

■ DOWN HOME SERIES

The year 2012 marks the 15th anniversary of *Cooperative Living* magazine's popular DOWN HOME feature, so we're revisiting the communities we profiled in 1997, the first year of the series. On this second stop, we'll be ...

DOWN HOME IN

CLARKSVILLE

by Tucker McLaughlin, Jr., Contributing Writer



Sam Caparatta grew up a perpetually impatient hard-charger from up north, so he became genuinely annoyed the first time seeking service in a Clarksville, Va., store.

Caparatta waited for what seemed an endless delay while two customers ahead of him discussed a recent social event with the store's owner.

Finally, he got his chance to be served. He angrily slammed his purchase on the counter.

Three decades later Caparatta, an affable, warm-hearted local business owner who adores the Southside Virginia area, remembers the owner's reply: "You're not from here, are you?"

After tobacco's decline and the loss of two local anchor industries, Clarksville has found its niche in Southside Virginia as an invigorating tourism destination, renowned for its Southern charm, hospitality and generous community spirit.

The anchor of Clarksville's attraction for visitors is the picturesque, sprawling John H. Kerr reservoir, a 50,000-acre flood-control and hydroelectric reservoir created in the early 1950s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The lake is also called Buggs Island Lake, after a small island in the Roanoke River just below the massive John H. Kerr Dam.

This July will mark the 35th anniversary of one of the signature events in the region tied to the reservoir, the Virginia Lake Festival (July 19-21).

Dale Hite, the owner of Hite's Clothing, has been in business since 1974 and is justifiably proud of his hometown.

"What makes Clarksville unique is Buggs Island Lake ... that differentiates us from all other small towns. It attracts not only tourists, but we've got a lot of retirees. A lot of them have money and don't like to drive from here to Raleigh or Durham to shop. They like to spend their money locally, because most of them have had enough of the city. They come here for the slow pace of life," says Hite.

And there are more people coming to enhance the quality of life here, all the time.

Shelia Cuykendall, the new executive director of the Clarksville Lake Country Chamber of Commerce, is excited about the newly announced marina project

Clarksville offers unique shopping and a hometown feel. Located next to the sprawling John H. Kerr reservoir, it is Virginia's only lakeside town.



TUCKER MCLAUGHLIN, JR. PHOTO



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AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: Approximately 1,400

FOUNDED: In 1818, 100 acres adjoining the Roanoke River were laid out for the town and named after the land's owner, Clark Royster.

FACTOIDS: The damming of the Roanoke River redefined the region, ushering in the 1953 construction of the John H. Kerr Dam and Reservoir. The 50,000-acre reservoir is also called Buggs Island Lake after a small island just below the dam. Clarksville is the only town on the lake. In June of 2011, a new world-record 143-pound blue catfish was caught in Buggs Island Lake.



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- 1.** The municipal dock offers complimentary day-use slips, allowing you to dock, dine and shop in Clarksville.
- 2.** The Mecklenburg County Veterans Memorial is located at the intersections of Highways 15/49 and Business 58.
- 3.** After retiring from the military, Joe Davidson made Clarksville home and became the longtime principal of Clarksville Elementary School.

administered by the staff at Oconeechee State Park, which has made its own indelible mark on tourism in the area.

Justin Eubank, current president of the Clarksville Chamber, says the marina project is a state-funded booster shot that will essentially double the amount of boat slips available in town, beyond what is currently available at the Clarksville Marina and the town municipal dock. "I think it'll enhance tourism," Eubank says.

"Buggs Island is kind of an under-used lake. If you've ever been to (nearby) Hyco Lake, you go out there and you feel like you're in Times Square. There are so many boats, so many people out there. Then, you come here, you realize just how much space you really do have, and it's a so-much-more-enjoyable experience, especially for families," Eubank adds.

Clarksville features unique shops that offer personal attention and a hometown feel, from The Galleria to Virginia Avenue Mall, with some 40 different vendors, to antiques dealers and much more.

"Even though it's a small town, it's very diverse. I grew up here and moved away, I went to college away, I went to work away, but I moved back here to raise my family, because I enjoy the quality of life. I can make more money in Greensboro, or Dallas or Richmond, but I prefer the lifestyle, knowing everybody here. I wouldn't trade that for anything," Eubank says.

