



Oriskany: Off Botetourt's Beaten Path

This quaint and remote mountain community is a side-trip destination well worth taking.

Craig Creek literally meanders through the 40-odd miles of Craig Valley from its headwaters in Giles through Craig County and New Castle (the only incorporated town on its route), finally connecting with the James River at Eagle Rock.

Names such as Hipes, Parr, Strom and Surber are dots on old maps, but they no longer represent communities or even clusters of homes, nor the rail stops where the names came from.

In fact, the former C&O Railroad spur that once served Craig Valley between Eagle Rock and New Castle was abandoned in the late 1950s.

The rail bed is still there, though. The rail spur right-of-way was deeded to the Virginia Department of Transportation, and parts are now secondary roads; other parts more or less unusable, and still other parts serving as paths through the national forest that covers most of the mountain land that cradles the valley from both sides.

The valley's heyday — from the mid-1800s until the 1930s and '40s — was because of the iron ore and timber in the mountains, and the bottomland along the creek where generations of farmers worked the soil.

Today, there are a few reminders of the iron ore days, much of the mountain land is national forest where timbering has been curbed for 30 years, and the farming community is fading with age in these isolated hinterlands of western Botetourt (pronounced by residents as Bot-e-tot) County.

There is one community left, however. Oriskany.

Carol Surber Lewis describes it as "The Little Village that Time Forgot. It's bucolic, way out of the mainstream, peaceful, quiet, lots of wildlife."

While well out of the way, it's easy to find on Rt. 615 or Craig Creek Road, that also meanders through the valley between Eagle Rock and New Castle. When you reach the beautiful country church that sits on a slight rise just off the secondary road, you're there.

King Memorial Community Church is as iconic as Craig Creek that — in one of its many ox bows — is just across the road. The end of Little Mountain seems to bow appropriately to the community church from the west.

Just around the corner from King Memorial in what's named Oriskany

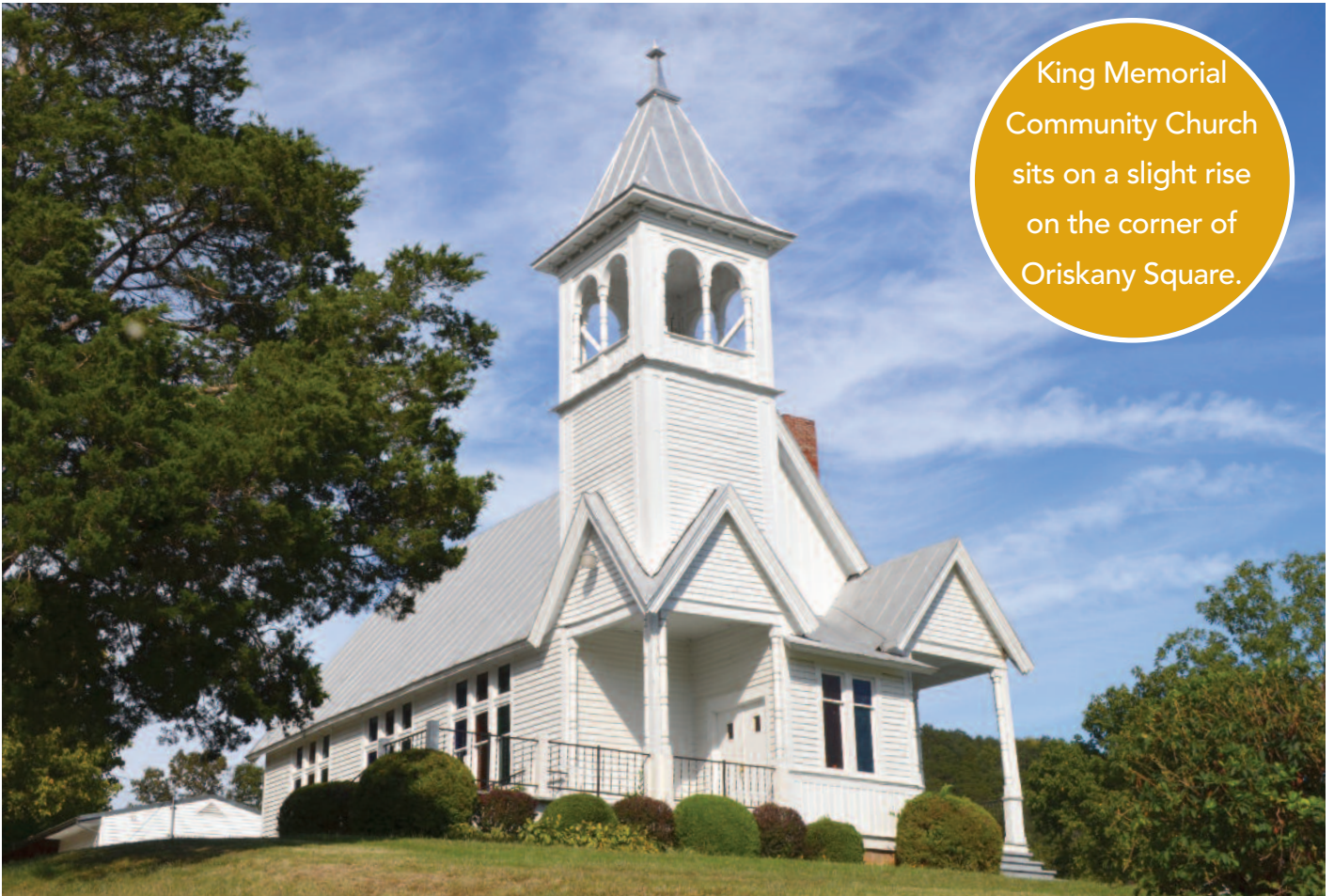
Square is the Oriskany Post Office.

