



**At the age of 95, Virginia Mae Simmons assumes she is the oldest resident in Grizzard, reasoning, "I don't know anyone here older than me! ... When we were children, my brother Bryan and I would sneak away from the house and go down to the store to get some candy or cookies. But we never needed any money ... because my Granddaddy Harrell owned the store! And we never had to ask him for treats; he just gave them to us!"**

## Grizzard — Rich in History and Hospitality

The depot and area around it were given the name 'Grizzard,' probably because land for the right-of-way was purchased from George D. Grizzard.

In the southeastern corner of Sussex County lies the unincorporated community of Grizzard. Inhabitants here enjoy the convenience of being only four miles from the city of Emporia and Interstate 95, while living in a serene haven where they can hear the wind rustling through the leaves of the cornfields and the cooing of nearby doves.

The village has several notable landmarks. The Fortsville house was built in 1796 by Lewis Fort and is included on the National Register of Historic Places. This was the home of John Young Mason, a Greensville County lawyer who held prominent positions in government in the 1800s as a member of the House of Representatives and also as United States District Judge. A historical marker located on Highway 58 states that Mason also served twice as Secretary of the Navy and United States Attorney General. He died in office as Minister to France in 1859.

Down the road from Fortsville in the heart of Grizzard stands an abandoned train depot

in its original location. It was constructed in the 1880s after the Atlantic and Danville Railway built a main line between Portsmouth and Danville, and a narrow-gauge branch line was run from Emporia, through Sussex and Surry counties, to Claremont on the James River.

The depot and area around it were given the name "Grizzard," probably because land for the right-of-way was purchased from George D. Grizzard. He served as sheriff of Sussex County from 1883 to 1899 and died in 1934 at the age of 78. He was buried on a plot of land behind his house, with a tombstone inscribed with these words: "An honest man is the noblest work of God." According to a brief history of Grizzard written in 1992 by resident Virginia Mae Simmons, "Mr. George Grizzard was a tall, aristocratic-looking gentleman, his very appearance commanding respect."

Simmons is 95 years old, and her claim to fame is that she is the oldest resident in Grizzard. She recalls growing up here and living close to the busy train depot/post



## An Old Train Depot Town



Images in and around Grizzard include (clockwise, from upper left) The Fortsville house was built in 1796 by Lewis Fort and is included on the National Register of Historic Places. The depot was established in Grizzard in the 1880s and still stands in its original location as a constant reminder of an earlier period in this community's history. The Harrells and Nunnallys take pride in maintaining the old country stores that were operated by members of their family.

office and the general store, which bustled with activity, "When we were children, my brother Bryan and I would sneak away from the house and go down to the store to get some candy or cookies." She grins, "But we never needed any money ... because my Granddaddy Harrell owned the store!" She adds, "And we never had to ask him for treats; he just gave them to us!"

Simmons remembers playing on the depot platform with the neighborhood kids. "It was fun to watch the train pull in," she says. "Wagons were all lined up, and we looked on as the men unloaded the freight that the farmers came to pick up." She pauses and then adds, "Most vivid in my mind are those big blocks of ice." Since there were no electric refrigerators or freezers in Grizzard at that time, people came to the general store to buy ice that was chipped from the 300-pound blocks. These were the days before Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative built lines and provided power in the area so rural residents could enjoy the same necessities and luxuries as people living in towns and cities.

Two country stores are on Grizzard Road

— J.B. Harrell Store and E.W. Harrell Store. They are no longer in operation, but they served the community for many years. Family members are proud of the heritage of their ancestors who operated these general merchandise stores, and they keep the unoccupied buildings well maintained.

Martin Harrell Sr., great-grandson of D.J. Harrell, the original owner of J.B. Harrell Store, was about 8 years old when he started helping in the store. He remembers placing items on the shelves, pumping 17-cents-a-gallon Esso gasoline for customers and filling the drink box with Pepsi Colas and other thirst-quenching soft drinks. He reminisces about the days when the store stayed open until dark every night selling everything from Craddock Terry shoes, groceries and Black-Draught ... to plow points, fertilizer and other farming necessities. Men gathered at the store after supper to play cards and checkers; and, most likely, they exchanged some tall tales about hunting and fishing. Harrell grew up to become owner of several convenience stores himself and has been quite successful in the retail business. "I guess it's just in my blood," he says.

