

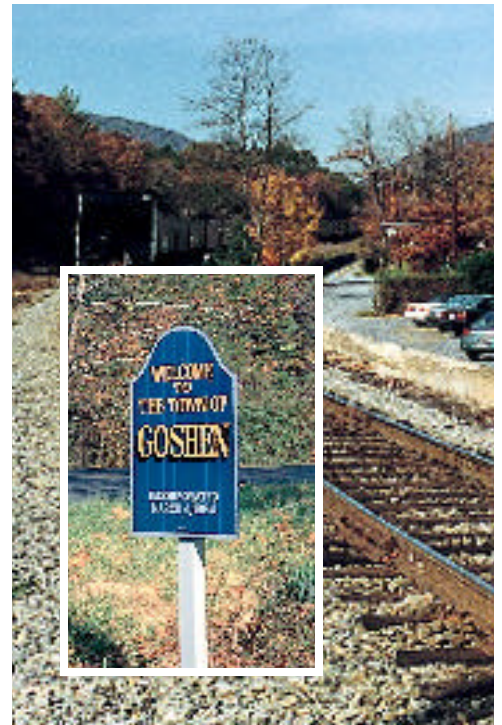
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Richard G. Johnstone Jr., Editor

During 1999, 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 first stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Goshen

The renowned pass through Virginia's Shenandoah Mountains is a gorgeous natural gateway to the quaint town of Goshen, which is more a land of mills and homes than of the milk and honey enjoyed by its Biblical predecessor.



It was 1742. Scotsman Andrew Graham was following a rugged buffalo trail alongside a small trout stream. Suddenly, more sky was unfolding before him. Could this be the pass through the mountains he had been seeking?

For several hundred yards, he navigated his way through the undergrowth of this rugged opening in the Shenandoah Mountains. This gorge's rocky inclines and shady lowlands were thick with native plants: ground-hugging mosses, expansive redbuds, and towering sugar maple, oak, and mountain ash trees. Then, after exiting this gorge--later named, appropriately, Buffalo Gap--Graham continued southward for some 20 miles, till he reached the heart of a pleasant, pristine valley. Standing on what was then the western fringe of the American frontier, Andrew Graham's search was complete.

Five generations and more than a quarter of a millennium later, his namesake, **Andy Graham**, still tends the land settled by his ancestor, a livestock farm of some 700 acres. As Andy points out, "The Scotch-Irish who came through Buffalo Gap were looking for good water and good grazing land." Graham and other settlers found an abundance of both as they moved through Buffalo Gap into the rich valley land fed by an array of rivers, streams and creeks.

Over the next century, thousands upon thousands of homesteaders would follow Graham and other pioneers through Buffalo Gap and through several other passes and openings cut by the elements into the sides

Town Clerk Bobbie Thornsby (right) says "news travels very well" in Goshen, even without a newspaper. "Goshen doesn't change much" says local elected official and service station owner **Bill Edwards (below, right)**, seen with wife **Leonie** and daughters **Cheryl Thornton (center)** and **Scarlett Grimm**. Hummingbird Inn proprietors **Diana and Jerry Robinson (below)** restored a town landmark into a pleasant B&B.





BILL SHERROD PHOTOS

of these ancient mountains. And while most of these hardy pioneers would continue pushing ever westward, a number of them found the valley in which Graham had settled to be just right for raising livestock and crops. And also families. To those who stayed, the land was as blessed as Goshen, the Old Testament “land of milk and honey.” And thus was born the name of a town.

Land o’ Goshen!

And thus also was born the name of the several-million-year-old gorge nearby that is one of the largest, most famous--and most beautiful--openings through Virginia’s mountains. Yet as famous as Goshen Pass is, most of the Scotch-Irish who settled the area migrated from the north, down the Shenandoah Valley through Panther Gap and Buffalo Gap, and not through Goshen Pass, which is just to the southeast of Goshen, the town. Goshen Pass, however, did serve as the gateway west for other groups of settlers later in the 18th and into the 19th century.

Today, Goshen — the pass — remains likely as lush and surely as stunning as it was two or three centuries ago, though gone are the herds of buffalo and elk that used the opening to range back and forth over the mountains in search of food. Their trail is

Two who moved to the town for its rural charm are retired Long Island banker Clarice Degnan (right) and Mill Creek Cafe owner Dudley Brill, who says “You couldn’t drag me out of Goshen.”



