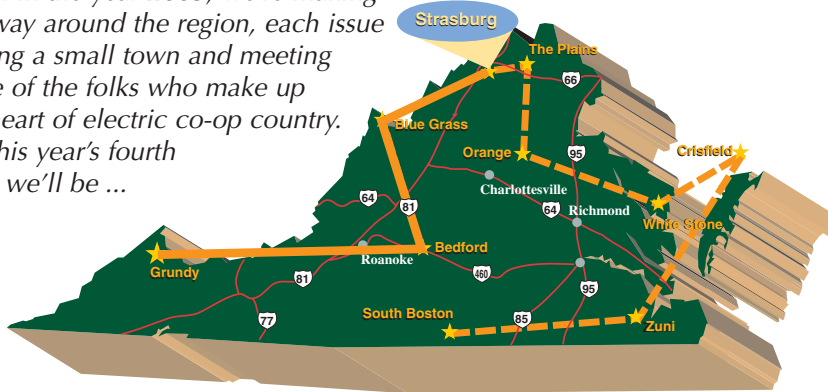


by Peter J. Fakoury,
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2003, we're making our way around the region, 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 **Strasburg**

Scenic vistas, hospitable townfolk and traditional values define this northern Shenandoah Valley community.

On a warm spring day in Strasburg, a woman wearing a lime-green sweater skips down the steps of St. Paul Lutheran Church on Washington Street. Her short blonde hair bobs perkily as her eyes meet those of a passing stranger.

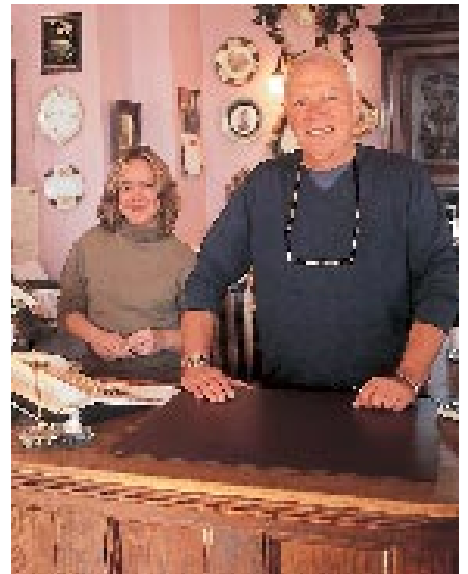
"How are you today?" she asks. "Looks like spring is here." The stranger smiles.

"Enjoy the day," she adds.

A block over on King Street, a waitress at the Hi Neighbor Restaurant sees a familiar customer walk in the door.



PETER FAKOURY PHOTOS



Gary Rutherford, owner of the Hotel Strasburg, and Brandy Combs, hold down the front desk at the hotel, which is one of Strasburg's loveliest attractions and best places to eat.

"Hi, Don," she says. "Iced tea, as usual?" The man nods, picks up a newspaper from the Formica lunch counter and sits down at a booth with red Naugahyde benches. It is Saint Patrick's Day and he orders the lunch special — corned beef and cabbage.

Strasburg is a town that harkens back to another time, a time when neighbors knew each other, old-fashioned values still ruled and life was simpler. It is quintessential small-town America.

Nestled at the foot of Massanutten Mountain, at the north end of the Shenandoah



St. Paul Lutheran Church is the town's oldest congregation. Established in 1747 by German settlers, its current building was erected in 1844.



Virginia Cadden is a lifelong resident of Strasburg. She loves its lovely views and quiet lifestyle.

Valley, Strasburg has remained virtually unchanged for decades. Originally an agricultural community, most residents were farmers, though some worked for the railroad and in the limestone quarries nearby. It wasn't until after World War II that industry brought new jobs. Today most of Strasburg's residents work in factories on the fringes of the town. The Perry Judd plant prints more than a hundred different magazine titles. The Lear Corporation factory turns out injection-molded parts for the automotive industry.

Though only 80 miles from Washington, D.C., it has not become a bedroom community for D.C.-area commuters, as have so many other small towns on the outskirts of the nation's capital. Most of Strasburg's citizens live and work in or around the town. Most admit they are lucky to be so close to Washington, yet still able to maintain their small-town lifestyle.

A Great Place to Unwind

Strasburg is the place to go for people who need to get away from the rat race of modern life for a little while. It is a place to slow down and recharge your batteries. It is unpretentious and real.

Though it makes only a modest attempt at promoting itself, there is much to experience in Strasburg. It all starts on King Street, the town's main drag, where a walk down its half-mile strip of shops is like strolling through a Norman Rockwell painting.



