

Boykins, Virginia: A small town with a big heart

Driving from Richmond via I-95 South, the road to Boykins takes a pleasant turn once you get off the interstate and onto VA-35.

On this rural roadway, you'll pass farm fields, lush forests and signs for places like Homerville, Littleton and Sebrell, along with neatly kept homesteads that emit the heady smell of fresh-mown grass.

Only two miles from the North Carolina state line in the extreme southern portion of Southampton County, Boykins (population: 650) is a quiet time capsule that includes Victorian-era homes, churches and rejuvenated storefronts, along with some vacant properties and a railroad track in town traversed by freight trains.

Once you start walking around town, you quickly discover the town motto ("a small town with a big heart," displayed everywhere on banners) seems appropriate. Boykins is knit together by community events, caring, church and family.

Rick Francis, 61, a Boykins native, former mayor (1984-2004) and Southampton County's clerk of the circuit court, explains, "This whole community will come out if you have trouble, a death

in the family, they will envelope you ... they are there for you."

He adds, laughing, "They don't get into your business, but they know all your business."

Lisa Morin, a "come-here" researcher/teacher at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, echoes Francis' description, proclaiming, "I love life in Boykins. I love that it takes 20 minutes to go to the post office because that's where all the gossip is ... I think it's wonderful!"

Boykins post office clerk Amber Ricks, 27, who lives in nearby Capron, says, "The people are very friendly. They tell me they appreciate me. We have 155 post office boxes in use, and if someone's sick, their mailbox is full."

Morin owns the historic Beaton-Powell House (1857) with her sister and brother-in-law, Paula and William Johansen. Originally from New York, the trio was living in North Carolina when the two-story plantation house built by town founder Edward Beaton charmed them. They bought the house in 1996 and moved to Boykins, embarking on restoration that Paula Johansen says "will probably always continue."

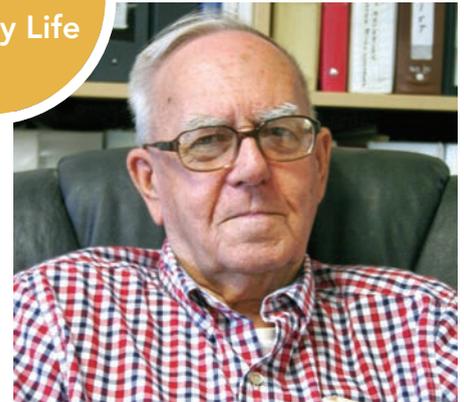
Morin remembers the early days as challenging, not the least of which was getting bats out of the attic: "Once they were gone, we had 150 years of bat poop to remove!"

William, who does home restoration, and Paula, who works for a critical-care doctor in Suffolk, share the home with Morin. The house stayed in the Beaton family until 1902, when it was sold to William Powell. It remained in the Powell family until the Johansens and Morin purchased it. Complete with original 1920s wallpaper, heart-pine floors and ornate ceiling medallions, the 4,000-square-foot home is on the National Register of Historic Places. It's occasionally open for tours, and a guest room is offered via the website www.airbnb.com.

Incorporated in 1884, Boykins is surrounded by forests and agricultural land. A 1955 history written by Norman S. Beaton noted the town grew slowly due to malaria in the early 1900s. Malaria originated via mosquitoes breeding in a nearby creek and a large number of artesian wells drilled without provision for proper drainage. Draining the creek, capping off artesian wells and paying attention to proper drainage solved the problem.



Peace and
Quiet —
Country Life



Clockwise, from above left: Beaton-Powell House historic exterior featuring classic Greek-revival characteristics; Debbie McManus, owner of Boykins Beans & Ice Cream; Amber Ricks, clerk at the Boykins Post Office; Mayor Richard Spier Edwards Jr. at his desk at Boykins Town Office; and Paula Johansen in a front-porch rocking chair at the Beaton-Powell House.

R. T. Lassiter, 85, married 60 years to wife Dot, moved to Boykins when he was 5 years old. His father had sawmills, which became White & Lassiter Timber Company, where Lassiter worked until he retired in 1992 and the business closed. He remembers cutting heavy oak timbers called keel blocks for the shipbuilding trade and cutting timbers for Jamestown replica ships.

“If you were not doing as you should in school, your parents found out, or one of dad’s men would tell you to straighten up and fly right,” he says of life in Boykins. “It was a community where you could do great works with a handshake.”

He also remembers working at local stores as a teenager, stores where “farmers would come in and bring eggs to trade [for store items].”

Mayor Richard Spier Edwards Jr., 81, explains, “This used to be a bustling town with all the buildings occupied. Today most people commute to jobs [outside of Boykins] and a lot of people have moved here from places like Norfolk and Virginia Beach.”

Boykins’ largest employer, Narricot, opened in 1962 as Boykins Narrow Fabric and is now owned by AEC (Asheboro

Elastics Corporation). Narricot’s 133 employees produce seatbelt webbing for cars and trucks and webbing for “fall protection” safety harnesses used by electric linemen, window washers and others who work in high places.

