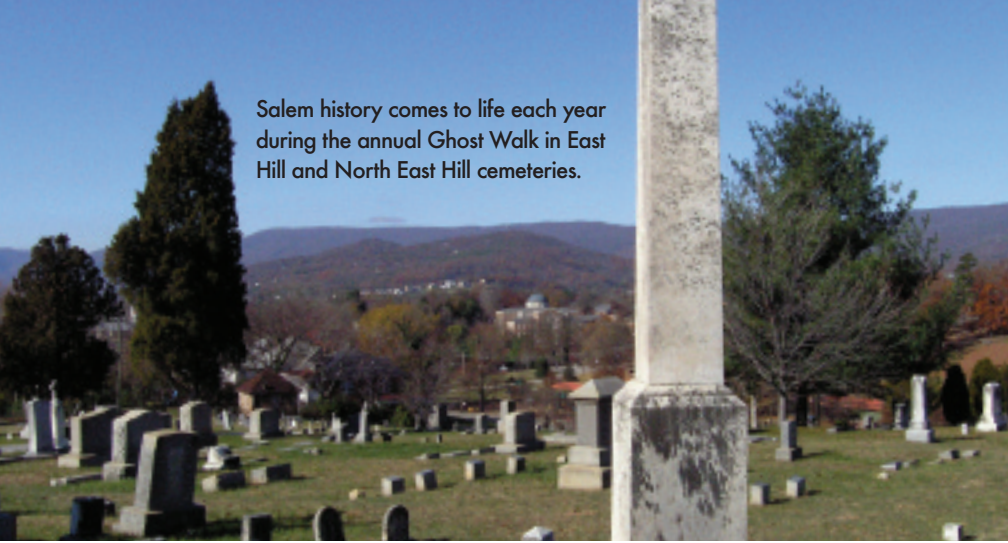
In **Roanoke**, 15 minutes north of Salem (take Exit 143 off Interstate I-81 to I-581 and follow the signs):

- **Virginia Museum of Transportation**, with everything from steam trains to model trains, and the **O. Winston Link Museum** that houses an extensive collection of the famous steam locomotive photographer's works.
- **Mill Mountain Zoo** with Ruby the Tiger and a collection of exotic animals in Roanoke.

One hour away is **Natural Bridge**, a natural stone bridge sacred to Native Americans, one of the wonders of the world; Monacan Indian Village, wax museum, drive-through zoo and caverns. U.S. Rt. 11 between Exits 175-180 of I-81 North. Go to www.naturalbridgeva.com.

Within two hours are skiers' destinations in **Snowshoe**, W. Va., and **Wintergreen** in Nelson County north of Lynchburg. It's motor-racing distance to NASCAR at the **Martinsville Speedway**, the home track of Ward and Jeff Burton at the **South Boston Speedway** and the **Bristol Motor Speedway**. Visit the racetracks online at:

- www.martinsvillespeedway.com,
- www.southbostonspeedway.com
- www.bristolmotorspeedway.com ■



Salem history comes to life each year during the annual Ghost Walk in East Hill and North East Hill cemeteries.

MEG HIBBERT PHOTOS



Debbie Kavitz, executive director of the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce, is “keeper of the ribbon.”

“I love the safe atmosphere in Salem, how I can leave my studio and walk down the street in the middle of the day,” Devine says. “I like the convenience, too. If my students and I want to study something, we can walk to the library.”

Library Square is tucked next to St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and across the street from the oldest congregation, Salem Presbyterian, which is celebrating its 175th anniversary this year. It’s one of the city’s oldest Christian groups, in terms of activity. The church building at the corner of East Main and Market was built before the Civil War.

Salem is known as a place that saves many of its historic buildings instead of razing them.

“It’s a community with a good sense of its roots,” says **John Long**, director of the Salem Museum. He’s been collecting, cataloging and telling people about the history since 1998 in the 1845 Williams-Brown House that houses the museum. Each year Long and sister, **Helen Johnson**, the assistant director, bring Salem history to life by arranging a Ghost Walk in East Hill Cemetery and North East Hill Cemetery, the final resting place of Salem’s early black citizens. On the walk historic figures tell visitors about their lives in early Salem.

The brother and sister pull together a Holiday Homes Tour that concludes Salem’s three-day Christmas extravaganza the first

weekend of December. It begins with an hour-long Christmas parade Friday night, followed on Saturday by costumed carolers, roasting chestnuts, store open houses and Mr. and Mrs. Santa leading children to the library.

Stand on almost any hill in Salem and you’ll see the brick buildings of Roanoke College, the country’s second-oldest Lutheran-related college set in the heart of the small city. Roanoke College extends into the community and is intertwined with its history. The college’s first president, Charles Brown, served as mayor of the town of Salem.

Although Salem’s roots date back to 1802 and Gen. Andrew Lewis, it didn’t become a city until 1968. Lewis – through a recording in the Salem Civic Center next to an impressive painting of the fiery Indian fighter – still brags about his adventures, including running off the last Colonial governor of Virginia. You can see him around the city: The former high school, now the middle school, is named for him. So is a portion of I-81 around Salem. A larger-than-life bronze statue guards the civic center where the general is ready to light a small ship’s cannon fired on special occasions.

“Salem’s just a friendly, safe community to live in, with a great educational system,” brags Mayor **Carl E. “Sonny” Tarpley**, himself a product of the schools. “The school system, Salem City Council, the city staff, all work together as a team. And, of course,

we’re known for our sports. I can just keep going on about Salem,” says the recently retired banker. Tarpley was on council when he encouraged the city to move its offices into the former Broad Street School, now Salem City Hall. Many who work there can recall going to elementary school in the building.

Not everyone grew up in Salem, although it may seem like it. “Salem to me is first, home – and the best-run municipality I’ve encountered in my travels,” says **Lawson Koeppel**. He adopted the Salem area after working in newspapers from his home state of Alabama to New Mexico and now is publisher of the 152-year-old *Salem Times-Register*. He followed **Ray Robinson** at the weekly community paper published continuously since 1854 – except during the Civil War.

“Salem’s open for business and it’s a wonderful place to live,” concludes **Debbie Kavitz**, a Salem resident and executive director of the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce. Kavitz is “keeper of the ribbon” who, as only a smidgen of her responsibilities, coordinates several ribbon cuttings each month for new and expanded businesses.

“What makes Salem is the diversity of everything from sports to ballet, its medical centers and public school system,” she points out, “and extremely close church families ... the essence of community you see in all the neighborhoods.” ■