Belle Grove Plantation, just north of town on the way to Middletown, is a two-century-old building that stands near Cedar Creek Battlefield.

Antiquers will love the town's numerous antique shops. History buffs will appreciate its rich colonial and Civil War history. Old timers will enjoy seeing a slice of what made America great in the old days. And children will learn much about what a sense of community is all about.

"Friends go back a long way around here," says **Virginia Cadden**, a lifelong Strasburg resident with roots that go several generations deep. "You might go six miles down the road and find someone who's your cousin Mary's son. There's always some connection here."

If you're not family, it doesn't matter. Strasburg people seem to welcome everyone with friendship and hospitality. The town got 30 inches of snow during the big blizzard of this past winter. With its proximity to Interstates 66 and 81, many motorists pulled off at Strasburg to wait out the storm. When

all of the hotel rooms in town were booked, a local family took a stranded motorist home with them to spend the night.

Cadden says the scenery and way of life make Strasburg appealing to residents and visitors.

"Every place you look is just gorgeous if you get the right sun on it," she says with a twinkle. "And you're within driving distance of everything in Washington. Yet you can come back to your own little nest here."

Scenery and Strasburg definitely go hand in hand. Everywhere you go Massanutten Mountain is within view. A drive through the surrounding countryside is a treat for the eyes. There's the Shenandoah River, ambling



The Old Mill Restaurant's stone walls and mill wheel date back to Strasburg's days as a farm town.

If You Go...

Strasburg has a nice **self-guided walking tour** for those interested in learning about its history. Brochures are available at many area businesses. And if all the walking makes you hungry, be sure to pay a visit to the **Depot Lounge** at the Hotel Strasburg. This cozy pub is decorated with many historic photos and is a comfortable place to learn a bit about the town and grab a bite. It's on Holiday Street, just a block down from the main drag.

For formal dining with a Victorian flair, it's hard to beat the **Hotel Strasburg**. It's elegantly decorated and romantic, and the menu features an interesting mix of tastes from different places. The hotel allows visitors to view all of its rooms. You'll find some wonderful decorating ideas there, and can case out the rooms for your next getaway. (800) 348-8327.

At the west end of King Street (Route 11), is another place with charm, the **Old Mill**



The Hi Neighbor Restaurant, on King Street, is a popular local gathering spot.

Restaurant. The building used to be a real mill, and the stonework and mill wheel are unique reminders of the town's history.

For informal eating, try the **Hi Neighbor Restaurant** for some down home-style eats. A lunch sandwich will cost you about \$3. It's located on King Street, and is a great place to take hungry children.

Potomac River and on to Washington. Her home, Spengler Hall, sits high above the Shenandoah with a spectacular view of the river and Massanutten Mountain.

"My great-great grandfather built this home in 1820," she recalls. "The mill where they ground the wheat is now the Old Mill Restaurant."

Cadden is somewhat of an expert on town history. She talks easily about how the Union army occupied her home during the Civil War, and how one of its most notable figures, General Philip Sheridan, still haunts the place. On occasion, shelves of china have crashed to the floor, and marble tabletops have shattered for no apparent reason. With a mischievous smile she says she thinks it was Sheridan still cursing at one of the other generals he once found dining in the house while his men were out fighting.

The rolling fields around Strasburg were the stomping grounds of Stonewall Jackson and Jubal Early. Several important battles were fought nearby — the Battle of Cedar Creek and the Battle of Fisher's Hill. Many locals are Civil War re-enactors, and some participated in the recent film, "Gods and Generals."

In what became known as the "Great

For more history, visit the **Strasburg Museum** at the east end of town. It's full of artifacts and photos from Strasburg's past.

For those interested in the Civil War, there is plenty to see in Strasburg. Start with the **Stonewall Jackson Museum** (540) 465-5884, then stroll through the historic battlefields. Near **Cedar Creek Battlefield** is **Belle Grove Plantation** (540) 869-2028, a 200-year-old plantation house that features a museum and a look at Shenandoah Valley life long ago.

The Museum of American Presidents boasts an amazing collection of memorabilia from a private collection, including James Madison's desk and a lock of George Washington's Hair (540) 465-5999.

There are plenty of antique shops in Strasburg. The largest is the **Great Strasburg Antique Emporium** (540) 465-3711, which offers over 90,000 square feet of antique furniture, jewelry, pottery and glassware. Others include **Bygones Antiques and Collectibles** (540) 465-2123, **Treasures From the Attic** and the **King Street Flea Market**. ■

past the town like an old friend. You can see for miles across the valley, across rolling pastures and historic battlefields.

