

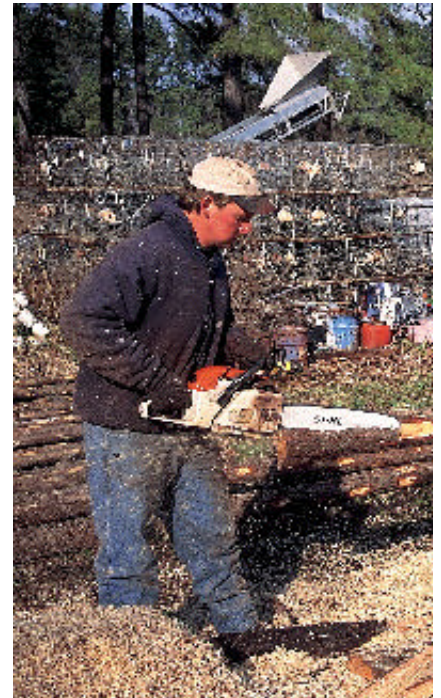
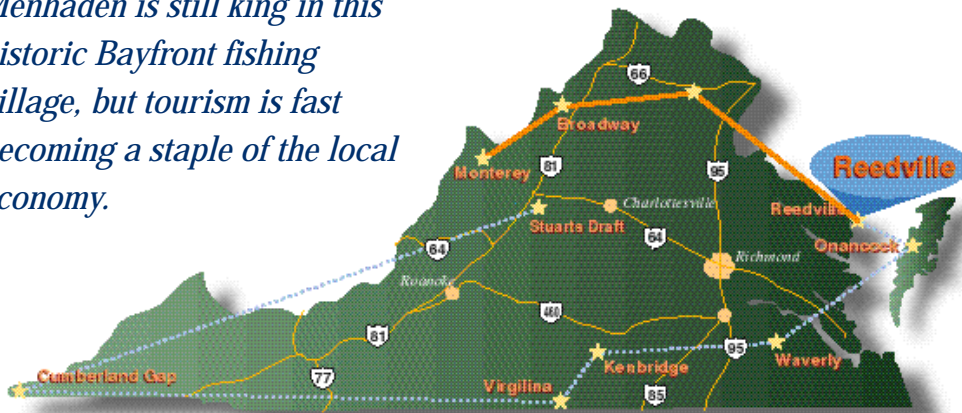
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Alfred M. Biddlecomb
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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 fourth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Reedville

Menhaden is still king in this historic Bayfront fishing village, but tourism is fast becoming a staple of the local economy.



ALFRED BIDDLECOMB PHOTOS



(Above) Ronnie Jett of Cockrell's Creek Seafood sells fresh fish and crabs brought in by local fishermen. (Left) Built in 1922, the *Elva C.* was recently donated to the Reedville Fishermen's Museum and has been restored to serve out its remaining years as a living exhibit.

In the early years of the 20th century, the town of Reedville had no major roads connecting it to the urban areas of Richmond and Tidewater. Roads did exist that led to these centers of commerce, but nothing that made these trips convenient. Located at the tip of the isolated Northern Neck of Virginia, one wanting to reach Reedville would have to travel some of the bumpiest roads this side of the Blue Ridge. Crossing the Rappahannock or Potomac Rivers which form the southern and northern borders of the Northern Neck was a chore in itself.

Despite what seemed like desolate isolation from the urban centers of the Old Dominion, Reedville was considered by many to be the richest little town in America. This designation was no exaggeration. Though it wasn't connected by any major roadways or rail lines, Reedville had the water. With the water at its doorstep, the



Local artist Lara Haynie, pictured here with her work "Reedville Afternoon," captures the flavor of the town.



(Above) Visitors can enjoy the past with a stay in the Morris House, a Victorian mansion turned bed-and-breakfast built for menhaden industry chief Albert Morris in 1895. (Left) Pound netter Greg Swift (left) is in his net field each spring preparing his nets for another fishing season.

boats would go out and the money would come in. It was during this turn of the century era that a small fish known as menhaden changed the face of this small peninsula of land known before 1874 only as Windmill Point.

As the menhaden fishing industry grew in Reedville, its profits built many Victorian-style mansions along Main Street, funded public schools, employed almost all its citizens (directly or indirectly), put the kids through college, and sustained a sea-going tradition that still thrives in the town today.