"We've got a lot of transplants. It's a very diverse group of people who lives here. A lot of people, when they first get here, complain that there's nothing to do. But they just haven't acclimated. After a year or so, they can't imagine going back

to the city. This is just so much nicer. That's the big draw, the quality of life. There's plenty to do, it's just not all malls and traffic," Eubank continues.

And Eubank, noting the influence of nearby industries, points out, "We actually have the infrastructure. With Microsoft (coming to Boydton), and Hewlett-Packett (homeland security), we have the best Internet available. We have the best web you can get anywhere in the country. There's broadband availability here that you wouldn't believe."

Joe Davidson knows Clarksville as well as anyone. He's a former educator who graduated from West Virginia University in 1964 and also had a career with the U.S. Navy. Just before he left the service, Davidson and his wife, Gail, went on a camping trip to the mountains and passed through Clarksville for the first time.



1. After initially being annoyed by the slower pace of life, northern transplant Sam Caparatta grew to adore the Southside Virginia area. **2.** Shelia Cuykendall is the new executive director of the Clarksville Lake Country Chamber of Commerce. **3.** Dale Hite, the owner of Hite's Clothing, has been in business since 1974. **4.** Cathy Ramsey is the current owner of Clarksville Florist on the Lake. **5.** Community leaders celebrated the grand opening of the 15,000-square-foot Clarksville Enrichment Complex. **6.** Barbara Martin owns the Virginia Avenue Mall, which houses 40 vendors. **7.** Justin Eubank, an area native and current president of the Clarksville Chamber of Commerce, moved away for a time but came back to Clarksville to raise his family.

When time came to retire from the military, the Davidsons decided to make Clarksville their home. He eventually became the longtime principal of Clarksville Elementary School. After that career, Davidson started a local business, Berry Hill Irrigation.

Davidson appreciates Clarksville's revival. "At the time when we lost the (Russell Stover) candy factory and Burlington Industries, it looked like, hey, the last one out will turn off the lights. But it didn't go that way. We've really bounced back in a big way. We've picked up two great industries. We have Hewlett-Packard (working on national homeland security) and now Microsoft (at nearby Boydton, the county seat.)"

Davidson has seen the inception of several important local revival projects, including, about eight years ago, the start of a major effort to revive the Clarksville YMCA. There's a new YMCA on a 10-acre tract along Noblin Farm Road. Julie Hartman, Jerry Ramsey, Win Baker and others have been instrumental in helping develop the \$2 million facility.

The impressive 15,000-square-foot Clarksville Enrichment Complex houses the YMCA as well as two educational facilities, including a Southside Virginia Community College presence and a distance-learning project with extensive access to the Internet. There's also a modern kitchen area at the complex, used for a myriad of community functions and fundraisers.

Clarksville has its own museum, housed in the Sam Davis residence. The Clarksville Regional Museum is a fabulous attraction, with a re-creation of the famed Clarksville Station train depot. It also includes an extensive military display, with photos and memorabilia relating to veterans' affairs.

A STAGE PRESENCE

Clarksville also has a proud thespian tradition in the Clarksville Players. The Players have staged numerous well-received productions, building an appreciative following along the way. The town is now seeking to improve the facility, and the town is turning the venue over to the group in an effort to land more grant funding to promote the arts.

The local Mecklenburg County SPCA is also working hard at its role in the community, protecting the interests of abandoned animals in the area. The facility is located in Clarksville.

The local Ruritans are thriving and sponsor a number of fund-raising activities as well as the club's donation center. The Ruritan

Thrift Store has also acquired a special reputation among area residents.

There's always been a spirit of eager volunteerism in the town.

Teresa Beck, bookkeeper at Berry Hill Irrigation, notes, "All it takes is a call or a need and people here really gather and get it done ... We all support each other's causes."

As Davidson points out, Clarksville residents are genuinely concerned about their neighbors. Newcomers and visitors find the friendliness of the townspeople one of the community's main attractions.

ONLY TOWN ON THE LAKE

Cathy Ramsey has been here for 40 years, and is the current owner of Clarksville Florist on the Lake.

