



This year *Cooperative Living* is taking a road trip along Route 360 as it crosses Virginia from the Chesapeake Bay to North Carolina. Each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way.

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# Southern Charm and Southern Fixin's in Keysville

*This highly walkable town along Route 360 will keep you coming back for more — more fried chicken, more friendly faces, and, of course, more ice cream.*

As Route 360 moves more deeply into Southside Virginia, still following a largely straight path parallel to Norfolk Southern railroad tracks, the landscape grows more rolling, giving way here and again to fields of bright green tobacco and corn. Just south of 360's convergence with Route 15 lies the Mayberry-like town of Keysville.

And given Keysville's location not too far from the North Carolina town that spawned both Andy Griffith and his popular sitcom, it is perhaps no surprise. This stretch of southern Piedmont is very much reminiscent of an earlier time.

Luckily, I find a native willing to show me around town, a native with a black cherry ice cream cone, I might add. Kim Henry, proprietor of the town's seven-year-old ice cream shop, Polar Xpress, knows how to win a travel columnist's



Some of the storefronts along Keysville's Railroad Avenue, a main thoroughfare of this small Southside Virginia community.

heart. As I indulge my sweet tooth under the shade of a bright yellow umbrella along Keysville's main drag, known as King Street, Henry tells me what drew her and her husband, who serves in the Air National Guard, to this sweet speck of a town.

## WHERE EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

Ohio natives, Henry's family came to Keysville 15 years ago, following her husband's parents to a slower pace of life in southern Virginia. Both of Henry's teenage girls grew up in the town and even help in mom's ice cream shop, which happens to occupy a little building directly adjacent to the former home of Tri-County Ford — now an empty warehouse about to be turned into a live-music venue and bistro by Paul Robleto.

As it happens, Robleto is also proprietor of my evening's accommodations at Roselawn Bed and Breakfast, an 1850s plantation house on the edge of town. Curiously enough, Roselawn doesn't serve breakfast, but they do serve complimentary wine as well as having an open bar. But that's likely because Charlotte County, true to its old-fashioned southern roots, is a dry community. Which gets me thinking of an alternate meaning for B&B, but back to ice cream ...

Henry, who actually knew nothing about selling ice cream before she opened her shop seven years ago, explains her entrepreneurial venture as a wonderful opportunity to provide the local kids a place to hang out as well as offering a gathering place for families on summer evenings. "My favorite part has been meeting everyone in town," she says.

And Henry isn't joking. As we stroll King Street, everyone says "hello," and we pop into one storefront after another chatting with Keysville's numerous small-business owners.

Among them is Shelly Wilke, owner of Lazy Daisy, the flower shop she always dreamed of owning. While Wilke's father once worked for Southside Electric Cooperative, she says she decided to settle in Keysville for the good local schools and small-town atmosphere. Many of the flowers she sells she grows herself, including Asiatic lilies and gladiolas.

A few more shops down, and we pop in to chat with lifetime Keysville resident and third-generation Thompson Insurance Agency owner Merrienne Dixon and her assistant, Peggy Agee. Dixon's grandmother started the business, later joined by her son, Dixon's father. As it happens Dixon is a dancer, teaching ballet and tap at the local studio.

Henry and I pretty much cover the whole of the town this way, drifting down back streets, passing in front of the old hotel (now apartments) overlooking the shortline tracks of the Buckingham Branch Railroad. "I love the walkability of this town," Henry says, noting that many locals know her as "that walking lady," since she was influential in making a map of walks (including distances) around Keysville.



Kim Henry relaxes with an ice cream cone outside of her business, Polar Xpress. Originally from Ohio, Henry says her entrepreneurial venture is a wonderful opportunity to provide the local kids a place to hang out, as well as offering a gathering place for families on summer evenings.



Roselawn (above), on the outskirts of Keysville, is a picturesque 1850s plantation house that owner Paul Robleto has turned into a country inn. Shelly Wilke (left) is owner of Lazy Daisy, the flower shop she always dreamed about owning. She says she decided to settle in Keysville for the good local schools and homey, small-town atmosphere. Many of the flowers that she sells she grows herself.



Merrienne Dixon (left) and Peggy Agee at Thompson Insurance, which Dixon owns and Agee assists with the operation of. Dixon, whose grandmother started the business, is a dancer who teaches ballet and tap at the local studio. Above, the short-line tracks of Buckingham Branch Railroad run through Keysville. It's a family-owned short-line railroad that delivers and receives freight cars from four large rail companies.



Larry and Beth Shook are new owners of the Exxon gas station, which has been turned into a destination deli by the couple.

### FAST, FRIED, STEWED AND CANDIED: SOUTHERN VICTUALS IN THE SOUTHSIDE

As we wander, we also run into the new owners of the Exxon gas station turned into a destination deli by Larry and Beth Shook, who already owned the local NAPA Auto Parts store. "We were just sitting over there at the store and said, wouldn't it be fun to own the gas station?" chuckles Beth. After their purchase a year ago, they gutted and expanded the building, opening an expanded deli that has arguably become the most popular place in town to grab lunch.

But for dinnertime, the hotspot is definitely Sheldon's, which opened in Keysville in the 1940s. Current owner Grover Sheldon and his sister, Restaurant Manager Betty Baldwin,

grew up in the family business their father and uncle started.