Unlike many rural post offices, this one is still open Monday through Saturday, but only two hours a day, 12:30 to 2:30 p.m.

Right now, Karen Mitchell, a clerk from the Eagle Rock Post Office that's about 17 miles and 30 minutes away, drives up to open up. Customers are few in the small building that once served as the community's train station when the rail spur was still in operation, but seven people still pick up their General Delivery mail there. The church and the post office are the only two public buildings in the village.

Carol Lewis and her husband Jack moved to Oriskany when she acquired property her family owned there. That includes Surber Station, one of the stops on the former Craig Valley Line. For several years after renovating the building, the Lewises provided vacation rentals in what they named "Olde Surber Station." Recently, they moved back into the station and stopped taking vacationers.

"Oriskany used to be a bustling place, with the train station, iron ore mines, schoolhouse, multiple stores, barbershop, busy tomato canning businesses. There



King Memorial
Community Church
sits on a slight rise
on the corner of
Oriskany Square.

were big plans for Oriskany and the railroad branch that passed through it before the Great Lakes ore discoveries made our iron ore unmarketable,” Lewis explains.

“The town of Lignite, a sizable and busy iron ore mining town, was right next to Oriskany, housing hundreds of people,” she continues. “Now it’s a ghost town with just a few ruins left.”

According to local lore, much of the company-owned town was dismantled and packed up for use in the northern mining communities.

There hasn’t been a store in Oriskany for decades, and just last year residents were invited to choose whether to drive to Eagle Rock or Fincastle to vote. The Board of Supervisors followed the county Electoral Board’s recommendation to consolidate the Oriskany Voting Precinct with one of the others, in a money-saving move.

The Oriskany folks picked the Botetourt County seat, Fincastle, even though it also requires a 17-mile, 30-minute drive, first into Craig County and then turning east across the gap in Price’s Mountain. That says something about the drive on Rt. 615 to Eagle Rock, but it’s also a shorter route to the shopping and employment

opportunities in southern Botetourt and Roanoke.

The 75 or so registered voters in the Oriskany Precinct at one time had a reputation for being very accurate in forecasting the outcome of an election before the returns were tallied across the state and country.

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Gayle King Hannah is a native of the area, living on what she calls “the outskirts of Oriskany.” She’s never lived anywhere else. “There’s very few of us original ones left,” she says. She’s from a farming family, but spent more than 20 years as the Oriskany Postmaster. She still works there, but for limited days since her retirement.

“There’s just a couple of farm families left,” she explains. “Before, that was the biggest part of Oriskany.

