



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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The Best Grains, The Best Digs, and The Best Eats

*Look beyond the corn and wheat fields along Route 360
through Virginia's Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula.
There's a lot going on behind the corn rows ...*

As I cruise west along Route 360 out of Reedville, long fields stretch out on either side of the road — just tasseling cornstalks, shimmering fields of golden-brown wheat, the nodding heads of sunflowers. Northumberland County's agricultural heritage is rich, and the landscape here reminds me some of my family's

native southwest Minnesota — flat, cultivated fields as far as the eye can see. The granddaughter of a row-crop producer who worked himself into the grave selling to the traditional commodities market, I can't help but admire the *chutspah* of Northern Neck producer Billy Dawson.

SOMETHING'S "BREWING" LOCALLY

Dawson, whose Bay's Best Feed production facility along Route 360 outside Heathsville, could easily be overlooked as just another warehouse building, has been producing grain on



The Rappahannock River bridge at Tappahannock connects the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula.

this peninsula for three decades. But about seven years ago, he walked into a local country store, happened to take a look at a bag of whole cracked corn and saw it was from Pennsylvania ... despite the fact that right outside the retail establishment's doors were miles and miles of cornfields.

It didn't make much sense to Dawson, who

decided it was high time he started direct marketing locally. "I was tired of taking my grain to market, dumping it in a hole, and never getting any feedback," he says. All his dedication to raising the "best" really didn't seem to matter in the commodities market.

So he decided to try his hand at value-added agriculture, continuing to raise conventional row crops on his 1,200-acre farm, but gradually opening a local direct market in cracked corn.

Pretty soon word got around, and Rick Wasmund, owner of Copper Fox Distillery in Sperryville, Va., contacted him asking if

Dawson could produce a really clean barley for making whiskey. Dawson decided to give it a whirl, grateful to at last have a market that would appreciate his attention to the quality of his harvest. Today Dawson raises grain for more than one distillery and alehouse, serving customers as far away as Asheville, N.C. You won't find any brewers on the Northern Neck using Dawson's grain ... not yet. But the time might be coming.

"If independent malt houses keep coming online," Dawson says, "I'll ramp up barley production even further."

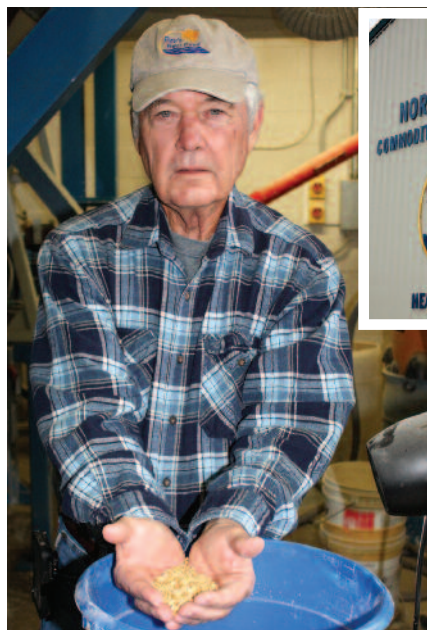
In the meantime, you might want to stop in at a local feed or hardware store and pick up some of Bay's Best Feed's wonderfully weed-free sunflower seeds for your birdfeeders.

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY IN MIDWEST STYLE

Dawson isn't the only progressive entrepreneur along Route 360, however. One can find a few more in Tappahannock, a town on the banks of the Rappahannock on Virginia's Middle Peninsula that, when I visited it about 15 years ago, seemed to have seen its best days. What a change a couple of decades makes. Today, Tappahannock's downtown historic district is on a slow build to becoming a destination for more than the kayakers who like to ply the Rappahannock come spring. High-end antique and art galleries as well as a couple of trendy new restaurants now have a place on the core streets of this old port town that was a major center of river commerce in the 17th and 18th centuries.

And now Ric Jefferson and Jeremy Gassen have joined the ranks of local businesspeople looking to capitalize on a growing tourism industry, mostly from the metro D.C. area. They purchased the c.1850 Essex Inn on Duke Street, about a block from the riverfront, less than a year ago. Both are Midwesterners, so they may seem unlikely stewards of this sprawling southern Greek Revival mansion, but somehow the shoe fits.

Perhaps it's Gassen's wonderfully outgoing nature and the fact that he uses words like "wonky" that delight me. Wiry and energetic, he laughs easily as he gives me the grand tour of the house and grounds, remarking that guests' favorite room is the "butler's pantry," where complimentary beer and wine are available to cap off a day on the river.



Billy Dawson (above and right) has produced quality grains on the Northern Neck for three decades.



Ric Jefferson and Jeremy Gassen (left) purchased the c. 1850 Essex Inn on Duke Street in Tappahannock less than a year ago. Below are scenes from around the Greek Revival mansion, including the 350-year-old box elder tree (bottom right) in the inn's gardens.



