

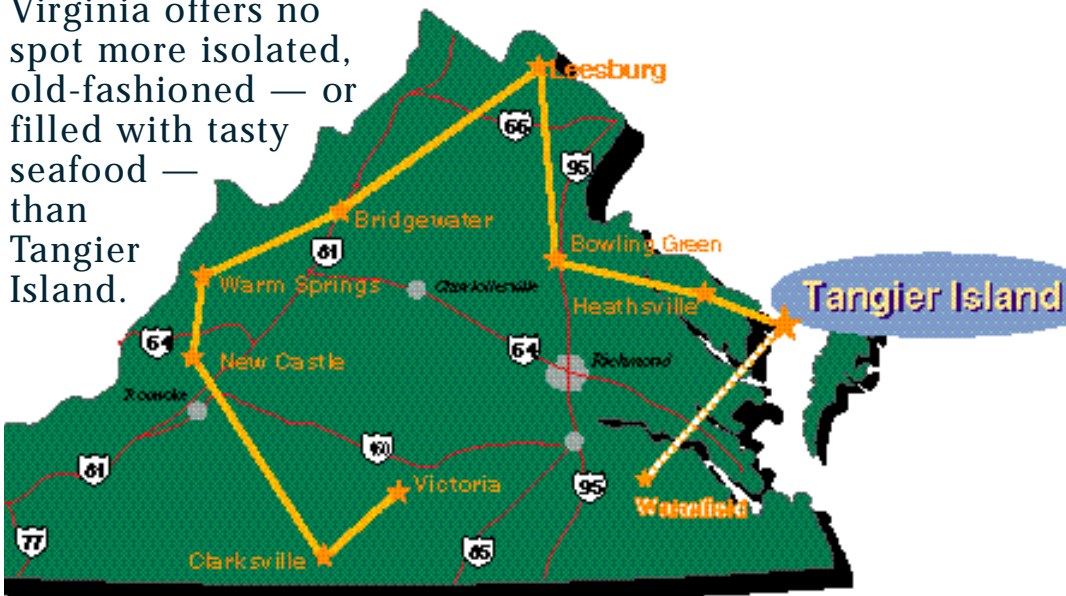
DOWN HOME SERIES

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 ninth stop, we'll be...

Down Home on *Tangier Island*

Virginia offers no spot more isolated, old-fashioned — or filled with tasty seafood — than Tangier Island.



Captain Linwood Bowis at work aboard the **Chesapeake Breeze**. "It's the only thing I know," he says. "I started doing this when I was 13."

The three GMC V-12 turbocharged engines of the *Chesapeake Breeze* rumble to life. Captain Linwood Bowis gives instructions to about 135 passengers before departure from Buzzard's Point Marina. Then it's two honks of the horn and we're moving out into Cockrell Creek for the 18-mile trip to Tangier Island. Four lifeboats sit stacked on the upper deck.

We pass fish factories in Reedville where menhaden are processed. Menhaden, also known as bunkers, pogies, and alewives, are oily, bony fish processed for oil. This highest-grossing fish on the East Coast was used for fertilizer. Now they're served to chickens and hogs.

In the pilot house, Bowis narrates the cruise and monitors the boat's course,

making adjustments when necessary.

"It's the only thing I know," he says. "I started doing this when I was 13."

The bow of the 97-ton boat knifes through the water of the Chesapeake Bay, gently bobbing up and down. The bay is one of the largest inland bodies of seawater, with 5,700 miles of shoreline. It's also an estuary, a place where salt-water and freshwater mix.

Bowis reaches for the radio's microphone and talks with the captain of a tug and barge. He slows down to avoid disrupting its cables. Since the 100-foot, aluminum hull boat creates a large wake, he also throttles back for fishing boats in the annual Reedville Bluefish Derby.

Land, ho! It's Tangier Island. Five miles long and 1½ miles wide. Three-

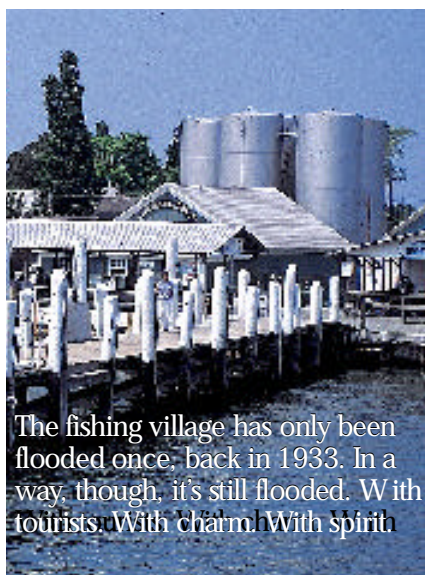
quarters of it is marsh. Tangier's population is 678, according to the last census count. The population has remained fairly constant.

The trip takes us an hour and a half. We have 2½ hours ashore before the *Chesapeake Breeze* heads back.

Sgt. Darren Landon of the Tangier Police Department keeps a close eye on the fishing village. Not that he has to, of course. The island epitomizes the word slow. Make that very slow.

There's no alcohol on Tangier Island. The only exception is what's brought there by people on boats.

