

*This year **Cooperative Living** is taking a road trip along the length of U.S. Route 1 as it crosses Virginia from the North Carolina border to Washington, D.C. In each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way, her...*

stories from the Road



A Stew of Discovery in Southside



by Deborah Huso,
Contributing Writer

If you were to ask Cheryl Johnson, co-owner of the Alberta General Store & Deli, how I happened to walk into her establishment just off the beaten path of old Route 1 about midway between Petersburg and the Virginia-North Carolina state line, she'd probably say it was an act of God.

No, not on the scale of a hurricane, but some things, you know, were just meant to be — like that hankering I had to take a quick jaunt off the main drag while cruising through Brunswick County one Monday afternoon in late October and see what there was to see.

And after a couple of hours of chit-chat with loquacious Cheryl and her more demure husband Chuck, author of the creamy chicken salad sandwich I sat munching on while being introduced to stewmasters and town dogs, I knew that I'd hit a little pot of gold in south-central Virginia.

But that's how things go on road trips like this, and I've been taking them as far back as I can remember. Long before I could even drive, I'd climb into my dad's pick-up truck on lazy Saturday afternoons once the farm work and yard chores were done, and he and I would hit the local back roads, fording streams, scampering into old country stores for ice cream, discovering little farms hidden in the hollows of Virginia's Blue Ridge, living life on the fly to see what we might come across.

And that's pretty much how I started my semi-random journey up Virginia's old Route 1 from the North Carolina line to Alexandria, tripping along at a leisurely Sunday-driver pace and pausing to take in whatever struck my fancy, from roadside flea markets in the middle of nowhere to one-dog towns known for championship Brunswick stew.



HEADING UP HISTORIC ROUTE 1

Before construction of I-95, Route 1 was the primary north-south corridor from the very tip of the Florida Keys to the southern coast of Maine. And, not unlike its more famous counterpart, Route 66, it was chock full of roadside diners, ranch-style motor inns, funky tourist traps, gas stations selling glass-bottled pop, and Main Street towns loaded with character. Route 1 was known as the Atlantic Highway when first conceived in 1911, and as automobiles gained supremacy as the primary mode of American transportation, the highway's significance grew and grew.

That would all change, however, with the construction of the nation's Interstate Highway System, authorized by Congress in 1956. By the late 1970s, I-95 was complete, creating a faster north-south corridor and relegating Route 1 to "local road" status. And with that change in status came a

change in the economy for many of the localities through which the old highway passed. Bypassed by the Interstate, businesses and communities that depended on vehicular traffic for economic sustenance began to close up, deteriorate, and become things of the past. And all along Route 1 through Virginia, you'll see the remnants of those bygone years in the heyday of Americans' love affair with the automobile.

CRUISING INTO SOUTH HILL

But even as I passed long-boarded-up gas stations and restaurants on my journey from the southern state line north, I found plenty of communities along the old corridor that had found ways to coax passersby like me off the Interstate and onto the back roads.

Some places, like South Hill, have actually grown since I-95's construction. Population 4,635, this old railroad town incorporated in 1901 was once a stop on the



Atlantic and Danville Railway and was the third-largest flue-cured tobacco market in Virginia. Today, the old railroad depot downtown serves as headquarters for the South Hill Chamber of Commerce, as well as for the South Hill Model Railroad Museum and the Virginia S. Evans Doll Museum.

If you're lucky, you'll stop into the railroad depot on a day when curator Max Crowder is on duty. The self-proclaimed "Grand Poopah" of South Hill (and yes, he has a nametag to prove it), Crowder is a font of information on everything from the region's railroad history to where to find the best eats. Retired from Burlington Industries, Crowder is quick to note that he is not a Chamber volunteer. "They actually pay me to do this job," he says with a little chuckle.



