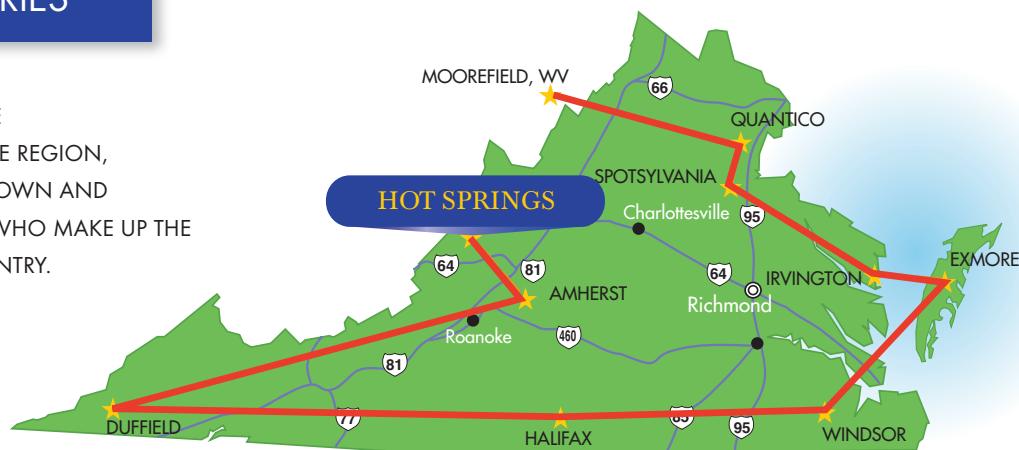


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2007, 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 LAST STOP, WE'LL BE ...



DOWN HOME IN

HOT SPRINGS

BY DEBORAH HUSO, CONTRIBUTING WRITER • PHOTOS BY DEBORAH HUSO, UNLESS OTHERWISE CREDITED

A BLEND OF SOPHISTICATION AND COUNTRY CHARM, HOT SPRINGS IS AN ECLECTIC ENTRY POINT TO VIRGINIA'S ALLEGHENY MOUNTAINS.

“As young people, we couldn’t wait to get out,” says Hot Springs resident and *Cooperative Living* columnist **Margo Oxendine**, of her beloved home in the Allegheny Highlands. Oxendine grew up here and says her experience mirrors that of many locals. “Many of us went away, made our way in the world, and have come back here to live again,” she says. “The initial draw is often family, but also the idyllic surroundings we came of age in.”

Idyllic is perhaps an appropriate word to describe the small community of Hot Springs, which is nestled alongside The Homestead, a landmark resort that has called Bath County home since 1766. In part because of the presence of The Homestead and its diverse guest list, which has included heads of state and famous capitalists, Hot Springs exhibits a level of refinement that would normally be rare in such an isolated community, situated as it is some 60 miles west of the Shenandoah Valley. “It’s a diverse and fluid community,” notes **Charles Garratt**, a 15-

year resident of the area and currently a staff

writer with *The Bath-Highland Recorder*. He credits the constant flow of tourists and seasonal residents as an advantage to this small town, creating a culture of multi-generational families alongside an influx of new blood.

But that mix of old and new isn’t always well-received. **Percy Nowlin**, who represents the district encompassing Hot Springs on the



New sidewalks and streetlights are part of recent improvements to the downtown area of Hot Springs.

AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: 490

STOPLIGHTS: 0

FOUNDED: 1890s

ELEVATION: 2,900 feet

FACTOID: Prior to the arrival in the 1890s of the Ingalls family, who were responsible for making The Homestead the landmark resort it is today, the spot of earth now known as Hot Springs was actually referred to as "Little Warm Springs" after the then more popular village of Warm Springs about five miles north.

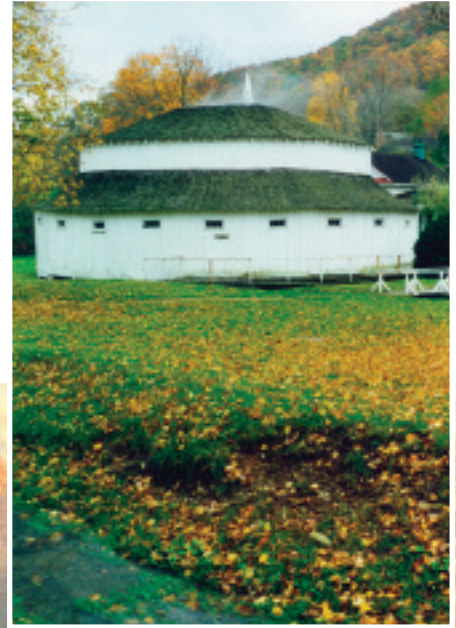


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HOMESTEAD

Bath County Board of Supervisors, says, "I see some residents being overly concerned with the issue of outsiders versus people who have always been here." He says some of his constituents are concerned that the increasing flow of new and seasonal residents will gradually erode the small-town, close-knit atmosphere of Hot Springs. But Nowlin himself disagrees with that assessment, noting, "I don't think we'll have any rapid change here. There just aren't that many jobs available close by."