“The original owner got community storekeepers to put up \$800 each as seed money to build the plant, telling [locals] he was bringing jobs and business, which would in turn bring them customers and business,” says human-resources manager Kris Potter. “Once the plant became profitable, he paid them all back.”

A smattering of small businesses dot the town. Pennsylvania natives Debbie and Mike McManus moved with their daughter to Boykins after living in Virginia Beach for 15 years, where Debbie had owned a printing business. Looking for an escape from city life, they discovered Boykins online and bought an old Victorian home, restoring it and adding a garage apartment where Debbie’s parents stay when they visit.

They also bought a literally falling-down building, “really it was just three walls,” Debbie says, at 32119 South Main Street, owned by the town and rebuilt it. Their

now-grown daughter lives in the restored Victorian with her two sons while her husband is deployed overseas; Debbie and Mike, retired from the U.S. Navy, live in an apartment over Boykins Beans & Ice Cream, the business they opened in their rebuilt building in 2009.

The coffeehouse-style shop specializes in gourmet coffee and ice cream. They also offer food (pizza, club sandwiches and burgers are popular) and gift items.

“This is a ‘Mayberry’ town with good people,” Debbie, 49, says. “We’re a social spot for locals, and we also get customers from places like Franklin, Virginia Beach and Smithfield.”

Boykins Butcher Block, a small butcher shop and grocery store, opened around the corner at 32126 Busy Street in November 2016. Owner Chris Jernigan, 31, a former music teacher who had also worked as a butcher, grew up in nearby Sedley and graduated from Chowan University.

“After I quit teaching, I started looking for a possible business location. I was riding through [town] and saw this vacant building,” Jernigan explains. “The owner agreed to lease the building and bought all the coolers.”



A
Slower
Laid-Back
Place



Clockwise, from above left: Big Mama's Restaurant, offering daily specials Monday-Saturday; Jessie Lashley, owner of Big Mama's Restaurant; Chris Jernigan at his business, Boykins Butcher Block; Boykins Butcher Block customer Shirley Lewis; Cumberland Millworks owner Tommy Barnes poses with a large lathe in his shop; buggy outside of Cumberland Millworks.

Jernigan's shop offers meats, eggs, cheese and local produce when available. Jernigan, who lives in North Carolina with wife Leanna, says business has been better than expected, noting "many customers buy everything from me."

Customer Shirley Lewis, 67, says a store like Jernigan's was missing in Boykins, explaining, "This is our grocery store ... now you don't have to drive 30 minutes."

Things are bustling at Big Mama's Restaurant at 32127 South Main Street, opened in January 2017 by Jessie Lashley. Lashley, 69, spent 34 years working at International Paper in Franklin, retiring in 2005, but says her children always told her she needed to open a restaurant. Jernigan told her about the building, and with restaurant equipment already installed, "all I had to do was move in."

Lashley has traded retirement for long days, but calls her venture "God's way of blessing." Big Mama's (named after her mother) has five employees and features a large menu, reasonable prices and made-from-scratch "country cooking" foods like cabbage, yams and fried chicken.

'It's a community where you could do great works with a handshake.'

She admits, "The response has surprised me. The townspeople have been good to us. We all get along here."

Church life remains important, with more than a half-dozen churches calling Boykins home. The Lassiters note their church, Boykins Baptist Church, has hosted a weekly breakfast/Bible study for all for the past 15 years (the ample breakfast costs \$1). Town celebrations include a Pumpkin Festival in October, a Christmas parade and a Spring Carnival sponsored by the volunteer fire department.

Volunteer fire chief Hank Fuller, 38, a deputy sheriff in Southampton County, has been with the fire department since age 15 and loves Boykins' country lifestyle. Organized in 1954, Boykins Volunteer Fire Department has 35 volunteers supplemented by paid EMS staff. The Spring Carnival, featuring entertainment, rides for kids and a Sunday "family day" with gospel music,

began in 2014 and attracts up to 3,000 people.

Tommy Barnes, 60, oversees Cumberland Millworks at 32083 North Main Street, designing and building custom wood products like cabinets, doors and furniture. Barnes grew up on a farm in Chesapeake, winding up in Boykins in 2011 after the building that housed his business was sold. Barnes, who has grown children and grandchildren, says wife Deborah, a school nurse in Portsmouth, has a sister who lives in Boykins.

His 30-by-85-foot landmark brick building displays signage proclaiming an earlier usage: "dealers in buggies, wagons, cart wheels, harness and undertakers." In the adjacent parking lot, a Conestoga wagon replica that Barnes built is a prominent advertisement that he's displayed at local festivals.

"This is a slower, laid-back place. People here work hard," he says. "If you like peace and quiet and country life, this is the place for you."

Mayor Edwards emphasizes, "People and businesses are welcome here ... we will do anything we can to help you." ■