Two or three months can pass without any problems, which are limited to domestic disputes and disorderly conduct, explains Landon. Six years in the



The fishing village has only been flooded once, back in 1933. In a way, though, it's still flooded. With tourists. With charm. With spirit.

ROBERT GROSSMAN PHOTOS



Donna Dice slides a soft-shell crab platter under the warmer at the Islander Seafood Restaurant.



"It's a hard life, but an enjoyable one," says Tangier fisherman and A&N Electric Cooperative member William Brown. Here he's working on one of his 300 crab pots.



Some islanders haul in greenbacks and coins instead of seafood. Dusty Gust makes a sale.

military kept him off the island. He enjoys the quietness.

"Ain't no place like it," says the A&N Electric Cooperative member-consumer with the Elizabethan accent common to island residents. "Everything on the mainland hasn't caught up with this island yet."

Youngsters speed by on motor scooters and motorcycles. Others take a more leisurely approach to getting around. That includes A&N Electric Cooperative member-consumer Ira Eskridge, who's lived on Tangier Island all his life. He pedals his bicycle.

"It means a lot of peace and quiet, until the tourists come," says Eskridge, after being asked about the island's isolation.

Tangier Island fishermen haul in thousands of crabs each year, and seafood restaurants there crank out loads of seafood. You can sit down to a family-style seafood meal at Hilda Crockett's Chesapeake House, Fisherman's Corner Seafood Restaurant, or the Islander Seafood Restaurant.

If you do so, make sure to have cash or your checkbook along. The restaurants don't accept credit cards.

You can also get up close and personal with crabs. "Please do not touch any of our little creatures," says the sign at a soft-shell crab farm exhibit. "They will bite."

A&N Electric Cooperative member-consumer William Brown looks up with a smile while working on one of his 300

crab pots. Brown makes his living as a fisherman, beginning work before the light of day. He often gets back at mid-afternoon or later.

"It's a hard life, but an enjoyable one," says Brown.

He grabs a soft-shell crab from a float, pointing out its distinguishing features. He helps out by getting me through the kitchen door of the Islander Seafood Restaurant, where Donna Dice and others are hard at work. His warmth and easygoing nature add to the joyful visit to Tangier Island.

Brown relies on his faith when life takes a difficult twist. Tangier Island is a Christian community, with two churches, Methodist and New Testament. The latter is non-denominational.

"It's unity, receiving the spirit of God, which brings us all together," says Brown. "Through your hardships, through your troubles, you have a settlement of peace with God. You rejoice in His glory."

Youngsters Set Up Shop

Some islanders haul in greenbacks and coins instead of seafood. Hannah and Olivia Goodwin, for example, are selling Kool-Aid.

"Sometimes we have summer school," says Hannah of what they do for fun. "We like to go outside and play."

Dusty Gust, meanwhile, is selling Kool-Aid and peanut-butter fudge. His

see *Tangier* page 47

If You Go...

You have several choices of how to get there.

If you want to leave from Reedville, call (757) 453-2628.

Onancock, on Virginia's Eastern Shore, is another departure point. Call (757) 891-2240.

Also, Captain David Crockett has a boat service that makes regular runs to and from Crisfield, MD. Special tour packages are also available. Call (757) 891-2212.

If you're hungry when you get to the island, your choices include the restaurants noted earlier — Hilda Crockett's Chesapeake House, Fisherman's Corner Seafood Restaurant, and the Islander Seafood Restaurant.

The following sandwich/snack shops will also help zap your hunger: the Waterfront Restaurant, Lorraine's, Spanky's Place, Jolly Jim's, and Jeff's Ice Cream Shop.

Golf carts, canoes, bicycles, and kayaks are available for rental. If you're a museum buff, make sure to check out the Tangier Museum.

Charter flight service is available year-round. Call Carter Crabbe of Chesapeake Aviation at (757) 787-2901.

Staying overnight? Hilda Crockett's Chesapeake House, open April 15th through October 15th, will put you up. Call Bette Nohe at (757) 891-2331. The Sunset Inn, meanwhile, is open year-round. Call Grace Brown at (757) 891-2535. Shirley's Bay View Inn is also open year-round. Call Shirley Pruitt at (757) 891-2396.

There are no annual events. Every day, though, is an event in and of itself.

For more information about Tangier Island, call the Town of Tangier at (757) 891-2438 or Virginia's Eastern Shore Tourism Commission at (757) 787-2460. ■

idea of fun: "I play basketball and hockey. I crab. I like to play with my dog."

A military jet on maneuvers zooms by the island, then is out of sight in an instant. The island has an airport, so if you want to fly in for a soft-shell crab platter, you can.

What's in a Name?

Tangier was named in 1608 by Captain John Smith, who sailed up the Chesapeake Bay before landing at the island. The Pocomoke Indians used it for hunting and fishing. They ended up

selling the island in 1666 for two overcoats.

The fishing village has only been flooded once, back in 1933. In a way, though, it's still flooded. With tourists. With charm. With spirit.

While traipsing through what appeared to be a grassy area at the island's airport, I ended up encountering a marsh of sorts and got mud on my overalls and shoes. Bowis says once you get Tangier mud between your toes you end up going back. Tangier Island beckons. ■