

BERTIE COUNTY NATIVES STAYING PUT BUT CENSUS SHOWS FEW OTHERS MOVE INTO THE AREA

JEFFREY S. HAMPTON
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George Roulhac stood in his front yard, sweat beading on his forehead underneath a USA baseball cap as he tried to remember how long he had lived in his home.

``I don't rightly know,' Roulhac said last week. ``Been a good while.' Roulhac, 69, was born and raised in Bertie County and worked on farm and logging crews. He still works occasionally when a local farmer needs extra help. He raised most of his nine children in this house in Merry Hill that began as a mobile home, he said. Over the years, a front room and heavy-grade vinyl siding were added so that it looks like a frame house. All nine of Roulhac's children have moved outside of Bertie, but he has no plans to leave.

``No, I never had much mind for that,' he said. His grass was mowed, so Roulhac planned to go to Miller's Exxon up the road on U.S. 17, sit on the bench in front of the little store and talk to friends awhile. It was too hot for anything else.

Roulhac is like a lot of others in Bertie County who tend to stay put. More than 86 percent of the 19,632 people in Bertie are natives of North Carolina, the highest percentage among the state's 100 counties, according to the latest U.S. Census figures. The census does not delineate whether the native North Carolinians are also natives of Bertie County, but the county ranks fifth, at 68 percent, in people who have lived in the same house since 1995.

At first Bertie's high ranking in the two categories might sound like a good thing. But combined with other statistics, it also shows that few people are moving into the county. Bertie lost nearly 4 percent of its population in the past 10 years, the most in the state, according to statistics from the state Department of Commerce. By contrast, Currituck was the 11th-fastest-growing county in North Carolina in the 1990s, increasing in population by 32 percent. Yet only one-third of Currituck's residents are North Carolina natives, the lowest of any of the state's 100 counties, according to the census.

Bertie County ranks among the lowest in family income and in number of high school and college graduates and has one of the highest populations of people living in poverty. Good jobs are hard to find, and the poorly educated work force doesn't draw high-paying industries, locals say.

``If I hadn't had a family business, I wouldn't have come back either,' said Jack Powell, one of the owners of Powell & Stokes Inc., a farm supply company founded in 1915 that in recent years has branched into retail peanut sales.

Wednesday afternoon, Powell, his brother Bill, his son Jeff and office clerk Alice Tayloe gathered in the company's office just north of Windsor. Photos on the wall depicted company founders Luther Powell and his brother-in-law Jonathan Stokes. An aerial photograph showed several buildings nearly submerged after Hurricane Floyd. On shelves, for sale, were jars of peanuts - roasted, raw, salted, fried, chocolate-covered, butterscotch-covered and made into peanut brittle. The jars were all labeled with the brand name Bertie County Peanuts. Anybody who comes in is offered a handful.

``Everybody in here was born and raised in Bertie County,' Powell said. ``Going back several generations.' Lu Whit Powell, the 84-year-old patriarch and uncle to Jack and Bill Powell, walked in the door. ``There's the oldest rat in the nest,' Jack Powell said.

Jeff Powell, the fourth generation at the company, believes business will continue going well in spite of the struggling agriculture industry and Bertie County's depressed economy. The retail peanut market is prospering, he said. The company produces a slick catalog and an Internet site.

``We came 200 miles to get these peanuts,' said Kimberly Wilkins of Jamestown, N.C., one of many regular customers from far outside of Bertie County.

Chuck Sanderlin, a 38-year-old native of Bertie County, moved to Portsmouth years ago to work. But the neighborhood was too rough, he said. The owner of the community store where he often shopped was shot to death one night.

``That scared me, so I just came back,' he said. He enjoys the quieter atmosphere in Bertie County, and that is what keeps many locals here, he said. He commutes to work across the Chowan River to Colony Tire in Edenton.

More than 41 percent of the jobs in Bertie County are in manufacturing plants, compared with 18 percent in government. Most northeastern North Carolina counties count the government as the biggest employer.

Still, most of the manufacturing jobs are low-paying, officials say. The largest employer is Perdue Farms with 2,200 workers. A new manufacturing company hasn't moved to Bertie County since 1993, according to statistics from the state Department of Commerce.

``I am an optimist as I look at what's been done in the last four or five years in this region,' said Bob Spivey, chairman of North Carolina's Northeast Partnership and mayor of Windsor, Bertie's county seat. ``When you do one thing, we think it helps everybody.' Bertie County is mostly rural, with several scenic waterways and forests. Officials hope to take advantage of the surge of ecotourism in the state, Spivey said.

In Windsor, the Roanoke/Cashie River Center offers exhibitions on the local environment, including a small amphitheater and a boardwalk along the Cashie River shoreline. Also on the site is the restored cellar of the Eden House. Highway crews found

the remains of the Eden House, a mansion built along the Chowan River in the 18th century, while doing road work. The still-intact cellar was moved to Windsor. North of Windsor is the Hope Plantation, a restored 1803 home that draws more than 11,000 visitors a year.

The economic impact of tourism on Bertie County in 2000 was \$7.96 million, an increase of more than a million dollars since 1995, according to Department of Commerce statistics. But the county still ranks 92nd in the state in that category.

``No question, we have set tourism as an opportunity,' Spivey said.

Tourist traffic on U.S. 17 helps Josh and Frank Zeidan support their families. The Zeidan brothers moved to Bertie County to own and operate Miller's Exxon, where Roulhac loves to spend hot afternoons. The small convenience store sits just off the highway, where U.S. 17 has four lanes.

``You've got to get by doing something,' Josh Zeidan said. ``We're not making no killing or nothing. It's a steady income.'