

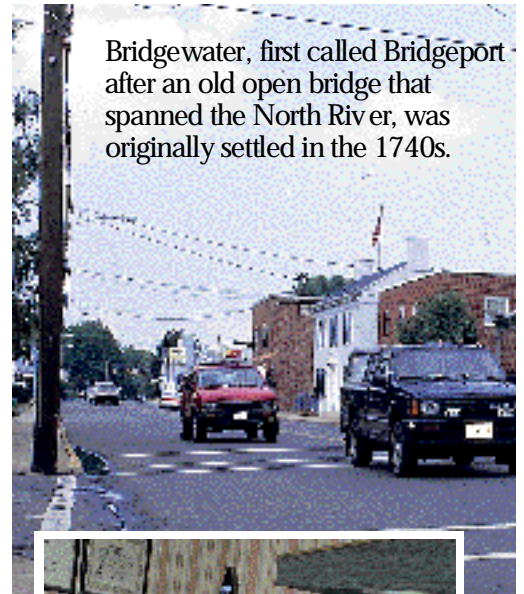
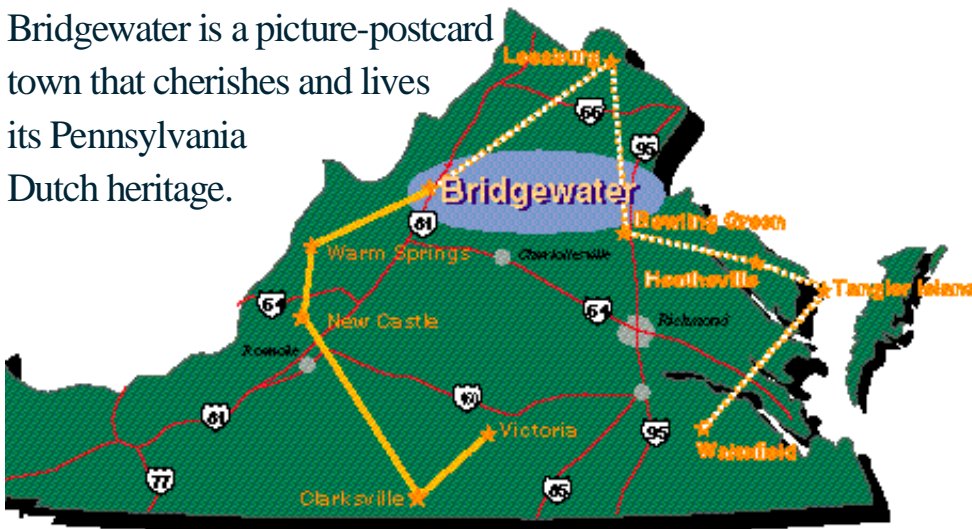
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Robert Grossman, Feature Writer

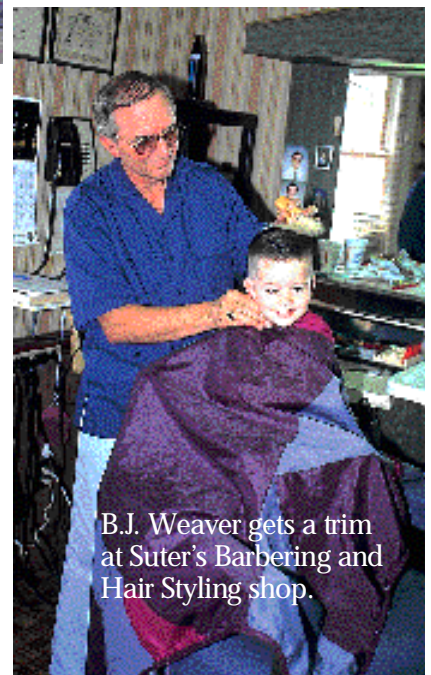
During 1997, we're making our way around Virginia, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this tour's fifth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in *Bridgewater*

Like a tonic for troubled times, Bridgewater is a picture-postcard town that cherishes and lives its Pennsylvania Dutch heritage.



Bridgewater, first called Bridgeport after an old open bridge that spanned the North River, was originally settled in the 1740s.