“I enjoyed working at the post office,” she continues. “The biggest excitement comes around when someone stops by with, ‘I’m lost. Where am I?’” she laughs.

There are some new folks, though but not many.

The Rev. David Cox counts six or seven new homes in the past few years.

Cox, pastor for 25 years of the non-denominational King Memorial Community Church, counted in his head the number of people living in Oriskany “proper.”

“Under 50,” he says. When asked, he counts again. Five are school age. The youngest is a fifth-grader at Eagle Rock Elementary School. High school students travel 29 miles to James River High School



The Little Village that Time Forgot



(Clockwise, from upper left): The Oriskany Post Office is open two hours a day, six days a week. The small building was once the train station for the Craig Valley Line, a spur of the former C&O Railroad. The Rev. David Cox and Gayle Hannah in the Oriskany Post Office, where Hannah served as postmaster for more than 20 years. Foot bridges — or swinging bridges — like this one are common around Oriskany and up and down Craig Creek, thanks to a number of secondary road fords. The footbridges at the “park and walk” spots allow residents on the other side of the creek to get in and out when the water’s high. Little Mountain rises to the west out of Oriskany, and in the background, Bald Mountain (left) and Rich Patch Mountain (right) meet forming a gap through to Barbours Creek on the other side.

near Buchanan. Again, in a nearly literal sense, almost on the other side of the county.

If you need groceries, New Castle is about 12 miles west on Rt. 615 where new owners have taken over what was the IGA.

“You go to New Castle if you need something during the week,” Sandy Ledford says. She’s another lifelong Oriskany resident — 69 years. “Then you head to Kroger or Walmart at least once a month.”

She laughs. “Most people come in here wanting cellphones. You can forget that. It’s not going to happen.”

Cox says there are spots in Oriskany where you can get a couple of reception bars on your cellphone, but there’s nothing consistent about that.

There’s a consensus that, if anything, Oriskany is quiet.

“It’s quiet and just Oriskany,” Ledford explains when asked to describe the community.

Hannah agrees, and adds, “You have to plan an hour to go anywhere.”

The 112-year-old church is the center of

community activities. A few years ago, the community added a picnic-style pavilion and an enclosed area for the pavilion. It serves the small congregation, and provides a place for community yard sales, family reunions and picnics.

On a recent September Sunday, the church held its annual Homecoming when about 75 folks joined in the morning service and afternoon meal.

When it celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2004, the church was featured in *Country Magazine*, Cox says.

Lewis remembers it being voted “the most beautiful church in Virginia,” a designation that is hard to argue with.

The Oriskany Community Club meets monthly and sponsors community projects and field trips, Lewis notes.

“This year we’ve gone as a group to see Attic Productions plays (in Fincastle) and to visit The Greenbrier Hotel (in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia). The club takes responsibility for maintenance of the old cemetery that’s in the heart of town, and helps out with any other community

projects that come to its attention. We pride ourselves on looking out for ourselves and each other.”

Looking out for each other includes having their own group of EMS providers.

Several years back, the Community Club helped raise money for a garage to house a First Response vehicle. Botetourt County provided an equipped 4-wheel-drive vehicle and radios once the community had a core group of trained providers.

Those volunteers serve as first responders since the closest rescue squads and fire departments are in Eagle Rock, Fincastle and New Castle. The group also serves as backup on some calls for New Castle and Eagle Rock.

Looking out for each other is a trait Cox notes, as well.

“An eclectic group of people live here. Retired, farmers, housewives, mill workers. We’re able to work together and get along,” he says. “It’s a nice place. We’ve enjoyed living here.