Among his duties is giving travelers like me the grand tour of the model railroads that now call this depot home, one of which was donated by a gentleman who once made models like these for the movies. One end of his railroad is a to-scale replica of the town of South Hill. The museum's other model railroad was donated by a Charleston, S.C., resident who worked on the model from the age of 12 until he died. His model is appropriate-

The old railroad depot in South Hill houses its Chamber of Commerce, as well as a model railroad museum and a doll museum.

ly named the Wiggledy Bump & Aggravation Railroad ... or at least that's what the "Grand Poopah" says.

The depot's doll museum is another unusual treasure, consisting of over 500 dolls donated by former local schoolteacher Virginia Evans, who said she'd give her collection to the Chamber on the condition that the organization never allow any other dolls but hers into the museum.

The depot is a good place to start a visit to South Hill, but just wandering around town can get you acquainted with the flavor of this little community pretty quickly, too. The streets here are lined with neat little Arts and Crafts-style homes under giant shade trees, and the locals are so darn friendly, it almost takes your breath away. Pop into the Dollar General on Atlantic Street for a soda, and you might be shocked by how the cashier begins talking as if you are an old friend, asking how you're going to spend this lovely, sunny afternoon.

That's one thing that inspired relatively new South Hill resident Daphne Glover to settle here for the long haul. A waitress at the very popular Brian's Steakhouse just off I-95 Exit 12, she lived 20 years in Winston-Salem, N.C., where she says folks were friendly but not in a South Hill-way of friendliness. "People here are genuinely friendly," Glover says in her sweet southern drawl. "They mean it." And I could believe it, too. As I sat

IF YOU GO



The best place to start a tour of South Hill is at the **South Hill Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center**, also home to the **South Hill Model Railroad Museum** and **Virginia S. Evans Doll Museum and Wildlife Exhibit** (201 S. Mecklenburg Ave., 434-447-4547, www.southhillchamber.com). And while you're in town, be sure to get a grounding in the region's tobacco-growing heritage at the **Tobacco Farm Life Museum of Virginia** on the corner of West Main and Lunenburg Ave. You can also take in a show at **The Colonial Center for the Performing Arts** (220 S. Mecklenburg, 434-262-4170, www.colonialcenterva.org), a restored 1925 Vaudeville theater. If you're into antiques, be sure to stop in and say "howdy" to Lucy Gillespie Queen, owner of **J's Antiques** (photo at left), which offers an assortment of period furniture, china, accessories, and chair

caning (106 N. Mecklenburg Ave., 434-447-7089). And if you need gear for a fishing trip on nearby **Lake Gaston** or the **John H. Kerr Reservoir**, stop by **Twin Lakes Outfitters** (1320 W. Danville St., 434-447-2710).

For the best eats, the locals go to **Brian's Steak House** (625 E. Atlantic St., 434-447-3169, www.brianssteakhouse.com), which serves up not only sirloin and prime rib, but also pulled pork barbecue, Virginia cured country ham, and fried chicken livers. Other options include **The Horseshoe Restaurant** (311 W. Danville, 434-447-7781), a classic diner that's been operational since the 1930s, and **Kahills Restaurant** (1791 N. Mecklenburg Ave., 434-447-6941), a local favorite for seafood.

While traveling up Route 1 from South Hill, be sure to take a side trip to Alberta, and have lunch (or should I say Brunswick

in a corner booth savoring a meal of steak tips and wild rice, watching the locals come and go, I saw customer after customer stop and chat with their neighbors, recounting births of grandchildren and marriages of daughters. It's the kind of place where everybody knows everybody.

THE NOT-TO-MISS VILLAGE OF ALBERTA

The same might be said of the little village of Alberta, about 15 miles north of South Hill. It's the kind of place you could easily miss but shouldn't. This one-street town has one store, one policeman, one town clerk, two hairdressers, and one town



Chuck and Cheryl Johnson bought the Alberta General Store and moved from Norfolk to the tiny village. Their four-legged family member, Albert, is the only dog in town.

stew?) at the **Alberta General Store & Deli** (106 W. First Ave., 434-949-7020, www.albertageneralstore.com). If you're an adventurer, consider learning to scuba dive at **Lake Rawlings Scuba & Camping Park** (804-478-9000, www.lakerawlings.com) in northern Brunswick County.

