

■ DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2011, 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 eighth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

CLIFTON FORGE

by Deborah R. Huso and Dorothy Stephenson, Contributing Writers • Photos by Dorothy Stephenson

Right off Interstate 64, just east of Covington, is the town of Clifton Forge — a little community full of charm, history, fun, and good food.

"The people here are outgoing and very welcoming," says Darlene L. Burcham, who accepted the office of town manager in May 2010 after 10 years as Roanoke's

Main Street Clifton Forge, whose residents — both two-legged and four-legged — are welcoming.

city manager. She originally intended to assume the position only temporarily, but the town and its residents quickly grew on her, so she made her move per-

manent earlier this year. In addition to a friendly community, Burcham says the area also offers affordable housing, lots of outdoor amenities, such as nearby

Douthat State Park, and a history that remains an honored part of town life.

Incorporated in 1884, but with a history dating back to the 1700s, Clifton Forge occupies land given by Lord Botetourt to Robert Gallaspy in 1770. The settlement along the Jackson River was originally known as Williamson, named after the family that owned the land. In 1826, completion of a road (now U.S. Route 60) over North Mountain opened the gates for more traffic, and the town began to grow. In 1857, the first passenger train arrived in Clifton Forge, turning it into a railroad boomtown. During its heyday, the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Railroad employed nearly 2,000 people to maintain its steam locomotives.

Local resident Gretel L. Anderson, 92, remembers the days when her father shoveled coal into the furnace in the C&O boiler room. "Daddy had to work from seven to three," says Anderson, who ventured from her family's home on Pine Street to the C&O lot with her sister to visit her father. "The trains stopped in Clifton Forge every day," Anderson recalls. As with so many Clifton Forge citizens, the railroad, whether it provided family income or transportation, was



AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: Approximately 4,000

LAND AREA: Approximately 1.5 square miles

ELEVATION: 1,083 feet

FOUNDED: Land grant to Robert Gallaspy in 1770. Incorporated in 1906.

FACTOIDS: The town's name came from William Lyle Alexander, who owned a forge in nearby Rainbow Gorge. He named the forge "Clifton" in honor of his father's estate in Lexington, Va., and the town eventually became known as Clifton Forge — the only city by that name in the United States.



1. The 614 locomotive, also known as "The Greenbrier," sits on the tracks at the C&O Railway Heritage Center in Clifton Forge. **2.** The restored C&O caboose sits at the end of the tracks behind the 614. **3.** The historic Masonic Theatre is a perfect example of the town's motto, "Where History and Culture Converge."

central to Anderson's life. "Back in the days when I would ride to college, girls and ladies were properly dressed," she says. "When you got on the train, you had that hat on."

Just off of Main Street, the C&O Railway Heritage Center tells the history of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway from its beginning in 1836. The C&O Railroad runs from the Chesapeake Bay in Newport News to the Ohio River in Huntington, W.Va. Though a small town, Clifton Forge was an important stop for workers to service trains before they headed west over the Allegheny

Mountains, east over the Blue Ridge Mountains, or down the James River. The small, crescent-shaped yard contained a repair shop, a rail yard for classifying coal and other freight, a yard for "less-than-carload freight," or smaller freight, an icing facility, a laundry facility, a passenger coach yard, and the division headquarters for the region.

Today, Heritage Center visitors can stand next to the massive 614 locomotive, also known as "The Greenbrier," and tour the attached cars. Kids as well as the young at heart can take a ride on the "Little C&O" that circles the yard next to

the 614. A museum, housed in the restored 1985 C&O Freight Depot, features information on the history of the C&O Railway, train models of all different sizes, and exhibits about the railroad's signature, gold-trimmed George Washington souvenir plates and C&O Railway's mascot, Chessie the cat, whom guests can pet in the gift shop after picking out a memento.

