

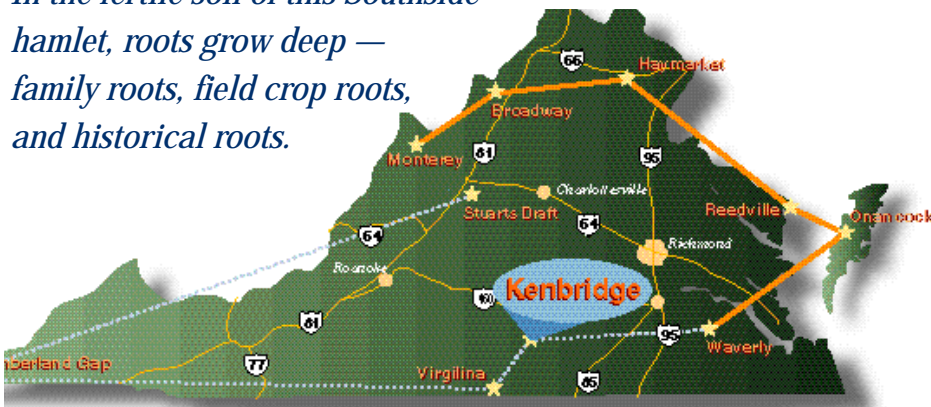
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Jane Gatling Atkinson
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During 1998, 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, our seventh stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Kenbridge

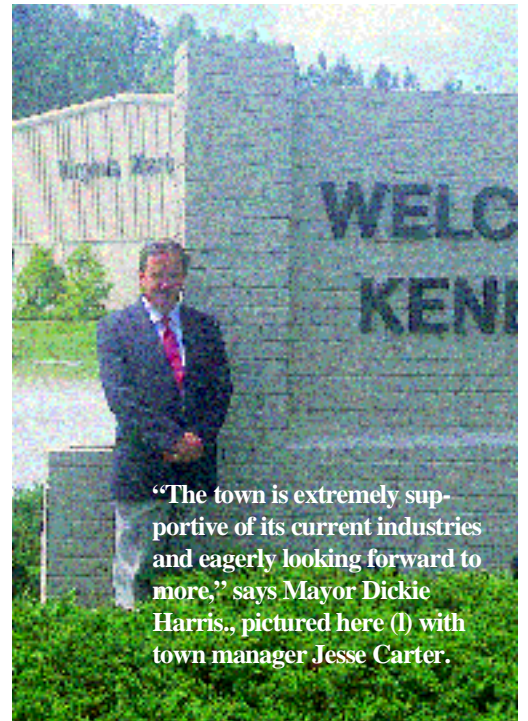
In the fertile soil of this Southside hamlet, roots grow deep — family roots, field crop roots, and historical roots.



JANE ATKINSON PHOTOS



The former home of Dr. W. D. Kendig, one of the town's first physicians.



"The town is extremely supportive of its current industries and eagerly looking forward to more," says Mayor Dickie Harris, pictured here (l) with town manager Jesse Carter.

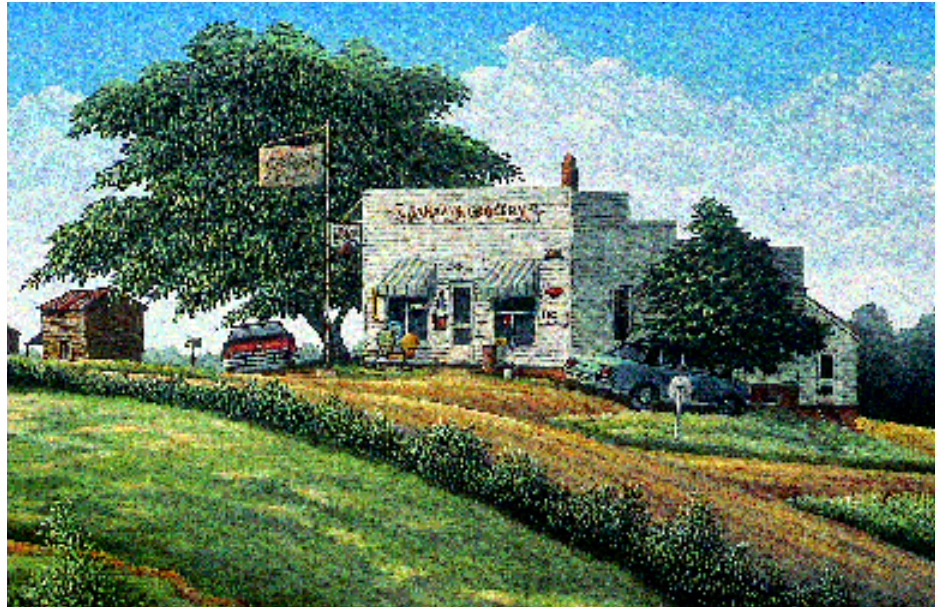
Kenbridge is part of the heart of Southside Virginia — a place where the best adjectives for small town, rural living apply. The population of about 1,200 can taste the amenities of urban life, then stroll a short way in any direction and see and smell the enduring things — the honeysuckle, new mown hay, and cured tobacco — that take root in the soul and stay forever.