FOR TRAVEL INFORMATION:

Learn more about the history of old Route 1, and obtain detailed maps and visitor guides at www.historicrouteone.com.

Mecklenburg County
www.mecklenburgva.com

Town of South Hill
www.southhillva.org

Brunswick County
www.brunswickco.com ■

dog (appropriately named "Albert," of course). And the centerpiece of this village is the Alberta General Store & Deli, which has been in continuous operation as a general store about as far back as anyone here can remember, which is about 1930 or so.

"Uncle Chuck" Johnson, who purchased the store a year and a half ago with his wife Cheryl, is a third-generation native of Alberta. He met San Diego native Cheryl more than 25 years ago after telling her father, with whom he worked in the insurance business, that he wanted to date his daughter. The rest is history ... and an interesting one at that.

The couple, who lived in Norfolk until purchasing the Alberta General Store in the summer of 2011, said they took a giant leap of faith in moving back to Chuck's hometown. The two had been making Brunswick stew for church fundraisers and festivals for years. "Everybody told us to make it professionally," explains bubbly Cheryl, who is a little amazed herself that her meeting with destiny should come through a stewpot.

The Johnsons decided to take their friends' and acquaintances' advice and actually bought the store in Alberta as home base for their stew and as a gathering point for all the stewmasters who come to Brunswick County each October for The Taste of Brunswick Festival. Chuck's Brunswick stew is the menu favorite, though I have to admit he makes a mean chicken salad and some darn good "skin-on" fries, too.

Chuck says most of the couple's business is local, which is almost hard to believe when you see how quiet this little town is ... at first, anyway. But after only a couple hours' visit, I found myself walking the village with a Pied Piper-type gathering of locals that Cheryl had coaxed into joining us whenever they popped their heads in the store or drove by on the street.

Among the folks we picked up was town clerk Gloria Roberta, who admits she doesn't see a whole lot of action. In fact, Cheryl said she fell in love with Alberta the day she walked into Roberta's office and watched a complaint being filed on a sticky note. "That's when I knew I had to move here," she laughs.

And in the last year and a half, the Johnsons have made the Alberta General Store a centerpiece of the community. Just like in the good old days, kids pop in for soda and candy and get their height measured and recorded on a post at the back of the store. "This isn't just a store," says Cheryl. "It's a place of fellowship." ■



Brunswick Stewmaster George Daniel

While the town of Brunswick, Ga., often lays claim to being where Brunswick stew originated, make that suggestion to anyone in Brunswick County, Virginia, and you might get a guffaw at best. Especially if you suggest it to George Daniel of the Red Oak Stew Crew in Alberta.

A lifetime resident of Brunswick County and three-years-running champion of A Taste of Brunswick Festival, this local auctioneer and stewmaster is a bit protective of the history of Brunswick stew, if not his own personal recipe for it. "If I were to give you my recipe, it wouldn't taste the same." That's likely true because, chances are, a lot of Daniel's friendly bravado goes into that stew. At last year's festival, his stew crew made 85 gallons of the stuff, which was gobbled up by some 10,000 festival attendees. "If you like my stew, you're coming back," says Daniel, who notes the festival, which is going into its 17th year, fills Brunswick County with such a divine smell that you can pick up the scent two miles away from the festival site on the campus of Southside Virginia Community College. Last year, 27 stewmasters competed, including Chuck Johnson of the Alberta General Store.

And there is no more appropriate place to be cooking up Brunswick stew, which is typically a blend of chicken and vegetables, since, as legend has it, the stew started here. Purportedly, the stew came out of a local hunting party's culinary efforts in 1828. While the hunting party of Dr. Creed Haskins was out searching for game, the doctor's cook, "Uncle" Jimmy Matthews, shot some squirrels, tossed the meat in a pot with some butter, onions, and stale bread, and created the concoction (with a dash of Dr. Haskins' brandy) we now know as Brunswick stew.

For more information on the 2013 A Taste of Brunswick Festival, visit www.TasteofBrunswickFestival.com. ■