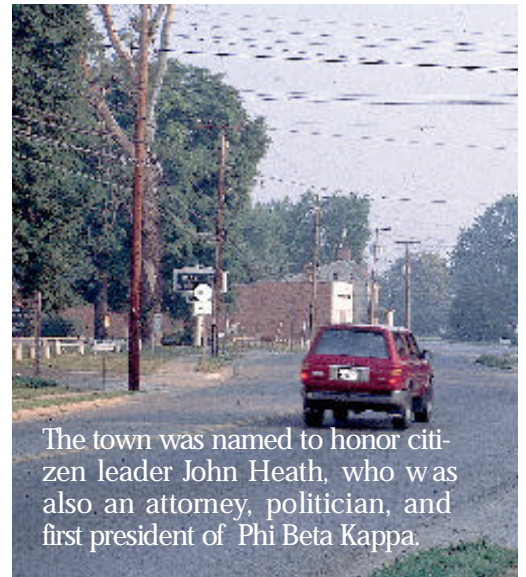


DOWN HOME SERIES

by Robert Grossman, Feature Writer

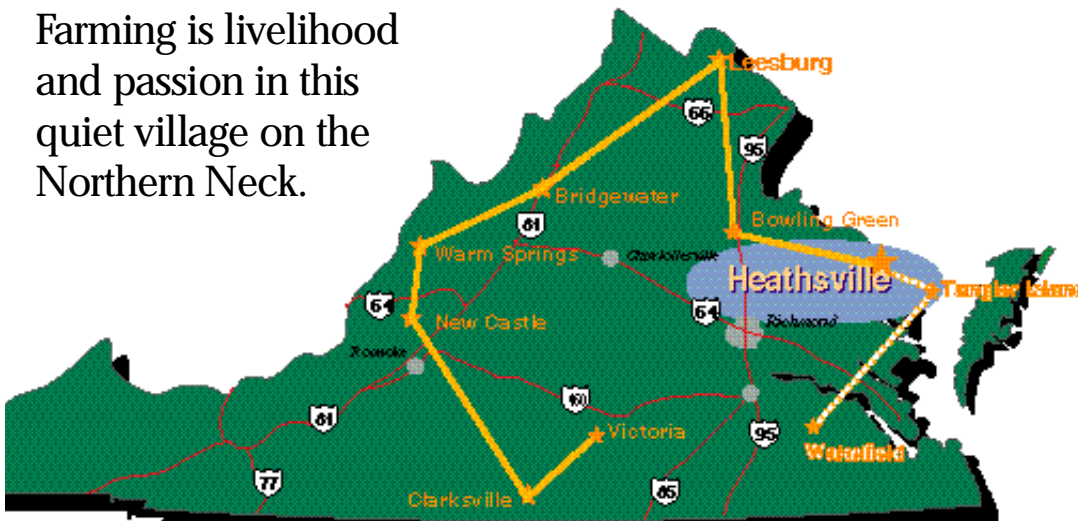
During 1997, we're making our way around Virginia, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this tour's eighth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in *Heathsville*



The town was named to honor citizen leader John Heath, who was also an attorney, politician, and first president of Phi Beta Kappa.

Farming is livelihood and passion in this quiet village on the Northern Neck.



"The world has to eat," says Rob Hall. "We're going to continue to farm."

Rob Hall rubs the head of a stalk of wheat with his hand to knock the kernels out of it. He's checking the wheat's moisture content to see if it's ready to be harvested. It isn't. The kernels compress easily, meaning the wheat is still too moist. He also tests the moisture content of a friend's load of barley.

Hall grows corn, soybeans, and wheat on 500 acres out of about 2,000 total acres on Coan Hall Farm. Farm acreage in Heathsville is decreasing, explains Hall, yet he's optimistic about being a farmer.

"Let's hope we're not a dying breed, because if we are, there won't

be any food on your table," says Hall, who was born and raised in Richmond.

He foresees more demand for farm products as the world's population increases. The low-income nature of farming as an occupation doesn't seem to dampen his enthusiasm.

"The world has to eat," says Hall. "We're going to continue to farm."

Hall is a member of the Virginia Farm Bureau Board, the Virginia Agricultural Council, and the Virginia Small Grains Checkoff Board.

In addition, you might say he's a

magnet for the media. Hall has been interviewed by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times*. The Cable News Network (CNN) ran footage of Hall running his 135-horsepower Deutz-Allis 9130 tractor two summers ago.

His hobby is antique cars. Included in his collection are a '26 Oldsmobile, a '37 Pontiac, a '48 Oldsmobile, a '51 Oldsmobile, a '67 Ford truck, and a '69 Chevy pickup truck. Life appears to be good for Rob Hall.

Life on the Farm

The sun slowly rises in the sky.



ROBERT GROSSMAN PHOTOS



"We're very proud of the schools and the staff," says Superintendent Lindsey Suggs.



There doesn't seem to be much to complain about in Heathsville. Life moves forward, one day at a time.

"The little farm is gone," says Packett. "It's history."

Mmmm...

Bacon sizzles on the grill at the Buoy Food Store. It's Father's Day weekend and the weekend of the nearby annual Reedville Bluefish Derby. Patrons queue up to pay for their purchases. Lisa Hayden is busy cooking and taking care of customers.