During a visit to Kenbridge, one should take a slow drive down Fifth Avenue, one of the town's main thoroughfares. Both sides are lined with lovely old homes that have been tenderly introduced to modern conveniences while their original personalities have remained intact. The stately yellow brick home that was the residence of Dr. W.D. Kendig, one of the town's first physicians, still stands charmingly among other reminders of days gone by.

"The Mother of Counties"

The town is one of only two in historic Lunenburg, "The Mother of Counties." Lunenburg broke away from next-door Brunswick County in 1746 and later became the foundation from which nine other counties were formed. She acquired the name Lunenburg from England's George II, who included Duke of Brunswick-Lunenburg among his many titles. Lunenburg also hails proudly as one of the Old Dominion's 14 "Hanover Counties."

Once called Tinkling, Kenbridge was



Kenbridge shares bragging rights to artist Eldridge Bagley with Victoria and Lunenburg County. This painting, “Rural Oasis,” is representative of his work, which mostly focuses on memories of life on his family’s Lunenburg tobacco farm.

officially formed by the Virginia General Assembly in 1908. The name was chosen in honor of W.F. Kennedy and L.W. Bridgforth, who owned the land on which it was built. Stories say the town was so thoughtfully mapped out that, when auto traffic became heavy 50 years later, streets were already wide enough to handle it.

Locals say Kenbridge stays in the blood, and that those who leave it often leave behind part of themselves. Some also send back something, as evidenced by the Ripberger Public Library, so named because of the enormous generosity of long-time former residents Theodore and Virginia Ripberger. The library is a bright, wonderful place to wile away the hours. Librarian **Roberta Rickers** is always more than glad to fill you in on local history, help you uncover information if you had ancestors from the area, or just direct you to the most up-to-date facts and fiction.

The Kenbridge that wraps itself around older hearts also tugs on its young people. Sadly, many must leave the area to find jobs. As is true of small, rural towns everywhere, employment is not as plentiful as it once was; but many of those who are lucky enough to be in Kenbridge take active roles in the community.

W.I. Yerby and his wife Betty, “The Strawberry Lady,” host the town’s annual Strawberry Festival in May at Yerby’s Berry Patch.

One example of a returning son is **Tom Inge**, whose roots reach far into the area’s red clay. Inge has recently become president of the chamber of commerce, and two of his highest priorities are “revitalizing” the town and combining his chamber with that in Victoria, the county’s only other incorporated town six miles away.

As part of the revitalization effort, the chamber is hoping to install new street lamps, plant trees in inviting places, install park benches, and encourage merchants to spruce up their businesses.

Creating a joint chamber of commerce is

a more delicate venture, as Kenbridge and Victoria have enjoyed a sibling-like rivalry that stories say began long ago with high school sports. Nevertheless, when the going gets tough, the two pull together, and Inge feels a single Lunenburg Chamber of Commerce could soon eliminate any division, real or imagined.

In Kenbridge, tobacco is no longer the major employment source it once was, except for Imperial Processing Corporation, which manufactures cigar filler and chewing scrap. During tobacco season, however, the old Belt Tobacco Market still holds sales in



the town's one remaining warehouse, Dixie Lee. Farmers travel as far as 60 miles to sell in Kenbridge, with some even coming from nearby North Carolina.

Over the years, the smell of tobacco, along with the wail of the railroad, has been replaced by industrial activity. Town residents are grateful and eager for more, and have created a sizable industrial park, Lunenburg CommerCenter, complete with new shell building, water tank, and other enticements.

"The town is extremely supportive of its current industries and eagerly looking forward to more," says Mayor **Dickie Harris**. "We'd like to be able to offer more job opportunities to recent graduates as well as our older citizens."

A Berry Fine Festival

While the industrial park waits for an occupant, the town's annual Strawberry Festival, put on by the chamber of commerce, takes place on its vast expanse. On the appointed Saturday in May, people from all around pour into Kenbridge for music, games, crafts, artists, a carnival, and strawberries — in every shape and taste imaginable, mostly originating from Yerby's Berry Patch a few miles down the road.