Architecture enthusiasts will get an eye-ful. Many of the homes in town have a classic look. There are many examples of tin-roofed farmhouses, and even Georgian colonial and neoclassical styles.

A Living History

Like many of the towns that dot Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, Strasburg was originally settled by German farmers who migrated south from Pennsylvania in search of more farmland. Originally settled in 1761 as Staufferstadt, the town sprung up along the banks of the Shenandoah River where the bottomland was fertile.

Later Strasburg became a center for the production of earthenware pottery. So extensive was the industry that Strasburg became known as "Pot Town." The pottery produced there was strictly utilitarian; its lines were simple and its colors mostly muted blues and grays. Today existing pieces of Strasburg pottery are quite collectible.

Virginia Cadden's ancestors were part of that history. They farmed wheat, milled it and shipped it down the Shenandoah to the

Train Raid of 1861," Jackson captured Union locomotives at Martinsburg, W. Va., and had them pulled by 40 horse teams across the roads to Strasburg. There they were set on rails again and sent south for the Confederate cause. The event is recounted in detail at the Strasburg Museum, located in a building that was once one of Strasburg's earthenware factories, and later the town's train station.

For a small town, Strasburg has more than its share of historical museums (there are five). The Stonewall Jackson Museum and Museum of American Presidents are two of the most popular.

Keeping the Small-Town Charm

Today Strasburg is at a turning point, according to its town manager, **Kevin Fauber**. There is pressure for growth.

"There's been a steady increase in the population," he says. "Last year was our busiest year for building permits. People are looking at our area for housing projects."

Fauber says the challenge will be to allow growth while keeping the small-town flavor for which Strasburg is known. Mayor **Rich Orndoff, Jr.**, agrees that losing that local charm would be tragic.

"We know we have to grow. We can't sti-

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fle it," he says. "But we have to do it smartly without taking out the charm and beauty. We know what a treasure we have here. It's a very special place."

Back at the Hi Neighbor Restaurant, the big issues of growth give way to the simple pleasures of small-town life. A sign on the wall says, "Ram Pride," a theme echoed all over town. The Rams are the town's high school football team. Everywhere you go in Strasburg you find purple banners proclaiming the beloved Rams.

Hi Neighbor waitress **Crystal Sibert** explains a local favorite called "Puddin' Meat."

"It's made out of hog liver that comes from a local slaughterhouse," she says. "Some people eat it plain, and others like it on pancakes."

At the other end of the spectrum is the Hotel Strasburg, an elegant reminder of the town's southern past. Built at the turn of the century as a hospital, the building was later converted to a hotel. Today it maintains its Victorian style with individually decorated rooms and lovely antique decor. And all the antiques are for sale, so those who find an irresistible treasure adorning their room can take it home with them.

The Hotel Strasburg is a popular spot for visitors looking for a quiet romantic getaway and good food. Its restaurant is one of the best in the region. The hotel is one of Strasburg's centerpiece businesses, and is worth a visit just to see the classic decor and sample the cuisine.

"Strasburg is small-town America," says **Gary Rutherford**, owner of the Hotel Strasburg. "People driving up and down Interstate 81 see the sign for the hotel and say, 'I wonder what Strasburg is like'. And when they take the exit they say, 'Hey, what a neat town.'"

In the Depot Lounge, located just off the hotel's main lobby, locals gather to discuss politics, land development and, of course, the Rams. The place is a favorite gathering spot, and a great place to sit, eat a sandwich and listen to local gossip. Like most of Strasburg eateries, it features Route 11 brand home-cooked potato chips, prepared and packaged just five miles away in Middletown.

On the docket for discussion today — the town's annual Mayfest (May 16-18). This year the town has hired a hot '50s/'60s dance band to kick off the event Friday evening. Saturday there's a parade through

downtown Strasburg, and then they'll close down King Street for crafters and food vendors. Call the Chamber of Commerce for more information, (540) 465-3187.

Mayfest is a big deal in Strasburg. Its origins date back to a school Maypole festival in the early 1900s. Flower-strewing girls wearing white dresses with sashes representing the 13 Confederate states once marched past the Hotel Strasburg to a nearby cemetery. There 136 Confederate soldiers are buried in a mass grave.

All Are Welcome

Strasburg has a refreshing attitude about itself. It doesn't try to be anything more than it is. The people and the way of life are real. It is not afraid of change, but most people hope it keeps what it has.

Richard Seelbach, owner of Bygones Antiques and Collectibles, is a newcomer to Strasburg. He arrived two years ago, restored a historic building to its original grandeur and then opened his shop on the ground floor. He lives upstairs.

"People were so welcoming to me," he says. "It's a very accepting small town. You don't always find that in other towns." ■