The C&O Railroad (now CSX) came through in the mid-1800s, opening the area for greater settlement and a brisk tourist trade at the turn of this century. Tracks run through town alongside Wood Street (left). Goshen Mayor J.B. Sprouse displays the aggressive plans from 1890 to turn the town into a booming metropolis. The biggest issue facing the town today, according to the mayor, is getting a sewage treatment plant, “which could help pave the way for other development,” he says.

now hard-surface state Route 39. And where Routes 39 and 42 converge, there you’ll find Goshen, the town. BARC Electric Cooperative serves the edges of town, much of surrounding Rockbridge County, and all of nearby Bath County.

While the pass has changed little, the town has changed dramatically over the 250-some years since Graham, fellow Scot and town founder, Alexander Dunlap, and several members of the Bratton family began settling the area. The C&O Railroad (now CSX) came through in the mid-1800s, opening the area for further settlement and a more robust tourist trade. The town of Goshen was, in fact, a bit of a tourist mecca around the turn of the 20th century.

The number of visitors to the area

boomed after construction in 1890 of the grand, 160-room Alleghany Hotel, which sat high atop a hill overlooking the C&O train station in the middle of town. Hotel staff welcomed off the passenger trains flocks of well-to-do city residents, eager to breathe the cool mountain air and drink the area’s cool spring water. The hotel offered its guests an impressive array of other amenities as well, including a swimming pool, tennis courts, and fresh flowers daily. There was also another elegant hotel, the Cold Sulphur, in Goshen at that time.

But as automobiles gradually replaced trains as the major means of transportation, and city residents were able to roam more freely on their vacations, Goshen’s tourist trade faded, and both hotels closed. Towns-



folk still talk about how the Alleghany Hotel burned to the ground under mysterious circumstances on Thanksgiving Day, 1923.

Much of the town's historical sense of identity seems to center on the train tracks that have been its lifeblood in many ways. Yet, to the outside world, the name Goshen overwhelmingly conjures up not a town, but a mighty gorge, carved through the mountains over eons and eons by a river that would become known as the Maury.

"The loveliest spot in Virginia" is how Matthew Fontaine Maury — after whom the river is named — described Goshen Pass. A professor at nearby Virginia Military Institute and a renowned early oceanographer during the mid-19th century, Maury would ultimately become known as "The Pathfinder of the Seas." Fulfilling his final request was a VMI honor guard, which after his death in 1873 carried his body through the pass while the rhododendrons were in bloom. Readers, of course, are encouraged to experience Goshen Pass on an earlier schedule.

The pass not only showcases natural beauty, it also offers the opportunity to pursue outdoors activities, from swimming, tubing and canoeing, to fishing for trout, to hiking, to picnicking. The Virginia Department of Transportation manages the pass as a game forest preserve.

Andy Graham, who as a B-24 pilot flew missions in the European Theater in World War II, takes Maury's compliment about the pass one step further, insisting that Goshen Pass is, simply, "the prettiest place in the world."

And though gone are the Victorian-era glory days with their trainloads of summertime tourists, the unspoiled splendor of the Goshen area has led in recent decades to it becoming a hotbed for summer camps, many intended for children and teens. Currently, there are at least two church-related camps for young people in the area, plus a private summer camp for boys, a Boy Scout camp, and a public campground.

Goshen Has Plenty of "Characters"

While the gorge's splendor is natural, the town's splendor is more of the human variety. "Goshen has always had lots of 'characters,'" notes **Mary Graham**, unofficial town historian who'll celebrate 50 years of marriage with husband Andy this June. "The people in Goshen are neighborly and kind," she continues, "and a lot of new people are moving into the area, many from up north. I guess they're trying to get away from the

If You Go...

Goshen has something — actually *someone* — better than a chamber of commerce in **Town Clerk Bobbie Thornsburg**, (540) 997-5545. She's there Monday through Friday from 9 a.m.-2 p.m. In a corner of the town office is a framed print from 1890 showing the Goshen Land & Improvement Co's. grand-but-never-realized plans to turn the town into a booming metropolis. Bobbie says Goshen folks welcome visitors and are "very down to earth and very sincere. And because we're a very close-knit community, news travels very well despite the fact that we have no local newspaper."

Another good source of information on the town is the **Goshen Public Library**, (540) 997-0351, where librarian Anne Drake McClung can provide additional information on the town and its history.