“We’re off the beaten path, but it’s a path worth taking.” ■



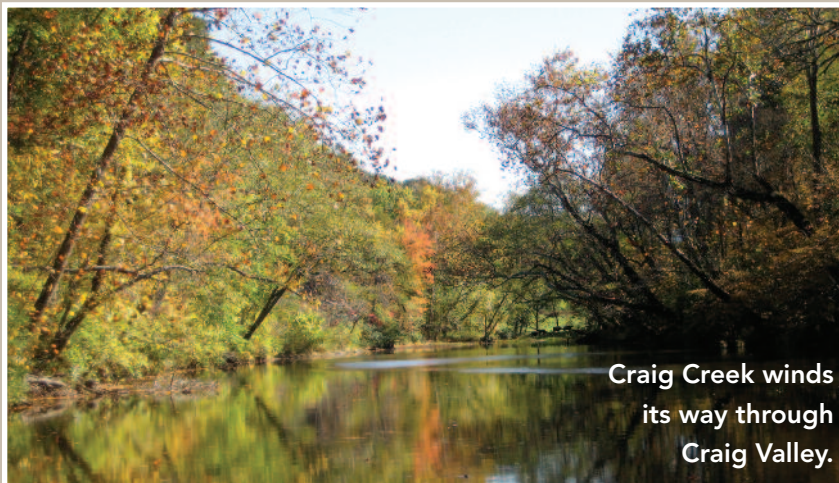
Parts of the old railroad bed from the Craig Valley Line days are used for secondary roads. This section is heading west out of Oriskany from the post office through national forest.

Getting to Oriskany

State Rt. 615 — Craig Creek Road — runs from US 220 at Eagle Rock in Botetourt County to Rt. 311 in New Castle in Craig County. It is designated as one of Virginia's Scenic Byways for a reason.

Motorcyclists love it. Sunday drivers can enjoy the slow pace the road requires. Leaf peepers are hard-pressed to find a prettier ride in the fall (really, any time of the year).

It's the only way to Oriskany, too. You can also get to Rt. 615 from Fincastle (in fact, that's the quickest way from the Roanoke Valley). Just hop on Rt. 606 (Grove Hill Road) in the historic county seat and head west until you reach the stop sign on Rt. 615. Turn right. ■



Craig Creek winds its way through Craig Valley.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID COX

Oriskany, an Outdoor Paradise

It's an outdoor person's paradise — whether you enjoy fishing, kayaking, bird watching, bicycling, hunting, hiking, camping or a combination.

The mountains around Oriskany include thousands of acres of the Jefferson/George Washington National Forest (in the Eastern Divide Ranger District).

Craig Creek provides great spring and early summer kayaking, canoeing and smallmouth fishing. There's a public access point on the national forest just west of Oriskany proper (look for the brown sign). That's a put-in and take-out area that includes a couple of makeshift fire rings.

Several creek crossings for secondary roads off Rt. 615 have fords where there's public access to the creek. You'll spot them because of the foot "swinging" bridges that allow residents on the other side to get in and out during high water. There's great trout fishing in nearby Barbours Creek near New Castle and Roaring Run Recreation Area near Eagle Rock.

Hunters can take their pick of Virginia's major game species to hunt — deer, turkey and bear; plus the plentiful small game in the national forest.

Bird watching is as easy as stopping the vehicle or hiking one of the many trails and U.S. Forest Service roads in the national forest.

The serious mountain biker can try those Forest Service roads as well, including the climb from Lignite Road to Bald Mountain and on to Fenwick

Mines Recreation Area, or over to Barbours Creek.

Families can find easy biking and hiking on the old railroad bed. You can start from the Oriskany Post Office and take the 3-plus-mile, nearly level ride west, turn around and come back; or, hop on Rt. 615. It's dirt and gravel. Or, you can take Old Rail Road (Rt. 817) east on the more improved gravel road that also leads to Craig Creek Recreation Area.

Craig Creek Recreation Area (called The Grapevine by locals) is a modestly improved, no-fee, day-use area in the national forest. The entrance is on Rt. 817, one-half mile off Rt. 615 in Oriskany. Although rustic, it does include Forest Service vault toilets, picnic tables, access to Craig Creek and a 1.4-mile hiking/biking single-track trail. You can also get a permit for group camping (\$25/night at www.recreation.gov) from the Eastern Divide Ranger District (540-552-4641). You'll want to do that to get access to the gate that is locked from dusk to dawn at the entrance to the 130-acre area. Bring your own drinking and cooking water.

There are a couple of vacation rentals available near Oriskany, and others within easy distances of the community. They can be found on one of the popular vacation rental websites. The nearest motels are in the Troutville area of southern Botetourt County. The nearest restaurants (all family-run) are in Eagle Rock, New Castle and Fincastle. ■