

DOWN HOME SERIES

by Bennie Scarton, Assistant Editor,
Manassas Journal Messenger

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 year's fourth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Manassas Park

Formed after World War II as a bedroom community for returning veterans, Manassas Park has managed to retain its reputation as a clean, safe place to raise a family through decades of brisk growth.



BENNIE SCARTON PHOTOS



The City of Manassas Park is one of the *youngest* as well as one of the *smallest* cities in Virginia due to its late date of incorporation, 1975.

Located to the immediate northeast of the larger City of Manassas in Northern Virginia, it is a community of vast contrasts, as growth has become the key word. A flurry of residential development has brought in new residents with new ideas, and most recently, the opening of a new, state-of-the-art high school.

On one side of busy Virginia Route 28 that runs through the city are the old "cracker box," Cape Cod-style houses sold in the 1940s and '50s for around \$10,000 each and bought largely by World War II veterans in need of housing for their young families. On

Career firefighter Jason Auth with the Manassas Park Fire Department puts a shine on one of the company's firetrucks.



Manassas Park Police Sergeant R.L. Eagal (left) has been with the police force for 16 years. Manassas Park High School (above) is one of the most technologically advanced schools in the state.



Dong Hee An, owner of An's Tailoring Shop for the past six years, is one of the city's many shop owners.



Troy Taylor (left), zoning and planning administrator, pauses on the steps of the Virginia Railway Express loading center. School bus driver June McBride (above) helps transport students to one of Manassas Park's five schools.



Mail carrier Reber Chergosky makes her rounds on Manassas Drive, one of the city's main thoroughfares.

the opposite side of the highway are new homes, selling rapidly despite \$300,000 price tags.

Mayor Ernest L. Evans, better known as Emie, is proud of the current growth of the city — both residential and business. It now has a population of 9,200, with new houses going up daily and new businesses coming in regularly. Most of the original homes have been remodeled and updated.

On a map, the 2½-square-mile city takes on the appearance of a key, with the head of the key to the east and the shank of the key to the west.

"A Good Life" for Residents

"We have affordable housing, exceptional schools, good recreation programs, responsive and well-equipped police, fire and rescue squads, and convenient transportation, everything to give our residents a good life" says Evans, who took office in 1992.

Within the past two years, the city has also opened the picturesque 18-hole Manassas Park Golf Course and Signal Bay Waterpark. Under the Parks and Recreation Program, the city also manages Costello Park, named for former Mayor Roger Costello, plus Signal Hill Park and three "block" parks. Signal Hill Park is named for nearby hills where flags were used for the first time by the Confederate armies for communication in their skirmishes with the Union in the Civil War.

The waterpark draws families from all over the region. "It makes you wish you were a kid again," says Mayor Evans. Costello Park is a 25-acre community park and recreation center and has been home of the city's annual Fourth of July activities.

The opening of the new Manassas Park High School in February was like nothing the students had ever seen before. On the first day of classes in their new \$14.2 million,

state-of-the-art high school, the students were happy and proud to attend the large, technologically advanced school, but they were also a little nervous about being in such a "nice" building.

"I've gone to schools in Manassas Park since I was in kindergarten and this isn't like any other Manassas Park school. It's really beautiful," says senior **Carolyn Henry**.

The three-story school boasts computer hook-ups in every room and the capability for every student in a classroom to use his or her own computer at the same time. It's the only school of its kind, anywhere, says **Principal Margaret Huckaby**.

Superintendent **Tom DeBolt** says for too long the students have been housed in trailers and a failing school building, but he's hopeful "a better school will lead to a better self-image and, in the end, better students."

Meanwhile, the city's business corridor has been growing faster than that of any other

locality in the Washington, D.C. area, with the number of businesses more than doubling in the past five years. The city now has more than 550 businesses, with a labor force of 4,000. Manassas Park always has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state.

Troy E. Taylor, zoning and planning administrator for the city, is particularly impressed with S & K Industries, a firm that has been in Manassas Park for 12 years and produces preservative-free, highly nutritional and naturally full-grained tortillas, tacos and tortilla chips for restaurants up and down the East Coast.

Plenty of Corn

Eugene Suarez Jr., a partner in the firm with his father, **Eugene Suarez Sr.**, says the company gets 45,000 pounds of corn from Ohio distributors each week, churning out nearly 18,000 tortillas along with chips and tacos. "We put out a lot of corn products," he notes in an understatement.

Taylor wishes he had more industries like S & K, with its 35 employees. He is constantly working to bring more into the area. "We won't leave any stone unturned to bring more firms into the city," he says.

