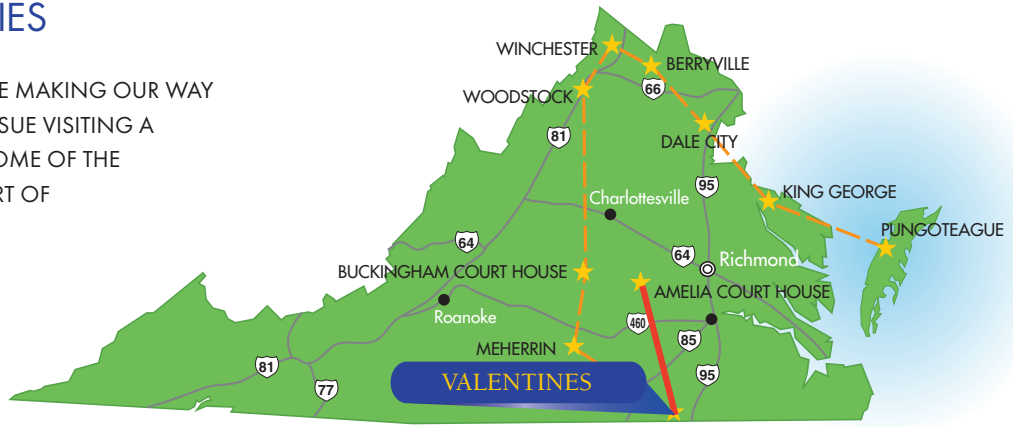


## DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2010, 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 SECOND STOP, WE'LL BE ...



## DOWN HOME IN

# VALENTINES

Story and photos by Angela R. Blue, Contributing Writer

Nestled at the intersection of Western Mill and Manning roads, the Valentines Post Office is a quiet place most days.

In the winter, a fire blazes in the stove, creating a cozy atmosphere in the small building. There might be a couple of folks sitting in wooden chairs, catching up on the latest news.

People come and go through the screen door, dropping off packages or picking up mail, always saying a friendly hello to everyone inside. The post office has become popular worldwide and is central to the community, but it is the people who make Valentines, Va., feel like home.

The Valentines community is in the southeastern part of Brunswick County. It was named after the community's first postmaster, William Henry Valentine, born in 1849. Valentine operated a mercantile store inside the post office, which was then located on Highway 46.

In 1924, the post office moved to the Robert J. Clary store less than a mile away, where it still resides. William R. Wright be-

came postmaster in 1951. During his time working at the post office, Wright served as vice chairman on the board of directors at Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative, and also wrote a book on the history of Valentines.

Besides being a businessman and a writer, he became a local cupid by starting a tradi-

tion of hand-stamping mailed envelopes for Valentine's Day. He designed the stamp himself, and would begin putting his signature mark on cards beginning in mid-January. Word traveled about the extra step Wright was taking to personalize the envelopes, and the mail volume started to increase. Articles about Wright and the post office have been published in major publications, as well as local and regional newspapers and magazines. The post office has been featured in

radio interviews and television broadcasts, including CNN and NBC. In 1995, the Love Stamp was issued at the post office, giving the small community even more renown.

### THINGS HAVEN'T CHANGED

Wright retired as postmaster in 1999 and died in 2006. His wife, Frances, still works in the post office and general store that carries canned goods, greeting cards and beauty supplies. Wright continues to perform the card-stamping practice that her



Postmaster Kathy Fajna has been coming to the Valentines Post Office ever since she was a young girl collecting stamps, and she's always been fond of the area. "Valentines isn't a big community, but we have big hearts," she says.



## AT A GLANCE...

**POPULATION:** Approximately 220

**ELEVATION:** 329 feet above sea level

**FACTOID:** In 1995, the Love Stamp was issued at the post office. In 2008, the Virginia General Assembly designated each February 14th as Valentines, Virginia Day.



**1.** Debbie and Russel Heese, owners of Gasburg Golf Cars, enjoy eating at Kennon House once a week. "You can't get anything here that's not good," says Debbie. **2.** The Club Resort at Lake Gaston is a perfect getaway for families or couples visiting the area. **3.** Warren Inge, pictured above, and his brother, David, carry on the family farming operation of cotton and tobacco.

husband started years ago. "It makes you feel wonderful that you can carry the tradition on," she says.