W. I. Yerby and wife **Betty**, the "Strawberry Lady" who also serves as Strawberry Festival chairman, operate their berry and vegetable farm from Berry Road. They've been in business for 15 years, and people come from places like Richmond and Norfolk to reap the benefits. One man from Philadelphia even takes his vacation to gather the farm's offerings. But the Yerbys make it a fun place for kids, too. Decked out in her strawberry suit, Betty conducts tours for school groups from four counties besides Lunenburg. The farm also offers strawberry balloon jumping, a playground, and observation beehives which kids seem to love.

Kenbridge has to share bragging rights to **Eldridge Bagley** with Victoria and Lunenburg County, as the acclaimed artist has deep ties to each. Bagley, a primitive artist by definition, has developed into a "memory painter" whose works are known throughout the United States and overseas. Bagley tells stories with his paintings, most focused on memories of life on his family's Lunenburg tobacco farm, but also some that derive purely from his imagination. The bulk of Bagley's work is sold through Cudahy's Gallery in Richmond, where he has a showing each June. He also takes part in several annual regional art festivals. No matter how

If You Go...

On the upper end of Kenbridge's Fifth Avenue is **Mildred's Meals**, owned and operated by Mildred Carter. It is the town's oldest restaurant and one that regularly draws returning customers from near and far. Besides **fresh vegetables** the way grandma fixed 'em, "**real**" **gravy, and house dressing**, one automatically thinks of **homemade rolls and pies** when Mildred's is mentioned. Reservations usually aren't needed, but large parties should call ahead at (804) 676-3060.

On South Broad, the town's main business street, you will find **Blanche Ridgeway's Carriage House Collectibles**, a warm and inviting shop that will make you forget everything else as you browse around. Though primarily a florist, **Carriage House offers antiques and collectible bears**, which Blanche calls "her babies." You also can find some **works of talented local artists, including Lunenburg's well-known "memory painter" Eldridge Bagley**. The shop's phone number is (804) 676-3560.

On down Broad about a mile is **Wingold's Antiques, specializing in walnut, cherry, oak, and mahogany furniture**. Owner Annie Bell Wingold, who has been in business for 40 years,

also offers over a hundred lamps and is an expert in repairs and parts, shades, and advice. She is open daily and most Sundays, but it's a good idea to check before traveling from too far away. Her telephone number is (804) 676-8056.

Anyone who visits Kenbridge should detour about 10 miles to the **tiny hamlet of Lunenburg** and see the **county's historic courthouse**. The first story of the native red clay building was erected in 1827, while the beautiful exterior staircase didn't come along until the second story was added around 1850. The imposing courthouse serves as proudly today as it did in the beginning.

One day between spring and fall — (possibly in September, this year), **local veterinarian Dr. Charlie Dunavant** holds what he calls "**a redneck, country horse race**" **on the half-mile track at his home, Woodhill Farm**, a few miles from town. In addition to operating Lunenburg Animal Hospital with partner Dr. Jennifer Edens, Dunavant trains and races his own standard-bred harness race horses, trotters, and pacers. **He and the Southside Virginia Saddle Club host the annual event for fun**. The race offers a variety of classes, including quarter horse races, even mule races — "something for everyone."

More information about the **Kenbridge area** can be obtained by calling **the Town Hall at (804) 676-2452** or **the Ripberger Public Library at 676-3456**. ■

recognized he becomes, Bagley remains a country boy at heart and strives to maintain the simple rural life that he so delightfully preserves on canvas.

In the not-too-distant future, Kenbridge expects to play an important role in a 27-stop, driving tour through several Southside Virginia counties. The trail will follow as closely as possible the route of the Southside Railroad Raid carried out by Generals James H. Wilson and August V. Kautz in 1864 during Grant's Petersburg Campaign. The town will be highlighted because of a silver Communion chalice stolen during a raid on nearby St. John's Church, which is close to Brickland plantation.

St. John's was later dismantled and its bricks used to build St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Kenbridge. The chalice was recovered during the war and has been in the

safekeeping of St. Paul's for many years. The church is allowing use of its grounds for the erection of a marker relating to the event. The marker's proposed text would read in part:

"The most outrageous action [of the Federal raiders] was the plundering of St. John's Church where a silver Communion service set was stolen. This Communion set was later left behind and recovered by Confederate Cavalry when the Federals were driven from the field at the Battle of Ream's Station."

Besides allowing its grounds to display the marker, St. Paul's has agreed to have the chalice moved to the Ripberger Public Library, where it will be put on permanent display for local citizens as well as those who follow Civil War trails and investigate other points of historical value. ■