B.J. Weaver gets a trim at Suter's Barbering and Hair Styling shop.

The clipper hums and hair floats lazily in the sunlight as Charlie Suter trims up a young customer on a Saturday afternoon.

At Suter's Barbering and Hair Styling shop you can get some mighty fine work done on your head. You can also learn about Bridgewater, find out how to maneuver around town, and share a good laugh.

B.J. Weaver hops down to play after getting sheared. He got his first haircut at Suter's along with a certificate from Charlie.

"It's nice and peaceful," says Charlie of Bridgewater. "People are very courteous."

In asking Charlie for directions to Bridgewater College, I inquire as to

whether they involve making a turn at the tree with a knot in it. Laughter erupts.

A marquee outside an F&M Bank reveals Bridgewater's rural character, and perhaps its sense of humor as well. The sign asks, "When a cow laughs does milk come out its nose?"

Bridgewater, first called Bridgeport after an old open bridge that spanned the North River, was originally settled in the 1740s by the Magill family. The name changed on February 7, 1835, when a charter was granted to the town. Jacob Dinkle and his brother John are considered the fathers of Bridgewater.

It takes little time to learn the nuts and bolts of the town. Bridgewater College, Perdue poultry, and Marshall's department store are the big names here.

There have been no homicides since 1976 in this quiet bedroom community of Harrisonburg. Moreover, very few felony arrests occur.

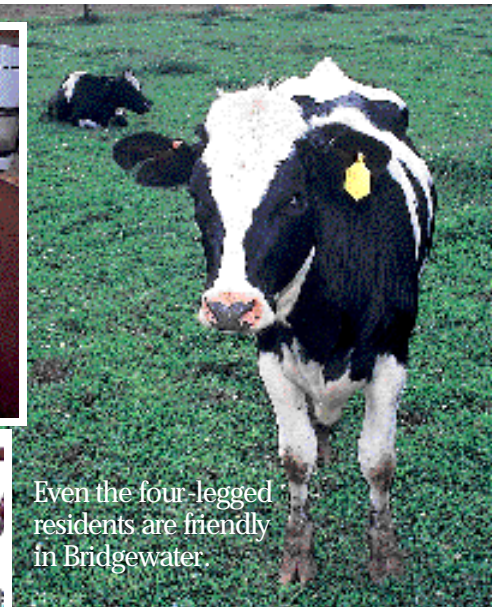
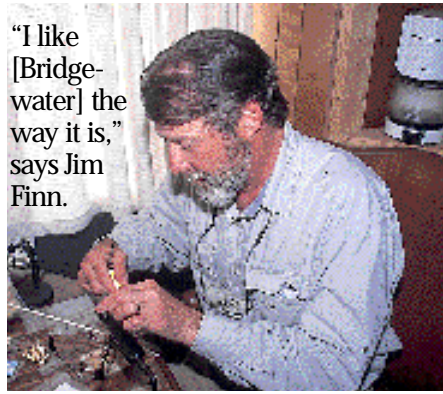
Tom Burgess, another local who has made his way into the barber chair, sits and talks while Charlie works away.

Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative consumer-owner Burgess owns two farms — one 90 acres, the other 130. He's also a veterinarian with a practice in Bridgewater. That gives him an opportunity to take care of horses owned by Mennonites. In many cases, horses are their only mode of transportation.

"I enjoy the horses," says Burgess, noting a predominance of show horses and pleasure horses. "They're like friends of the family."



"I like [Bridge-water] the way it is," says Jim Finn.



Even the four-legged residents are friendly in Bridgewater.



As a local Mennonite noted, Bridgewater is "an area we can reach with horses without having to deal with a lot of city traffic."



ROBERT GROSSMAN PHOTOS

Geoffrey and Jennifer Weathersby are hard at play in a public playground.

He grows corn, hay, and rye on about 79 acres. In addition, he owns close to 100 Grade A dairy cattle. While getting their picture taken, they amble toward the fence.

The farm situation is "pretty good," explains Showalter. "My major challenge is milking the cows."