Hot Springs' largest employer, not surprisingly, is The Homestead, which is staffed by more than 1,000, many of them residents of Bath County. The resort's new Vice President and General Manager **Sean**

Maddock, who recently moved to Hot Springs from Scottsdale, Arizona, says he believes the level of service guests experience at the hotel is directly related to the natural hospitality and caring the local residents already exhibit for one another. "The Homestead wouldn't be what it is without the people who work here," Maddock says.

And the staff members of The Homestead exhibit tremendous loyalty to the historic resort, many having worked there for decades, some from families that have been employed at the resort for generations. Homestead Director of Golf **Don Ryder** first began working at the resort in 1965, when he was 18 years old, starting out at the now-defunct Homestead Garage,

The Homestead has been drawing visitors to Hot Springs for well over two centuries. The upscale resort is steeped in history, as are guests who indulge in spa packages at historic Jefferson Pools (INSET).

which garaged automobiles for hotel guests. He left the community for a few years, beginning in 1969, then came back to work at the resort again in 1973. He's been there ever since. "The most exciting thing for me is how I got where I am," explains Ryder. "I started as a doorman in '73. There is always opportunity for the people of Hot Springs at The Homestead if you do your job and are good to people."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HOMESTEAD

Ryder, who has lived in Hot Springs all his life, says the community has changed very little over the years. "It's a very safe community," he says. "People look out for each other. If you have a flat tire, you won't ever have to change it by yourself." An avid golfer, Ryder says he has had the opportunity to golf with vice presidents and sports celebrities like Bath County native Sam Snead. He adds that most of his fellow employees grew up in the area just like he did.

"Everybody has a reason for working and working hard," says Ryder. "Mine is because there's so much history here in my family and my wife's family." His wife's grandfather worked at the resort for 65 years.

DEVELOPER DRAWN TO THE AREA

That kind of history is part of what drew nationally recognized developer Celebration Associates, whose principals worked on the award-winning community of Celebration, Florida, to locate a new conservation-oriented community in Bath County known as Homestead Preserve. After purchasing 11,500 acres from the Virginia Hot Springs Company in 2002, Celebration Associates sold 9,250 of those acres to The Nature Conservancy (which now holds that acreage in conservation for perpetuity as the Warm Springs Mountain Preserve) and then placed another 935 acres in permanent conservation easement

with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. The remaining 2,300 acres of Homestead Preserve will feature no more than 450 homes, all built in architectural styles native to the region in and around the villages of Hot Springs and Warm Springs to the north.

Homestead Preserve Co-General Manager **Don Killoren** says the company was first drawn to the area by the presence of The Homestead, but then became enthralled with "the amount of undevel-



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOMESTEAD PRESERVE



FROM TOP: Don Ryder, director of golf at The Homestead, has worked at the resort for over 40 years. • Charles Garratt, staff writer for *The Recorder*, Highland and Bath counties' local newspaper. • Don Killoren, co-general manager of Homestead Preserve. • Iris Leary, staff of The Forest Place Gift Shop in Hot Springs. • Melinda Nichols, office manager, Bath County Chamber of Commerce in Hot Springs.

oped and unspoiled property as well as the amount of national forest" (89 percent of Bath County remains covered in forest). Killoren, who with his wife **Ellen**, is now a full-time resident of Hot Springs, says that he has been impressed with the local residents' attention to and appreciation of their history. "People have been coming here on vacation for 200 years," he explains. To build a second-home community like Homestead Preserve in a place with such a unique draw, both in terms of its natural beauty and its resort amenities, seemed like an ideal plan.

Killoren admits that area residents were at first skeptical of the new development, but he feels the relationship Homestead Preserve has with the local community now is a good one. "We've proven ourselves and done what we said we would do," he notes. Homestead Preserve also employs 70 people, many of them local, and has brought millions of dollars in economic benefit to the area with its road building and home construction efforts. "On any one day, we have 100 to 200 people working on homes here," Killoren says.