I spend the evening in the main house with its four-over-four architecture, wide hallways for what Gassen calls “natural air conditioning” when one opens wide the front and back doors. Adjacent to the main house are the old 1840s slave quarters, now turned into cozy suites with fireplaces and kitchenettes. Gassen tells me that almost all of the mansion’s formerly gas chandeliers are original, as are the solid heart-pine floors, and 12 fireplaces. And then there is the inn’s pride and joy — the 350-year-old box elder tree in the gardens.

More reserved but sweetly smiling, Jefferson is the pulse of the inn in many ways. A St. Louis native and chef, he remarks, “My specialty has always been breakfast. Lucky me!” Indeed, for breakfast at The Essex Inn is sure to please. Mine was a southwest-style omelet with tomatoes and biscuits.

FOOD HEAVEN

I begin to think I have food obsession because it isn’t too long after breakfast that I show up a few miles south of

Tappahannock at a former roadside foodstand known as Almost There (appropriately located next to Watt’s Grocery, which has been serving locals since the 1940s). Today this little restaurant has cozy indoor seating with food to match. I dine on a decadent grilled cheese sandwich with chicken pot pie soup.

Proprietor Joni Walsh eyes me a little suspiciously when I start taking pictures of my surroundings and plunks herself down at my table to ask what’s going on. Once I produce my travel columnist credentials, she’s satisfied and smiles widely, eyes brightening behind her glasses. She tells me how this little restaurant, rich with downhome cooking, started as a food truck seven years earlier.

“All the bank people ate here,” she says. “They just kept coming.” That seemed to justify a real restaurant. Walsh, a native of Montana, has actually been in the restaurant business most of her life. “You find a need, and you fill it,” she



Joni Walsh (above) is proprietor of Almost There, a cozy little restaurant south of Tappahannock that features downhome cooking.

explains simply. Food is a basic need, hence her tag line: “Feeding God’s people.”

Walsh

remarks matter-of-factly as I sip my soup, “We have a lot of hungry men who come up here.” No kidding. As the lunch hour progresses, I see painters, construction workers, and even a few suits walk in. Walsh hugs them all. They are, after all, her “regulars.” ■

● IF YOU GO ...

Before continuing your journey down Route 360 on Virginia’s Northern Neck, check out the **Northern Neck Tourism Commission** (804-333-1919, www.northernneck.org). Just south of Warsaw, Route 360 crosses the Rappahannock River onto the Middle Peninsula, specifically **Essex County** (www.essex-virginia.org). You can pick up maps and brochures at the **Tappahannock-Essex Chamber of Commerce** (205 Cross St., Tappahannock).

The “Rivah Country,” as the locals call it, appears pretty quiet, and, if you’re not paying attention, you may think there’s not much to do along 360. But there are plenty of diversions, including winery tours and tastings at **Belle Mount Vineyards** (2570 Newland Road, 804-333-4700, www.bellemount.com) just outside Warsaw. You can also enjoy a Rappahannock River cruise aboard the *Captain Thomas*, which departs from the dock at the foot of the Hoskins Creek Bridge in Tappahannock at 10 a.m. daily (804-453-2628, www.tangercruise.com). The 20-mile narrated



cruise offers bald eagle sightings as well as a tour and tasting at **Ingleside Vineyards** (804-224-8687, www.inglesidevineyards.com).

While in Tappahannock, make a stop at the **Essex County Museum and Historical Society** (218 Water Lane, 804-434-4690), which is open daily except Sundays and Wednesdays, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Admission is free. And check out the historic district’s antique shops, too. My personal favorite is **Queen Street Antique Mall** (227 Queen St., 804-683-5715, queenstreetantiquemall.com). Owner Brian Penniston carries beautiful and carefully selected 17th- and 18th-century antiques ranging from tiger maple chests of drawers to tilt candle tables. “Everything we carry is

The Essex County Courthouse (left).

Civil War era or earlier,” he says. “We don’t mess with the Victorian era or deal in reproductions.”

For the best eats while you’re traveling this section of Route 360, stop by **The Tavern Restaurant** (73 Monument Place, Heathsville, 804-580-7900), which serves lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday and Sunday brunch at the historic Rice’s Hotel and Hughlett’s Tavern, a local landmark built in the 1700s. In Tappahannock, you can enjoy local seafood like sesame encrusted scallops with lime as well as traditional southern favorites like cornbread (and let me tell you, it’s the sweetest I’ve ever tasted!) at **The Fat Finch Café** (324 Prince Street, 804-333-3138), and be sure to stop in for lunch just south of town at **Almost There** (Route 360, Millers Tavern, 804-443-2622) for some seriously delicious homemade soups and sandwiches.

Spend the night at the comfortable and elegant Essex Inn (203 Duke St., 804-443-9900, www.essexinnva.com), which also hosts “Chase Those Monday Blues Away” from 6 to 8 p.m. on Mondays, of course, with live music and refreshments. ■