His wife, Mary Jane, grew up in Emporia but moved to Grizzard in the early 1960s after their marriage. She has served as clerk for the treasurer of Greensville County and also worked with the Juvenile Probation Department. With a smile she adds that her most enjoyable job has been selling Longaberger baskets. "I can't imagine living in town," she states. "I love living in the country! We have good neighbors."

The Harrells raised two sons and a daughter, who have all stayed close to home. Martin Jr., manager with a construction contracting company, and Stuart, co-owner and manager of Harrell Properties LLC, live in Grizzard, while Mary Beth Poarch, an English teacher, lives in the not-too-distant area of Pleasant Shade.

Billy Nunnally, originally from Jarratt, is a retired electrician with Philip Morris in Richmond and has lived in Grizzard for 38 years; but his wife, Marsha, grew up here. She is the granddaughter of E.W. Harrell, who owned and operated the store bearing his name. Mr. Nunnally comments, "I think this is just a wonderful place to live, and of course for Marsha it's always been home."





(Clockwise, from upper left) Visitors know they are in Grizzard when they see Martin Harrell's red caboose placed close to the old train depot. Stacy and Chris Bradshaw reside in the "Grizzard Home Place," where the community's namesake lived and the largest magnolia tree in Virginia is located. Bethlehem Baptist Church and a portion of the congregation with Pastor Kelsey Moore kneeling in front.

Their son, Kevin, lives next door and commutes to Garysburg, North Carolina, where he is a supervisor with Enviva, a producer of wood pellets.

People who have moved into the Grizzard area, like Chris and Stacy Bradshaw, make remarks about how pleasant it is to live among friendly neighbors who are always willing to lend a hand. He works with the USDA Nature Resources Conservation Service, and she is a student at Virginia State University. They moved in 2005 to the "Grizzard Home Place," formerly Sheriff Grizzard's abode, and they lived in a single-wide trailer on the property until major remodeling and an addition to the house were completed in 2010. In the front yard of their home grows an enormous magnolia tree — in fact, it has been measured at 276 inches in circumference, making it the largest listed magnolia in Virginia; and it is currently the Southern Magnolia National Grand Champion.

Gary and Diane Herubin came to Grizzard 33 years ago when a job opportunity with the Department of Defense arose for him. They were living in Virginia Beach at the time and were contending every day with

traffic from the naval base and the constant noise of jets flying overhead.

"We wanted to raise our boys where they could ride 4-wheelers and have property to enjoy activities that they couldn't do in the city," he says. "The people here were very hospitable! When we moved here, it was like a piece of heaven!"

During his 31 years as program manager, Gary travelled from the tiny settlement of Grizzard to cities all across the United States and to other countries — France, Germany, Belgium and Japan, to name a few. "Grizzard is like a crossroads to three major cities," he says. "I can be in Raleigh in two hours, Richmond in one and the Tidewater area in an hour-and-a-half." He also mentions the benefit of living where taxes are lower. Diane was employed as a dental hygienist in Emporia, and both of them are enjoying retirement now. He currently serves on the board of directors of the Emporia Country Club. "Living in Grizzard is a unique experience," he comments, "and we love it!"

Thomas and Joan Cobb came to Grizzard in 1990 from King William County and are happily retired now. He was a shop teacher at Greenville County High School, and Joan

worked in the retail business and also as a bank teller. They enjoy the area's opportunities for fishing, raising a garden and being in a quiet neighborhood. "The people are friendly, and it's a nice place to live," they concur.

A significant element of any community is the local church, such as Bethlehem Baptist Church. In November the congregation will be celebrating the church's 123rd anniversary. Some of the members live in the nearby area, but many drive from Emporia and Greenville County to attend Sunday and mid-week services. The group is active in networking with Social Services to provide school supplies and canned goods to less-fortunate residents of Sussex County, and the church members faithfully engage in numerous mission projects.

Many Grizzard folks, past and present, have made significant impacts in communities that extend far beyond the unmarked boundaries of Grizzard. Future generations living here will recall the history of this tiny community and will continue to extend the hospitality that Grizzard is so well-known for today. ■