But even with new opportunities for economic growth, Nowlin feels that Hot Springs has lost a lot over the years in terms of providing good jobs for local residents. He points out that Mead Westvaco in neighboring Alleghany County has eliminated a lot of job opportunities because of advancing technology. He worries that there just isn't enough economic opportunity to keep people employed locally. Nowlin is hopeful that Homestead Preserve will continue to help the community grow, however, without taxing the local government. "One of the greatest expenses of development," he points out, "is the increase in school costs. But with Homestead Preserve, we don't have the economic crush because most of the residents are seasonal and retirees."

One of Homestead Preserve's few full-time residents happens to be Killoren, who just finished building a new home in the community. He has fallen in love with Hot Springs and the surrounding mountains. "Ellen and I are both empty nesters, and we thought moving to the mountains at this time was a good idea," he explains. "I like getting away from the city. In Charlotte, I had to lock my car in my own driveway. I don't have to do that here."

NATIVES WEIGH IN

Iris Leary works at The Forest Place Gift Shop and Visitor Center on Main Street and

has lived in the community all her life. She knows exactly what Killoren is talking about. "We don't have the crime," she says. "You feel safer here. We don't lock our doors, and there's no hustle and bustle."

In fact, there's probably less hustle and bustle in Hot Springs today than there was years ago. Leary says downtown doesn't have all the offerings it once did, and now people have to go to Wal-Mart in Covington to get a lot of the everyday items of life. Oxendine agrees: "Hot Springs was more vibrant in my childhood days. There was a soda fountain at the drug store, a movie theater, and shops and stores that provided the basic necessities of life." Oxendine waxes nostalgic about what has been lost, saying, "Who decided we no longer needed a movie theater and soda fountain? I wish those things would come back."

Garratt says he has to agree, even though he has seen Hot Springs benefit from positive physical changes in recent years like new sidewalks, streetlights, and planters downtown. "There's still a lot of potential in Hot Springs," he says. "There's more room here for retail. I'd like to see Hot Springs change into more of a thriving arts community. There's room for something like that here."

GRADUAL CHANGE

And gradually, Hot Springs is taking on a new feel. **Melinda Nichols**, office manager for the Bath County Chamber of Commerce, which is located on Main Street, points out that Hot Springs now has art galleries and even a wine shop. "There's more culture than there used to be," she notes.

The visitation to the area is pretty eclectic as well. Nichols says she sees visitors from all over, including England and France, even Austria. "Often they come to do genealogical research, but people are also looking for some place to go that is out of the way." She says about 7,000 people a year stop by the Chamber of Commerce visitor center. She thinks Hot Springs' biggest draw, apart from The Homestead, is its outdoor recreation, including hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking. "You can drive two miles out of town and see nothing but trees," she remarks.

Garratt agrees, noting that the view from his newspaper office window is hard to match. "It's just fantastically beautiful here," he says. "Most of what I see when I look out the window is trees and mountains. Living here really changes your perspective on things." ■

IF YOU GO...

The **Bath County Chamber of Commerce** on Main Street in Hot Springs is the ideal spot to start a tour of Hot Springs. Open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Saturday, the **Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center** offers brochures and maps on the surrounding area and is also located right next door to **The Forest Place Visitor Center and Gift Shop**, where visitors can obtain information on exploring the **George Washington National Forest** as well as purchase souvenirs.

Dining options in Hot Springs are varied, from **Sam Snead's Tavern**, which offers excellent steaks and burgers, on the corner of Main Street and Route 220, to the popular lunch destination of the **Red Rooster Café** adjacent to the Hot Springs post office. **The Homestead Market**, located in the Old Virginia Building on Route 220, offers a variety of deli options, and visitors can also pick up a Subway sandwich at the **Duck-In** around the corner on Main Street.

The biggest draw for visitors in Hot Springs is **The Homestead**, the landmark resort located directly across from Hot Springs' downtown business district. Home to three acclaimed golf courses, where golf greats like Sam Snead have played, as well as to the mineral spring amenities of **The Homestead Spa**, the resort draws thousands of social and business guests throughout the year.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Bath County Chamber of Commerce
P.O. Box 718
Main Street
Hot Springs, VA 24445
800-628-8092
www.discoverbath.com ■



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HOMESTEAD

The Homestead Resort is widely renowned for golf and won the 2007 Best in Virginia Cooperative Living readers' choice award in the Best Virginia Golf Course category.