Good for Kids, Too

Geoffrey and Jennifer Weathersby are hard at play in a public playground. Terry, their dad, and Hooch, the family's black Lab, supervise the action. The family, including Terry's wife Jill, moved to Bridgewater from Charleston, South Carolina.

Geoffrey says he likes the town "because we have tennis courts and basketball courts."

Jennifer, meanwhile, has praise for her school, the Blue Ridge Christian School.

"My teacher is very nice and I have lots of friends there," says Jennifer.

As for Terry, he calls Bridgewater "a good place to raise children." He's an assistant professor of psychology at Bridgewater College.

The school, associated with the Church of the Brethren, is the oldest of three colleges and universities in Bridgewater and Rockingham County. Another distinction is that it was the first coeducational liberal arts college in Virginia.

Sunday morning. The sun is struggling to poke through the gray skies. Clip-clop. Clip-clop. Mennonites are travelling by horse and buggy to church.

They're climbing a hill next to the Rockingham District Office of Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative. The pace varies on the hill. Near the top, as the road levels, they accelerate eastward. The tempo quickens when buggies coming from the other direction descend the hill.

Most of the estimated 10,000 Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley live in or around Bridgewater and nearby town Dayton, explains a Mennonite from just outside Dayton who prefers to remain anonymous. Mennonites do not seek publicity. This reluctance is shared

with other Pennsylvania Dutch sects such as the Amish, and arises from scriptural exhortations to exalt the Lord, and not the individual.

On the day we speak, this Mennonite is coming into Bridgewater for groceries and items from the hardware store, since the town has some things Dayton doesn't have. He patiently answers questions as a thunderstorm builds in the sky.

"It's an area we can reach with horses without having to deal with a lot of city traffic," he says. "The people here have everything we need. They understand our way of life."

Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative consumer-owner Edward Showalter is a Mennonite with a farm in Bridgewater. A buggy sits on his property.

The school was founded by Daniel Christian Flory in the village of Spring Creek in 1880. The original name was Spring Creek Normal and Collegiate Institute. It became Bridgewater College in 1889.

"It's pretty challenging because of the workload and the need for critical thinking," says Patricio Arboleda, an international business student. "Professors are always ready to help students."

Kevin Moore lives in Dayton and works for Bridgewater College as a groundskeeper. He takes a brief respite from his grass cutting. "I've always liked working outside," says Moore. "I'm not cut out for a desk job, at least not yet."

Driving around Bridgewater and stopping to talk with the people who live there has a comfortable feel to it. No one cuts you off in traffic as you motor around town. Parking on Main Street is plentiful. Folks are approachable and open up easily to a city dude toting a note pad and camera.

Since flycasting the area's many rivers and streams for native trout is a local passion, it's hardly surprising that Bridgewater has a specialized fishing store. Jim Finn, owner of the Mossy Creek Fly Shop, describes his home with a sentiment that seems to be pervasive: "I like it the way it is." ■

If You Go... Musical evenings will take place Sundays at 7 p.m. in Oakdale Community Park on the following dates: July 13, 20, and 27; August 3, 10, 17, 24, and 31.

The annual Bridgewater Firemen's Parade and Lawn Party features the firemen's parade, a parade of antique cars and tractors, and music, rides, food, and exhibits. The dates are July 16 - 19.

Yard sales at more than 100 homes make up the annual Residence Yard Sale, set for Saturday, June 14, and Saturday, September 27.

The annual lighting of Main Street and the community Christmas tree is scheduled for December 7.

For those who enjoy historic homes, the town's historic district has homes built between 1819 and 1849.

There's the John Dinkle House at 108 Wynant Place, as well as the Jacob Dinkle House at 215 South Main Street. Additional homes include the T.H.B. Brown House at 115 South Main Street, the J.G. Brown House at 111 South Main Street, and the Barbee House at 403 North Main Street.

Bridge, anyone? What's considered to have been the longest single-span wooden bridge in the world was completed in April of 1878. An iron bridge now stands in place of the wooden bridge, which was torn down in 1916.

For more information about Bridgewater, call (540) 828-6273. ■