C&O Railway eventually became part of the Chessie System in 1973, and merged into the present CSX Corporation in 1985. One can still ride the C&O line today courtesy of Amtrak's



1. Resident Gretel L. Anderson, 92, remembers the days when her father shoveled coal in the C&O boiler room. **2.** Photographer Chuck Almarez co-owns the Fire and Light Gallery. **3.** Helen Kostel and Henrietta Crandall, board members of the Clifton Forge School of the Arts, next to a newly completed painting in one of the new school's studios. **4.** Wilma McClung serves on the board for the town's Historic Masonic Theatre, which is scheduled to reopen in late 2012 or early 2013 after a complete renovation. **5.** The work of Glen Bryant, local blacksmith artisan and co-owner of Fire and Light Gallery, can be seen all over town. **6.** Teresa Hammond, executive director of the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce, at the Old Forge Coffee Company.

Cardinal, which stops in Clifton Forge. According to David Kleppinger, executive director of the Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Corporation, CSX Railroad is important to the area for many reasons. "Between 300 and 400 people work for CSX from the Clifton Forge rail office," says Kleppinger, who adds most positions involve riding the rails rather than working in Clifton Forge. In addition, Amtrak offers regular trains heading west to Chicago and north to Washington, D.C., from Clifton Forge. "This creates opportunities for local use of rail mass transit and for local businesses to serve rail passengers before and after rail trips," says Kleppinger. Clifton Forge and Amtrak are working to move the current Amtrak stop to the C&O Railway Heritage Center, which is considered a significant and growing tourist attraction.

SHOPPING DRAWS VISITORS

Downtown shopping also draws tourists to town. Main Street in Clifton Forge (also called Ridgeway Street) sits just a couple of blocks from the heritage center and offers a variety of galleries and shops, including three antique malls. Coffee drinkers and bookworms will enjoy Old Forge Coffee Company, which serves coffee, cappuccinos, smoothies, lattes, and other specialty drinks. While waiting for their drinks, patrons can select a new read from the many shelves of used books, sit down on the comfy couch in the middle of the store to enjoy their book and beverage, and kick back in front of a locally crafted artisan coffee table.

The table is the creation of local blacksmith, Glen Bryant of Fire and Light Gallery. He crafted iron legs to hold the wooden tabletop he made from lightning-struck poplar and oak trees. In fact, visitors can see Bryant's work throughout Clifton Forge. The door pull patrons touch when entering the Old Forge Coffee Company as well as mountings for local store signs, fences, and the signs for the C&O Railway Heritage Center and CSX station are all works of Bryant's. Bryant and his business partner, photographer Chuck Almarez, opened Fire and Light Gallery on Ridgeway Street in October 2009.

Almarez and Bryant also teach classes at Clifton Forge's newest art addition, the Clifton Forge School of the Arts on Church Street. This facility offers classes

from blacksmithing (taught by Bryant) and photography (instructed by Almarez) to stained glass, quilting, and beading. Board members Helen Kostel and Henrietta Crandall say the school is always adding new classes to the schedule.

HISTORIC THEATRE HOST TO ROY ROGERS, GENE AUTRY

In fact, the arts have become a distinguishing component of this former railroad boomtown. Across the street from the Clifton Forge School of the Arts is the historic Masonic Theatre — a perfect example of the town's motto, "Where History and Culture Converge." Wilma McClung, a member of the theatre's board of directors, has been involved with the theatre since the mid-1970s. She welcomed her last two children to the world after she moved to Clifton Forge in 1973. "They learned to walk between the seats of the theatre," McClung laughs. "It felt like home." Currently, the 106-year-old theatre is closed for a complete renovation, but McClung says they are planning to reopen bigger and better in late 2012 or early 2013. "We hope to reach something for everyone," says McClung. "We plan to do it all." Though nothing is set in stone, the theatre plans to feature musicians, singers, bands, dancers, movies, and drama productions. In years past, the theatre hosted Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, the Drifters, and the Count Basie Orchestra.

ON THE MENU

Once patrons have seen a show they can enjoy a bite to eat at the many restaurants in downtown Clifton Forge. Jack Mason's Tavern, a European-style pub located on Main Street, serves up appetizers, burgers, wraps, sandwiches, salads, soups, and desserts, as well as beer and wine and some sweet, sweet tea.