"In the 1950s and '60s, we were the only restaurant around," Sheldon explains. To this day, the place, which serves up serious southern home cooking like stewed tomatoes, black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, and fried chicken, is the hotspot after local high school athletic events.

"A lot of the people who come in here are repeat business," Sheldon adds. "It's not unusual to have two or three generations sitting at the same table."

Sheldon's is probably most popular for its succulent buffet, which includes homemade rolls and their own on-site smoked ham. In the old days, the motel side of the business was ripe with innovation. "In the 1940s, the leisure industry was just getting off the ground," Sheldon explains, and the restaurant's adjacent motel cabins were heated with a boiler that also kept the restaurant toasty. At the time, central heating was pretty unusual, particularly for a motel.

Sheldon, who has lived his whole life in Keysville, says that while the town now has a number of restaurants and even more traffic than it once did, a

lot of things haven't changed. "We're one of the few counties in Virginia without a stoplight," he notes.

Sheldon and Baldwin host a lot of banquets and family gatherings in event space they have added to the restaurant, and one of the more common things they do is provide food and gathering room for families after funerals. "If anybody dies," Baldwin says, "we're one of the first to be there for them."

The brother-and-sister team say everything in the restaurant is made from scratch with the help of 28 full- and part-time employees. As for me, I grab a plate and hit the buffet, hardly knowing where to begin. Creamed corn, green beans cooked with ham, candied yams, and rotisserie chicken ... "We do simple but good food," Sheldon says. "And if I have to wash dishes, I wash dishes. Along with great food, you need great hospitality." ■



Sheldon's Restaurant and Motel are Keysville community landmarks.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FACEBOOK.COM/  
SHELDONSHOSPITALITY

## ROY CLARK WAS HERE

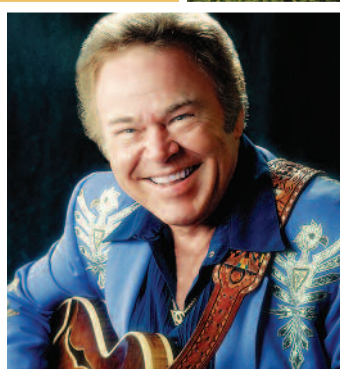
The tiny crossroads village of Meherrin seems little more than a couple of gas stations and a one-room post office, but if you're a country-music fan, you might want to do more than zoom on through.

In front of the little white post office just off Route 360 is a monument to Country Music Hall of Fame and Grand Ole Opry member Roy Clark. He is best known for his role as host of the popular country variety show *Hee Haw*, which aired from 1969 to 1992.

Clark was born in Meherrin in 1933, and, according to the locals, he still comes back to his birthplace each fall to hunt.

Until recently, you could still drive past the home in which he was born, but today, that building is gone, the only semblance of its existence a pile of rubble and a crude marker. A skilled guitarist and banjo player, he is one of the last surviving male members of the *Hee Haw* cast. ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF OPRY.COM/ARTIST/ROY-CLARK



Meherrin native Roy Clark (left) is honored with a brick monument outside of the Meherrin post office on Route 360. Clark is best known as host of the popular country variety show *Hee Haw* from 1969 to 1992.

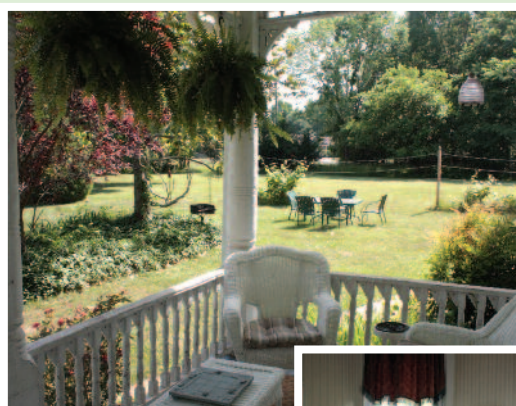
## ● IF YOU GO ...

The stretch of Route 360 that meanders through the increasingly rolling countryside southwest of Crewe and Burkeville and the tiny, crossroads hamlets of Green Bay and Meherrin isn't necessarily rife with roadside attractions, but it is a bit like driving back in time, as the close-knit community of **Keysville** ([www.townofkeysville.com](http://www.townofkeysville.com)) will attest.

For such a small community, Keysville has a selection of restaurants, the most-visited being **Sheldon's** (1450 Locust Highway, 434-736-8391), where down-home southern-style cooking will remind you of Grandma's house. And while Betty Baldwin's

homemade German chocolate cake is to die for (made from her mother's recipe), you might also want to pick up a black cherry ice cream cone at **Polar Xpress** (150 King St.).

Spend the night at **Roselawn Bed and Breakfast** (475 Four Locust Highway, 434-736-8129, [www.roselawn.us](http://www.roselawn.us)), and enjoy a bottle of complimentary wine, whirlpool bath, and quiet lodgings only a short drive from town. Proprietor Paul Robleto says he and his wife were the first non-family owners of the house, which was once the centerpiece of a 1,000-acre plantation. ■



The view from the porch at Roselawn (above), and the inn's parlor (right) hint at the genteel country hospitality exuded by the inn and the Keysville community.