"Clarksville really stands out, because, for one thing, we're the only town on this lake. That's an asset for us," she says.

Ramsey has come to appreciate Clarksville as a small, quaint, friendly town; an excellent place to live.

Barbara Martin owns the Virginia Avenue Mall, with 40 vendors. She appreciates the community's support. Asked to explain the appeal of this town, she observes, "It is very grounded. People are friendly ... people will say hello in the morning, even if they don't know you ..."

She moved to Clarksville from the north, and has enjoyed a comfortable life in the community for 33 years.

Caparatta and his wife, Aggie, have been here 32 years. He runs the very popular Pizza Pub and has developed a side business repairing computers.

"Clarksville's a unique town," he says. "The lake's a well-kept secret. Clarksville has a lot to offer – fishing, a great golf course (the award-winning Kinderton Country Club, featuring its Donald Ross design), the people are friendly. We get tourism in here from all over the state, really. It's hard to believe over at Occoneechee (State Park), which is so close to Clarksville, we get over 200,000 visitors every year."

Caparatta is also very pleased with the new Marina project. "When you offer better things to people, they want to come," says Caparatta. "I just love Clarksville. I just love living here, I love the people."

"I'm originally from up around the Pennsylvania, New Jersey area ... it took me a while to get used to life here," he adds.

"Now, when I go back up to Pennsylvania or Jersey, it's overwhelming. I love coming back to Clarksville." ■

IF YOU GO...

Prestwoud Plantation, the 1790s home of Sir Peyton and Lady Jean Skipwith, is a stunning national historic landmark open April 15 – Oct. 31. Prestwoud is located two miles north of Clarksville on U.S. 15.

Prestwoud Plantation has received important new additions to its original library of Lady Jean Skipwith, which was the largest library of any woman in 18th-century America, according to Julian B. Hudson, president of the Prestwoud foundation.

The library is noted for its volumes on horticulture, astronomy, geography and 18th century taboos, such as risqué fiction for that period.

The **Clarksville Regional Museum** houses an 1800s parlor, the permanent Buffalo Springs room and a tobacco room.

An exhibit at **Occoneechee State Park** tells the Occoneechee Indian story, the Native Americans who first inhabited this area.

The **Mecklenburg County Veterans Memorial** is dedicated to nearly 600 patriots from Mecklenburg County. The Memorial is located at the intersections of Highways 15/49 and Business 58 in Clarksville.

The town has its own **historic walking tour**, including some 60 buildings, homes, churches and businesses dating back to 1824. There are wonderful architectural treasures on the Virginia National Register of Historic Places.



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Voted by the Southeast Tourism Society in 2011 as "One of the Top 20 Festivals In The Southeast," Lakefest is capped off each year by a spectacular display of fireworks.

In 2012, the venerable **Lakefest** is 35 years old, capped by the annual parade of fireworks on the lake.

Lakefest, planned for July 19-21, is one of the major summer events in the region. Other fun events include the **Fourth of July Parade**, **Harvest Days Festival** on Oct. 6, **Christmas Holiday Open House** on Nov. 18, and **Christmas Parade** on Dec. 7. For a full schedule of community events go to www.clarksvilleva.com, or call 434-374-2436.

Kinderton Country Club hosts a variety of events for golfing enthusiasts, with popular tournaments and other attractions that boost the overall tourist base. Clarksville also produced Lane Hite, this year's Virginia State amateur medalist for stroke play.

Clarksville has a variety of restaurant and culinary choices, including the distinctive **Cooper's Landing Inn and Traveler's Tavern**. There's the **Great Wall Chinese** restaurant and, as always, the ever-popular **Pizza Pub**, among other options.

Clarksville has extremely convenient transportation links. The town is located off U.S. Highway 58, which runs the length of Virginia's southern border. The area also features soon-to-be-expanded marina boat options, and the **Lake Country Regional airport** (formerly Marks Municipal). ■



JUSTIN EUBANK PHOTO

Clarksville's **Lakefest** draws huge crowds annually with a wide range of attractions including hot air balloons, helicopter rides, live music and hundreds of vendors.