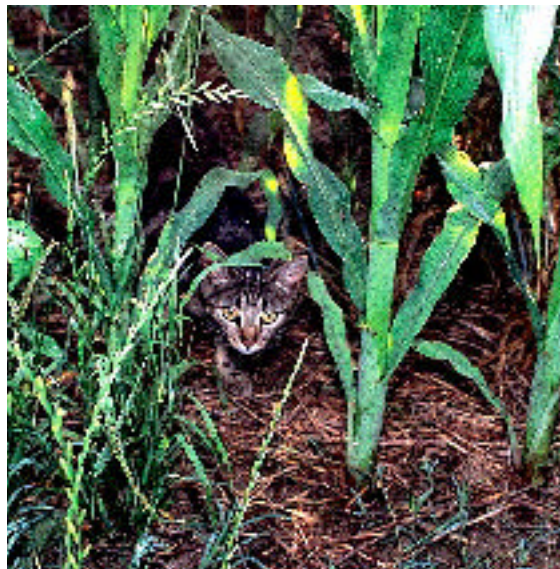
"It's a nice community," says Hayden. "People are very friendly. On mornings like this when I'm here by myself they're very patient."

What's Up at School?

Over at the Northumberland Elementary School, there's a din of conversation as about 125 teachers, staff, and administrators gather for a breakfast honoring two retiring staff members and three others for their time in service.

The clink of silverware is heard amidst the noise. Superintendent Lindsey Suggs says a prayer, then a line forms for the food.

"We're very proud of the schools and the staff," says Suggs, referring



Chessie peeks out of a cornfield.

The temperature is rising, too, headed for a high near 90 degrees.

Birds chirp as Jaime Packett relaxes on the front porch of his rented farmhouse. Despite the early hour, Packett is quick to help in my search for Billy Dawson, another Heathsville farmer.

Packett tries to raise Dawson on the CB radio. No luck. He tries again. Still nothing.

Suddenly, Dawson pulls up. He has to meet someone and barely has time to talk. He strides off toward his truck.

"I'd love to talk with you, but I've got to go," says Dawson while on

the move. "If you want to talk with me you're going to have to catch me on a rainy day."

Packett, meanwhile, takes a sip of coffee and settles back on the porch to discuss Heathsville. Chessie, his kitten, darts into the cornfield. The kitten is named after the mascot for the C&O Railroad, which Packett's grandfather served as a mechanical engineer.

Farming and fishing are the major economic activities in the area, explains Packett. Moreover, farming isn't what it used to be. Big farmers rule the roost, while young farmers rent farmland.

to the elementary school as well as the county's middle school and high school.

The Northumberland Senior Future Farmers of America (FFA) Chapter at the high school is traditionally one of the state's most active FFA chapters. The chapter maintains two greenhouses, places exhibits at the State Fair of Virginia, and participates in the Adopt-A-Highway program as part of its ambitious schedule of activities.

Traffic zips through Heathsville on Route 360. St. Stephen's Church, a Virginia Historic Landmark, graces the village with its elegant architecture. The Northumberland County Courthouse is situated in town as well. By one account, some 300 folks reside in the village itself.

The Town's Origins

On December 11, 1797, a petition was presented to the General Assembly. It requested that the town of Northumberland Court House be established. The town later became Heathsville to honor citizen leader John Heath, who was also an attorney, politician, and first president of Phi Beta Kappa.

Heathsville mailing addresses extend out into Northumberland County, which has a population of more than 10,000. The county was established in 1648. It contains no incorporated towns.

As the popular joke goes, Heathsville is one of the few towns in Virginia that George Washington could walk through today and still recognize.

This sleepy little village on Virginia's Northern Neck peninsula may just stay the way it is, populated by friendly people who farm and fish for their livelihood. If Heathsville's lucky, its residents will be telling the George Washington joke 100 years hence. And it will still be no joke. ■

If You Go...

Be ready to experience events that reflect the joy of community life. On Court Day in October, for example, costumed interpreters will lead tours of the restoration project at Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern, built in the late 1700's. The event features archaeological exhibits, surrey rides, period artisans, demonstrations, and sales. This year's fun is scheduled for October 4.

On December 6 Heathsville hosts "An Old-Fashioned Village Christmas," the beginning of Northumberland County's 350th anniversary celebration in 1998.

The Strawberry Festival is Heathsville's third major event, held in May. It usually takes place on Memorial Day weekend.

The National Register of Historic places has designated Heathsville as a Historic District. That means the town is rich with history.

In addition to Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern, the Historic District includes the following: Heathsville United Methodist Church (1894); Oakley, a private residence, circa 1795-1810; Rice/Richardson/Robertson house (1890-1910); Springfield House, circa 1828; and, as noted earlier, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, circa 1881.

The Ball Memorial Museum and Library houses Civil War, medical, and pre-historic artifacts. A vast collection of silver, china, and crystal graces the museum, as does a collection of oil paintings and late 19th-century cottage furniture.

The museum is open on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and every second and fourth Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information about Heathsville contact Carole Harding of the Northern Neck Tourism Council at (800) 393-6180. ■