The Conner Center Industrial and Business Park is bursting with companies, ranging from auto body shops to plumbing and heating firms, employing some 2,000 people.

A local treasure is the golf course, a \$6.4 million, 18-hole championship facility open for public play. The course was erected on the site where Confederate General Richard

S. Ewell encamped for the winter, close by the Manassas National Battlefield Park. At least one hole had to be redesigned when course architect Jerry Slack came across historic Civil War remnants as the fairways were being laid out.

"It's a very beautiful, very challenging golf course," says **Bob Anderson**, CEO of Metro Sign and Design, who moved his company to the Park in 1990. He points out that "all the services were here and all we had to do was build and move in."

The city has also become a mecca for corporate offices and production facilities, whose work products range from advertising to xerography.

As a tiny independent city, Manassas Park is somewhat of an anomaly in the sprawling Northern Virginia suburbs, but city residents and officials are fiercely proud of their economic independence and have made a name for the city by offering cut-rate land prices for small businesses.

Another Civil War vestige, the Conner House, also known as the Yellow Hospital, stands across the road from the city's administration building. Efforts are being made to have it restored.

"All in all, there isn't much we don't have in Manassas Park and what we don't have is close by," Evans says with pride. "We've got a lot to be proud of here and we know where we're going and we're on the right track."

Manassas Park Police Department has 15 sworn officers, seven civilian employees, one animal control officer and four crossing guards. Chief of Police **William Kiefer** says

major crimes are rare in his city, with the officers spending most of their time keeping the speeders under control. "We've been ranked as the safest city in Virginia twice," he notes with pride.

Manassas Park was formed during the 1940s and '50s as housing for World War II veterans and "blue collar" workers seeking affordable housing. The community voted to secede from Prince William County in 1975, and scrambled to set up a city government and establish a school system made of temporary buildings.

A Major School Upgrade

Twenty-five years later, the school system's infrastructure has started to age. With a growing population of younger suburbanites with school-age children, the city has entered the planning stages of a major overhaul for the school system, including the opening of the new high school and a fourth elementary school now in the planning stage.

Joseph and **Nancy Dazzo** are two of Manassas Park's long-term home owners, having moved into the community 30 years ago.

"We found it to be affordable and a great place to raise our family," says Dazzo, who retired after a 20-year stint in the U. S. Army and decided Manassas Park was where he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

That also holds true for hundreds of other families who call Manassas Park home. It's a community that enjoys a well-earned reputation for providing its residents with one of the highest qualities of life in the region. ■

If You Go...

Plan to take in the traditional Fourth of July celebration that includes sporting events, entertainment and food topped off by a big fireworks celebration. Call (703) 335-8800. Manassas Park has a wide variety of recreational activities, with parks and an active Parks and Recreation Department for the entire family. Call (703) 335-8871. In the summer months, Signal Bay Waterpark is open to the public from Memorial Day through Labor Day for a modest admission price. Call (703) 335-8874.

The recreation center is open to the public in the afternoon and evenings, year round, and has a full-sized gym, a general activities room and programs for the youth. Costello Park Pool is open during the summer months. Call (703) 335-8873.

The city has one of the most technologi-

cally advanced high schools in the state. For more information, call the school board office at (703) 335-8850.

The pride of the city is the Manassas Park Public Golf Course, a \$6.4 million, 18-hole championship golf course for public play. It has a driving range, teaching academy, putting green, restaurant and pro shop. Call (703) 335-0777.

While the city was not formed until the late 1940s and early '50s, the Conner House dates back to before the Civil War. The Antebellum house served as Field Headquarters for Confederate Gen. Joseph Johnston during the summer of 1861 and later was used as a hospital by both southern and northern troops. It is a focal point in the city and plans are in the works to restore it so the public can appreciate its historic and architectural value.

Manassas Park is also a stop for the Virginia Railway Express with a station for residents to get a ride into the Washington,

D. C. area. Call (703) 684-0400.

Rack 'N Roll Billiard Club, which offers food, sales, lessons, leagues and tournaments, is a popular spot in the city. Call (703) 330-1414. Several restaurants are located in the Manassas Park Shopping Center.

For more information on Manassas Park, call the Prince William County-Greater Manassas Chamber of Commerce at (703) 368-6600 or stop by the office at 8963 Center Street in Manassas for visitor information and services.

To reach Manassas Park from Washington, D.C., take Interstate 66 to Virginia Route 28 south (exit 53) toward Manassas. Proceed south 5.5 miles and take a left or right on Manassas Drive. A right turn will take you into the old established part of the city and the Manassas Park Shopping Center, while a left will take you into the newly developed section (Blooms Crossing), with the VRE train station, City Hall and Golf Course. ■