**Kathy Fajna** has been the postmaster since 2006 and describes the Valentine's rush with one word: chaos. Along with the process of stamping all those valentines, Fajna and Wright keep busy with giving tours to those who want to see the building decorated and have a first-hand look at the stamped envelopes. Some groups who have visited the post office include school children on field trips, bikers participating in tours, and even red-hatters who have stopped by wearing bathing suits and fur coats. Fifteen couples have been married in the post office, and another couple got engaged on the front porch just last year.

One of Fajna's favorite things about working at a small post office is that she gets to know her clientele. "I've laughed with customers; I've cried with them," she says. "They basically become family."

### STICKING TOGETHER

Since there aren't many people living in Valentines, it's easy for the residents to get to know one another. "It's some of the nicest people you'll meet," says **Buddy High**, owner of High's Garage on Highway 46.

High explains that even though the economy has hurt his and other businesses, the people stick together to help each other. He used to have four employees, but now he is the only one working at the garage. In his spare time, High makes homemade soap,

carves walking sticks, designs chairs and builds large boats for the annual James River Batteau Festival.

Another business owner in Valentines is **Karoline Watkins**. She and her husband **Charles** operate C-Line Graphics, Inc., which is located in the original Valentines Post Office building. C-Line handles all kinds of printing needs such as invitations, newsletters, commercial printing and brochures. Karoline says that she enjoys living in Valentines because it is quaint and quiet.

### LIFE ON THE FARM

Farming and agriculture are popular occupations in Valentines. **Nahmen Nielsen** and his wife, **Dorothy**, are local cattle farmers, but their farm is different from any other in the

## IF YOU GO...

### **Taste of Brunswick Festival —**

Brunswick County is the original home of Brunswick Stew. To celebrate this tasty recipe, the locals hold a Brunswick Stew cook-off every October. The stew is cooked in large, black iron pots and stirred with a boat paddle. The festival offers a day of entertainment including live music, a classic car show and children's activities. Visit [www.tasteofbrunswickfestival.com](http://www.tasteofbrunswickfestival.com) to learn more about this year's Taste of Brunswick Festival.

### **Brunswick County Museum —**

Besides being the originator of a scrumptious stew, Brunswick County has a lot of history to offer. Visitors of the museum will take a tour of the past with Indian relics, including a 3,000-4,000-year-old tomahawk and arrowheads that were found in the area. The Fort Christanna exhibit includes depictions of one of the largest frontier forts ever built in Virginia. Other exhibits of interest include a doctor's buggy from the 1800s and a showcase of antique dolls. Museum hours are Tuesday and Thursday, 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., and Saturdays, 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free, but donations are welcome. For more information, contact the museum at (434) 848-0964.

**Rosemont Vineyards and Winery —** Rosemont produced its first vintage in September 2007, and has been impressing wine lovers since. It offers 10 different wines for tasting and purchasing, and guests may also shop for wine accessories, crafts and artwork from local vendors. On the weekends, Chef David Rose creates an exquisite menu of cheeses, appetizers and desserts. To schedule private dinners or find out which wine suits your palette, visit the Rosemont Web site at [www.rosemontofvirginia.com](http://www.rosemontofvirginia.com).

### **Brunswick Mineral Springs Bed and Breakfast —**

Discover the Southern charms that this bed and breakfast has to offer. Take your sweetheart out for a picnic lunch, enjoy a swim in the indoor heated pool or simply relax by the fireplace. Wake up to a full country breakfast or indulge in a three-course dinner during your stay. With three suites and two cottages, Brunswick Mineral Springs has something to accommodate everyone's needs. For booking information, visit [www.brunswickmineralsprings.com](http://www.brunswickmineralsprings.com).



**Lake Gaston, a popular destination that attracts many property buyers to the area, is roughly 35 miles long and covers more than 20,000 acres.**

**The Artbank —** No vacation is complete without catching an entertaining show. The Artbank is a local source for exploring the worlds of dance, theater, painting, poetry, music, storytelling and mime. To get a taste of the cultural talents of Brunswick County, call (434) 577-2833 and find out what shows you can't miss.