On your way to or from Goshen, be sure to **follow Route 39 along the Maury River and experience the Goshen Pass, which is naturally beautiful year-round**. If you're staying in town, contact **The Hummingbird Inn** at (800) 397-3214 or (540) 997-9065, or visit their web site at www.hummingbirdinn.com.

birdinn.com. Also, there's **Big River Guest Lodge**, (540) 997-0361 or 997-1478.

Any visit to the Rockbridge County area should begin in Lexington, which is just 23 miles south of Goshen. The **Lexington Visitors Bureau** has an impressive visitor center at 106 E. Washington St. in the historic downtown area. Phone the center at (540) 463-3777, or e-mail at lexington@rockbridge.net. **The center has loads of information on area historical and cultural sites, places to stay, and places to eat.**

While in Lexington, be sure to visit the **George C. Marshall Museum**, next to Washington and Lee University and Virginia Military Institute, and also nearby **Stonewall Jackson House**, where the Civil War hero lived for a decade before the war.

Of special interest to equine lovers is Lexington's **Virginia Horse Center**, just north of the city. The center's 4,000-seat coliseum hosts state, national and international horse competitions. For information and schedules, call (540) 463-2194.

A Rockbridge must-see is **Natural Bridge**, about 15 miles south of Lexington. For more info on this natural wonder, surveyed by George Washington and owned by Thomas Jefferson, phone (800) 533-1410 or (540) 291-2121, e-mail at Natbrg@aol.com, or visit the web site at www.naturalbridgeva.com. ■

cold weather and from traffic congestion and high taxes." At last count, the town had about 365 residents.

One of the town's primary "characters," who moved to the area from Richmond in the mid-'70s, is **Dudley Brill**, owner of Mill Creek Café, a popular eatery and conversation corner located at the intersection of Routes 39 and 42. Then the owner of a café in downtown Richmond, Brill says that "one day in 1975, I decided I needed to get out of there. The people in downtown were rude." So he moved near Goshen, bought a house and three acres for \$8,500, and began fixing up his new place. In 1978, he bought Mill Creek Café, a local landmark that was in need of TLC. Brill gave it plenty of attention and time — including several years of 18-hour days — and by the mid-'80s the café was a success with the locals and with folks passing through the area.

"The reason I was able to turn this place around is because I did what country folks

do — instead of using instant or already-prepared food, I've worked hard to offer almost nothing but homemade foods. We also have freshly cut meats and even fresh seafood from Deltaville," Brill points out.

He says Goshen is "a real enticing area, especially for retired people. In a big city like Richmond or New York, you don't have different types of people mix together as much as you do in a small town. Everybody's like family here," Brill says. His plans for the future? "You couldn't drag me kicking and screaming out of here and back to Richmond."

Another local business owner is **Bill Edwards**, whose two grown daughters, **Scarlett Grimm** and **Cheryl Thornton**, mark the fourth generation of his family to live in Goshen. With his daughters and wife **Leonia**, Edwards operates an Exxon station and convenience store on the edge of town, near a bridge over the Calfpasture River. That river, fed by Mill Creek (after which

Brill's café is named), flows into the Maury River.

Edwards has operated a full-service gas station on the site since 1964, though in an earlier life it was a Gulf station. Now halfway through his third term as a member of the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors, Edwards sees tomorrow's Goshen as being, well, pretty much like the Goshen of today. "Goshen doesn't change much," he says from the cozy back office of his station, surrounded on all sides by walls full of photos of Goshen during its heyday at the turn of the 20th century. "There are a fair number of retirees moving into the area, but I don't see any drastic change ahead. Textiles and timber will continue as our major industries, with just enough development to keep bread on the table."

Edwards is right on target as to what keeps bread on the tables around Goshen. A textile plant, Stillwater Mills, is the town's largest employer, with 175 or so employees who finish and dye cloth utilizing the Cal-pasture's pure water, which is what first attracted the plant's owners to the area in 1930. Among other major employers of local folks are three timber-related businesses. There's a wood treatment plant, Burke-Parsons-Bowlby, whose 85 employees manufacture railroad ties and fence posts, and there are also two sizeable lumberyards, Randolph Williams Lumber Company and North Fork Lumber Company, whose president, **Will Harris**, is also on the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors.