Through it all, it was the water — the Chesapeake Bay — that made all this possible. In fact, most who settled the Reedville area in the early days came by boat. One of these settlers was a fisherman from the coast of Maine who had envisioned setting up menhaden fishing operations similar to the ones that had thrived up north for years. In his quest, Capt. Elijah Reed sailed into a lit-

tle inlet below the Potomac River known as Cockrell's Creek in 1867. While many southern towns were still recovering from the aftereffects of the Civil War, Reedville began to experience an upward spiral in its economic fortunes.

In the early years, with no major highways or railroads, the lifeblood of the Reedville economy and its links with the urban markets of Baltimore and Norfolk were sustained by the shipping channels. Stopping at the end of Reedville, the steamboats would pick up goods to be sold in Baltimore and drop off merchandise to stock the local shops. In fact, within a stone's throw of the steamboat wharf, Reedville had no less than four grocery stores at one time. "There were so many and none of them went broke," says Jean McKenney, a retired schoolteacher who grew up in Reedville. "Many people who walk along these streets today probably couldn't imagine the business activity that Reedville once supported."

Today, Reedville is still one of the busiest fishing ports in the nation, often ranking among the leaders in gross tonnage of fish landed annually. The core of this industry is still the menhaden fishery. Though there have been over 50 menhaden-processing plants on Cockrell's Creek, only one modern facility remains today, with a fleet of 13

oceangoing ships. Reedville is also home to a fleet of snapper-rigs, which catch menhaden for the lucrative bait market; pound net fishermen, who catch menhaden and various food fish served in restaurants up and down the East Coast; crab potters who still bring home the "cash crop" of the Chesapeake Bay in large numbers; and oystermen, who are seeing a significant rebound in their industry.

A Great Escape

Reedville sees a growing number of tourists and a new generation of settlers who wish to get away from the frantic life of the urban centers. Reedville's historic district, which runs along Main Street, allows visitors to see the many New England-style homes built by many of the town's famed fish boat captains and bosses of the industry. What probably sets Reedville apart from many other historic districts is the fact that much of this history is still alive and well. Visitors can enjoy the past with a stay in the Morris House — a Victorian mansion built for menhaden industry chief Albert Morris in 1895 — while viewing the town's commercial fishermen still hard at work. From his dock on Cockrell's Creek, pound netter Greg Swift is in his net field each spring preparing his nets for another fishing season.

Whether it's cutting the stakes that support his nets out in the Bay or bringing home a load of fish, Swift continues a tradition carried on by his family for generations. Just up the shore, Walter Rogers also carries on his family's pound netting tradition while his older brother, Fred, catches menhaden from his snapper rig, the *Hush Puppy*. Family traditions run deep in Reedville, with many in the fishing business carrying the local names of Haynie, Deihl, Jett, and others who have shaped the industry.

One thing Reedville has had a hard time doing through the years is keeping its young people at home, instead of exporting their talents to the cities and suburbs. Though many have left to find high-paying jobs in the lucrative urban centers, most always find their way back to Reedville when they retire. Swift is one of the few who feels no need to waste his prime years away from his boyhood home. "I would rather live here in Reedville earning less money doing what I enjoy than moving away and being miserable while making more money."

Along Main Street, at Reedville Marine Railway, sits a link to the past. Docked at one of the piers is the deadrise work boat *Elva C.*, which Swift's grandfather, Capt. Ira Swift, used to fish his pound nets. Built in

1922, the *Elva C.* was recently donated to the Reedville Fishermen's Museum and has been restored to serve out its remaining years as a living exhibit.

Fishing Success = Economic Success

Just up the creek along the shore is Cockrell's Creek Seafood, which sells fresh fish and crabs brought in by many of the local watermen. Here you can find Ronnie Jett hard at work keeping track of his shipments of blue crabs sent north to Baltimore or serving customers in his seafood deli. Jett, who has worked in and around the fishing industry most of his life, knows that despite Reedville's changing economy, much of the town's hopes rely on how well the fishing season goes each year. "A friend of mine told me a long time ago that the determining factor in how local businesses will fare is how well the [menhaden] fish boats do each year," Jett says. "When the boats are having a good season, you can see the jump in the local economy, because everyone has more money to spend."

