

World Unwinding Out There in Baden

A Life Built Around Farms and Fields Is Prized in Prince George's County



Sylvia Pearsall, with the American Red Cross, takes blood at the Baden Volunteer Fire Department. **The Brandywine Lions Club sponsored the drive.**

By Jim Brocker
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Baden residents say their rural Prince George's community, tucked into the county's southeast corner away from the surrounding, dense suburbia, is more than a place to live -- it's a lifestyle worth preserving.

Rolling two-lane roads fan out through farms and fields, and five-acre lots are required for single-family homes, attracting people who enjoy space and a less hectic pace. County and state programs encourage landowners to keep the area rural, and residents have fought against development they worry could create more traffic.

The volunteer fire department is home to dinners, dances, citizen meetings and card games. A complex attached to Baden Elementary School features a community center, library and health clinic. The community has a handful of businesses and churches, as well as a few small markets, but residents are a long way from the big-box stores. This is country.

In recent years, subdivisions with stately brick-fronted houses have popped up between the farmhouses and barns, and roughly 1,600 people now call the area home, according to Lindsay Smith of the Prince George's County Planning Department. Baden is about 20 minutes from the commercial centers of Waldorf and Clinton, and many residents like it that way.

"We don't call it an inconvenience. It's just a nice way of life," said Virginia Stallings, 85, a civic leader who has lived in the area since 1951.

But adapting to the isolation can take some adjustment.

"When I moved here, I cried every day," said Wanda Gryzkiewicz, a former Fort Washington resident who arrived in the Baden area with her husband in 1984. "But I wouldn't leave this area now if I had to." Gryzkiewicz is an official with the growing Baden Aquasco Little League, which has about 240 youngsters and struggles with a shortage of playing fields.

Many of the longtime residents embrace the laid-back atmosphere. "I've been to different parts of the country. I've found no better place to go," said Wendell O. Lee, 55, a lifelong resident who stopped one afternoon to give blood at the Baden Volunteer Fire Department, a regular event sponsored by the Brandywine Lions Club. Lee's parents grew up in the area, and he works at the Adams Funeral Home.

"I think people have a certain amount of respect for each other and look out for each other," said Richard Neiser of the nearby Brandywine area, who also dropped by to give blood. "When you watch the functions at the firehouse, you can see it's like a family-type thing."

Those families have lived in the Baden area for generations. Robert "Buddy" Boswell, 59, a former Baden fire chief, averages a few hundred calls a year with the department and lives on 30 acres three minutes from the firehouse. Of the volunteers, Boswell said: "It's still family. Lot of husband-and-wife teams. And then their kids come in here." When Boswell's daughter Wendy was young, she rode with him in the chief's car, he said. Now she is chief of the department.

Claire Watson, 70, belongs to the auxiliary that operates the VFD's kitchen for special events. The department "has been the center of this community for many years, and there's hardly a week that goes by without some kind of activity," she said.

Watson's five sisters and her son live on her parents' original property off Croom Road. Although few area farmers now grow tobacco, Watson and fellow auxiliary member Louise Riess, 78, say their families harvest corn, soybeans and wheat.

Some Baden residents participate in programs that allow owners to sell development rights to the county or state. In exchange, they agree to keep the land rural. Robert "Yates" Claggett, a Baden farmer who oversees land preservation programs as administrator of the Prince George's County Soil Conservation District, said the programs can save open land and help farmers can stay in business with initiatives designed to help them raise profitable, marketable crops.

"What makes real estate in Baden desirable is those open landscapes, vistas and views," Claggett said. "If we pave it all over, what have we done? We're just like every other suburbia."

Claggett, 38, is raising grass-fed cattle and hopes to market his beef to consumers in Washington and Baltimore. He said some area farmers are trying to grow alternative crops, such as organic vegetables and grapes for winemaking.

Residents work to protect their lifestyle. The Greater Baden-Aquasco Citizens Association raised nearly \$200,000 during a decade-long battle over a proposed construction rubble fill along Route 381 near the county schools' outdoor education center. The project and subsequent appeal were eventually denied. The truck traffic generated by the fill would have overwhelmed the area, said Stallings, one of the association's leaders.

Many of the area's newest residents are professionals, government workers and military families, said Susan Payne, an agent for ReMax 100. She noted that the area is near Andrews Air Force Base and 30 to 35 minutes from the District. Baden is for people who "want a flavor for rural living without a huge commute," Payne said.

The influx of large, new houses has been unsettling to some longtime residents, but the newcomers who get involved in the community are accepted. Many meet their neighbors through the elementary school. Akemi Johnson, the mother of second-grader E'Mari Johnson, went to

Baden Elementary on a recent Friday to watch a dance troupe perform in front of the students for Black History Month. The event was sponsored by the Baden Community Center, which holds events with the school.

"People are nice, teachers are wonderful, the nurses, the secretaries. I couldn't ask for anything more," said Johnson, who added that E'Mari has been on a Little League team for two years and attends summer camp at the center.

Steve Kensinger, a banker who bought a house in nearby Aquasco, joined the citizens association and remembers how growth and sprawl changed his native Northern Virginia. Although he's had to adjust -- for example, Kensinger says he has to remember to keep enough gas in his tank -- he said there are more benefits to living in a rural area. At night, he said, "we can see the stars, which is quite nice."



Robert Buddy Boswell lives on 30 acres just three minutes away from the Baden Volunteer Fire Department, where he spends hours as a volunteer.