Further down the street, Heirlooms Café offers a variety of lunches, including salads, soups, sandwiches, and desserts in addition to a shop full of books, antiques, and gifts. One of Heirlooms' signature dishes is the Krispy Kreme donut bread pudding, which incorporates crumbled Krispy Kreme donuts. According to Teresa Hammond, executive director of the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce, it's only served on occasion, but visitors should try it if they're lucky enough to be dining when it's on the menu. ■

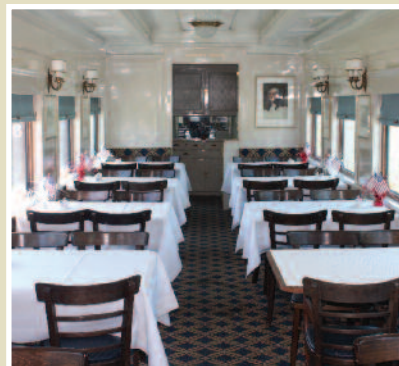
IF YOU GO...

To get a grounding in Clifton Forge's history, visitors should start at the **C&O Railway Heritage Center** located just off of Main Street. Exhibits include old locomotives and dining and cargo cars. Visitors can also learn about the history of the railroad in Clifton Forge in the center's museum located in the original C&O Freight Depot. Open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sundays 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.; admission is \$8 for adults and \$5 for seniors and children under 12. COHS members and children under 2 are free.

In addition to the railway history and art opportunities, Clifton Forge is a great place for the outdoor adventurer. With the Cowpasture and Jackson rivers meeting to form the James just three miles outside of Clifton Forge, the area offers many chances for kayaking, tubing, fishing, or general river play. **Riders Up! Outfitters**, located on east Ridgeway Street, offers all the supplies needed to enjoy local water activities. They provide kayak and canoe rentals, river guide services, guided fishing, hiking, rock climbing, backpacking trips, and mountain bike rentals.

Just a few miles away is another natural escape. **Douthat State Park** straddles the border of Alleghany and Bath counties on Route 629 just four miles north of town, and is one of the six original Virginia state parks. Douthat's 50-acre lake offers boating, swimming, and seasonal trout fishing opportunities, and there are plenty of camping sites and cabins located throughout the park. In addition, there are more than 40 miles of easy to difficult wooded, hiking trails, and the park presents a variety of entertainment from clogging to bands at their lakeside amphitheatre on the main beach. Douthat Lake View Restaurant is open from Memorial Day through Labor Day and features a glass-enclosed porch overlooking the lake.

Another picturesque and historic stop in this area is the 100-foot-long **Humpback**



A look into the dining car at the C&O Railway Heritage Center, a good place to begin a tour of Clifton Forge.

Bridge, one of Virginia's oldest remaining covered bridges. Built in 1857, it was part of the James River and Kanawha Turnpike, and stretches over Dunlap creek. The original bridge was constructed in the 1820s, but a flood washed it away on May 12, 1837. Another flood washed away a second bridge in 1842, and a third collapsed in 1856.

The Alleghany Highlands Arts and Crafts Center on Ridgeway Street is a great place to experience local artistry. The gallery's changing exhibits feature work from area and regional artists, and sells original juried handmade items, such as pottery, jewelry, wood crafts, cards, bead and needlework, fiber arts, rugs, and paintings. Open mid-January through April, Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and May through December, Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Visitors can also partake in creating arts and crafts, such as stained glass, iron works, and knitting, at the local **Clifton Forge School of the Arts**. For a full class listing, check out the school's website at www.cfsota.org. After a class, one can please the palate at **Vic's Italian & American Family Restaurant**, with fresh seafood, steaks, and pasta, and at **The Club Car**, serving up sandwiches, soups, and entrees. ■



Humpback Bridge in nearby Covington is one of Virginia's oldest remaining covered bridges.