Like most businessmen in Reedville, Jett has seen the growing number of tourists coming to visit the village each year. Just like the early settlers, he says it's the water that lures them in. "One day we had a family

come down here to eat lunch," Jett says. "The weather was windy and cold that day and we told them they may want to eat inside, but they insisted on sitting outside along the creek shore. Views like we have around here are something that few people get a chance to see."

While Reedville has seen many changes over the past century, memories of the past are usually just a doorstep away. In an effort to preserve the town's heritage, a group of residents formed the Greater Reedville Association, whose first order of business was to purchase the Walker House — the oldest standing home in Reedville. At this location the Reedville Fishermen's Museum was established and, in less than 10 years of operation, has more than doubled in size, with exhibits ranging from the story of the menhaden industry to the tools of the watermen's trade, along with many paintings and photos of the town and its history.

Reedville, with its fledgling tourism economy and preservation projects, offers much insight into the history and evolution of a Chesapeake Bay boom town. But much of this history is still alive and many chapters have yet to be written. History here is rich, but it is truly a living history. ■

If You Go...

The Reedville landscape is dominated by classic New England-style homes built with money from its booming economy, which was based on the local fishing industry. Many of these homes now serve as bed-and-breakfasts, accommodating the growing number of visitors the town receives each year.

Two of the most notable landmarks at the end of historic Main Street in Reedville are the Morris House (built in 1895) and The Gables (built in 1909). These Victorian mansions were built for two of the leading businessmen in the menhaden fishing industry. Both homes have been renovated and feature waterfront views and all the modern conveniences.

Reservations at the Morris House can be made by contacting Heath or Erin Dill at 804-453-7016. For reservations at The Gables, call 804-453-5209.

Also along Main Street is the Bailey-Cockrell House which has also been restored with Victorian antiques and features a waterfront view of Cockrell's Creek. Reservations can be placed by calling 804-453-5900. Janet's Bed and Breakfast is open between April and

September. Reservations can be made by dialing 804-453-5222.

Just down the road in the village of Fleeton on Chesapeake Bay is Cedar Grove Bed and Breakfast Inn. Reservations can be made by dialing 804-453-3915 or 800-497-8215.

Accommodations are also available at the 20-room Bay Motel (804-453-5171) located near Reedville on U.S. 360. Full campground facilities are located at Chesapeake Bay/Smith Island KOA & Marina (804-453-3430).

Waterfront dining is a special feature of the Reedville area and on Main Street is Elijah's Restaurant (804-453-3621). Carrying the name of the town's founder — Capt. Elijah Reed — Elijah's features a wide variety of seafood, fresh prime cuts of beef, soups and breads.

Also along the waterfront is Cockrell's Creek Seafood (804-453-6326), which features live and steamed crabs, soft crabs, and fresh fish, along with a host of seafood salads made fresh daily. Located near Reedville off Fleeton Road, Cockrell's Creek Seafood is accessible by boat or car.

Also located on Cockrell's Creek in the nearby village of Fairport is Fairport Marina & Restaurant (804-453-5002). In addition to providing mooring services for boaters, visitors can feast on the abundant supply of live

or steamed crabs and fresh seafood.

Visitors wishing to take a day cruise out on the Chesapeake Bay have two from which to choose. Both are seasonal (May-Oct.) and reservations are required.

A trip to Tangier Island leaves from Buzzard's Point Marina aboard the Chesapeake Breeze. Reservations can be made by calling 804-453-BOAT (2628). From nearby Smith Point, a daily cruise leaves for Smith Island aboard the Capt. Evans. For reservations aboard this cruise call 804-453-3430.

For a broad perspective on the evolution of Reedville and its Chesapeake Bay heritage, visiting the Reedville Fishermen's Museum is a must. The museum is open daily (except Tuesdays) from May 1-Oct. 31 and on Fridays through Mondays from November through April. For more information, call 804-453-6529. Of special interest is the upcoming Waterman's Day on Sat., May 16. For more information, contact the museum or Jackie Carper, 804-453-4122.

For more information on Reedville and Northumberland County call the Northumberland County Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center at 804-529-5031. ■