**The Three Angels Inn at Sherwood —** This Lawrenceville inn provides a tranquil atmosphere for those who are looking to get away for the weekend, but it also caters to adventure seekers. Spend a quiet afternoon getting lost in a good book while lazing on the front porch or explore some of the area's hiking trails. Whether you're looking to rekindle the romance or renew your relationship with nature, the Three Angels Inn is sure to please; [www.threeangelsinn.com](http://www.threeangelsinn.com).

**Lake Rawlings —** Why drive all the way to the ocean when you can swim in one of the clearest lakes on the East Coast? Lake Rawlings is a popular locale for swimming, kayaking and scuba diving. Divers will enjoy the thrill of discovering Ms. Laurie, a sunken airplane, and Ms. Nikki, a sunken school bus, along with many other underwater attractions. For overnight guests, there are recreational vehicle sites, campgrounds and cabins available for rent. Check out [www.lakerawlings.com](http://www.lakerawlings.com) to learn about programs and events taking place at the lake. ■

area. They operate Living Water Farm, a ministry where those with drug or alcohol addictions can stay free of charge.

Although they've been successful at helping many overcome addictions, they don't take the credit for it. "It's the Lord's business; we're doing it for him, not for us," Nahmen says.

An agricultural export of Valentines is pine trees. Dr. Robert C. Clary, who was raised in Valentines, expresses the importance of supporting this major crop. "When I go to a grocery store and they don't have paper bags, I don't go back there," Clary says. "We raise pine trees; not plastic." Clary has visited all 50 states and has traveled to many countries, but came back to Valentines where he now sells real estate on Lake Gaston.

## **WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE**

Lake Gaston attracts many property buyers to the area, and it's a popular tourist spot. Water lovers come to participate in all kinds of activities such as tubing, water skiing, swimming, fishing and boating. Many visitors enjoy staying at The Club, a resort on the lake. Aside from the waterfront motel rooms, the resort has an exclusive clubhouse that offers great family activities such as bowling, aerobics, shuffleboard, mini-golf, racquetball, arcade games and an indoor swimming pool. For a more romantic outing, couples may enjoy a walk on the private beach to watch the sunset.

## **ROMANCE IN THE AIR**

The most romantic place to dine in Valentines is the Kennon House. Built in 1792, the Kennon House walls are constructed with 16 inches of clay. Inside, the crisp, white tablecloths offset the amorous red walls of the main dining room. Soft lighting accompanies the tranquil music that plays in the background.

The atmosphere at Kennon House sets the mood for the type of food served, which could be described as Southern cuisine with a twist. On the menu, there is a variety of dishes from soups and salads to seafood and steak. The salmon served with a delectable tomato basil topping is highly recommended. After dinner, indulge in a slice of homemade chocolate pie or enjoy a nightcap from the bar.

It's apparent why many couples have chosen this community as the destination for their weddings and why most of the residents have never dreamt of leaving. With its romantic atmosphere and warm-hearted people, Valentines epitomizes the slogan, "Virginia is for lovers." ■



PHOTO BY BOBBY CONNER-BRUNSWICK COUNTY LAKE GASTON TOURISM ASSOCIATION

**1.** Nahmen Nielsen is originally from Germany, and his wife, Dorothy, is from New York, but they've lived in Valentines for 20 years. "When we moved here, the people welcomed us with open arms," Dorothy says. **2.** In her general store, Francis Wright sells bologna and some of the best hoop cheese around. **3.** As a realtor on Lake Gaston, Dr. Robert C. Clary gets to meet the newcomers in the area. "The people that I've gotten to know, I would not mind having as a next door neighbor," he says. **4.** Well-known local artist William Ward Moseley displays his watercolor of the landmark post office. **5.** Buddy High sells used cars and does minor repair work at his garage. **6.** Freddy Adams comes to the post office nearly every day to socialize with friends. "Freddy's a good soul," says Mrs. Wright. **7.** 10-year-old Allison Wright enjoys visiting the post office where her grandmother works.