No Traffic Lights, Please

Exxon station owner Edwards sums up economic development this way: "Folks around here like rural living. They don't want a major explosion. We'd like to pick up some more small industries, to keep our young people from moving away. But most folks don't want a population boom." He quickly adds, "And they don't want traffic lights."

Edwards had the opportunity to see the world beyond Goshen years ago during a tour of duty in the U.S. Air Force, with assignments on Okinawa and in Germany. "I went to Holland in the springtime when the tulips were in bloom," he remembers, "and that was the only place I've been that was *almost* as pretty as Goshen."

The biggest challenge facing Goshen, according to Edwards, is funding and installing a sewage treatment plant. The town already has a central drinking-water system. The view held by board of supervisors member Edwards is shared by **Darell**

"J. B." Sprouse, Goshen's mayor. "We need a sewer system, which could help pave the way for other development," says Sprouse. In particular, he thinks that a sewer system could make additional housing possible, as well as help attract a sewing plant or other small industry. He says a sewing plant in particular "would be good to bring into the area. There are a lot of people who live here and travel to other areas to work at sewing plants." He knows this first-hand, having retired after working for 29 years as a sewing machine mechanic in Staunton.

Mayor Sprouse jokes about being a transplant to Goshen: "I came here in 1953, from Craigsville, where I was born and raised." Craigsville, by the way, is all of nine miles away. And why did Sprouse leave his hometown? "My girlfriend drew me here," he relates with a wry grin, adding, "she's now my wife." And with wife **Janet** — a Goshen native — the mayor owns and operates a small grocery store, The Little Food Mart. Sprouse downplays his own role in the business, which his wife operated for years while he was working in Staunton. "She manages the grocery store," Sprouse relates. "She does the ordering and everything. I just stand around and try to help her."

Another husband-and-wife team owns and operates The Hummingbird Inn, one of the town's two lodging establishments. The inn's stunning exterior architectural style, Carpenter Gothic, is a reflection of the fact that the bulk of the former residence was built by the Teter family in the second half of the 19th century. But the formal Victorian exterior belies the inn's humble beginnings as a simple cabin of post-and-beam construction built about 1780. The original cabin is now the rustic den used by guests of innkeepers **Jerry and Diana Robinson**.

The Robinsons moved south in 1992 from New York, where he was an editor with McGraw-Hill and she worked as a registered nurse. While on business trips to Virginia, he says he fell in love with the Shenandoah Valley.

The final push to move south came in the form of an astronomically high real estate tax bill. "That was the final straw," he says. "We had to get out of the northeast. And climate and taxes were two major considerations in helping us decide where to relocate."

After scouting 150 or more bed-and-breakfast inns in several states, the couple "kept coming back to Virginia," he says. "We drove to Goshen in a downpour, and even though the inn was unoccupied and dirty, there was something warm and appeal-

ing about it." Diana adds: "The house had a lot of character to it, more than the others we had seen, many of which had been renovated to death."

When Eleanor Came to Town

Jerry Robinson says he and Diana felt it was important "to maintain the structure without ruining it." The Robinsons were careful to restore the home to its appearance earlier this century, while adding onto the home enough bathrooms to allow a private one for each of the five guestrooms. The home's grandest moment may well have been in 1935, when Pearl Teter Wood hosted Eleanor Roosevelt for an overnight stay. The First Lady had come to Goshen to tour Stillwater Mills, which during the Depression sold a considerable amount of woolen cloth to the federal government.

The Robinsons' take on Goshen after six-plus years? "People here value their church, their family, their home, their way of life. I don't believe most of them could live in a city," notes Jerry. Diana, a native of England, uses warm adjectives to paint a word-picture of the town: "Goshen is quaint, homey, friendly, unpretentious. Goshen is peaceful."

Clarice Degan and her husband moved to Goshen from Long Island, New York, 10 years ago, when both retired from jobs in the banking industry. Along with the Robinsons, the Degans volunteer to pick up trash and debris along a stretch of Routes 39 and 42. "It's been wonderful living here," she says. "We wanted to be near a college town, and with Lexington so close by, there's always something going on."

Indeed, follow almost any point of the compass from Goshen and within 30 miles you'll find another town or small city, including Lexington, of course, but also Staunton, Clifton Forge, Warm Springs and Hot Springs.

"I wouldn't want to be anyplace else," says Clarice of Goshen. Her words could just as easily have been spoken by Andrew Graham some 257 years ago, when he found a land his descendants would live on and love into the 21st century. ■