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Give them guns - and doughnuts, too

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Twenty thousand visitors will drive through the Appalachian Mountains on serpentine, up-and-down, two-lane roads to have a good time in Highland County, Va., this weekend.

Our 2,300 full-time residents are hosting the 53rd annual Maple Festival, which is dedicated to the proposition that the addition of maple syrup improves all human activity, from muffins to marriages.

About a dozen farms show how sap is tapped at the tree, gathered and processed into syrup and derivative products. Exhibitors exhibit; musicians play; dancers dance; eaters eat. Everyone is on good behavior.

Of course, many who live here understand that the two Festival weekends are the worst four days of our year.

Traffic jams beset Monterey, the county seat, a town of 300. People stand in long lines for food and outside toilets—different lines, usually.

New SUVs stop without warning in the middle of our roads to gawk at birds, lambs and locals. It's odd to be gawked at. Sometimes, I wave. Sometimes, I gawk back. Every so often, I'll spit on my boot to enrich the exchange.

I've been photographed from the safety of a vehicle parked in my driveway. I felt like a bear in a zoo.

Highland County has come to depend on the Maple Festival. All of our churches and volunteer organizations -- VFD, rescue squad, Ruritans, Lions and Band Boosters, among others -- sell food items to fund their year-round, worthwhile activities.

Our everyday lives would be diminished without this big infusion of imported cash.

The Festival's iconic dish is the maple-glazed doughnut sold hot by the Mill Gap Ruritan Club whose trailer stands near the county's only stoplight.

Our one traffic signal is a four-way-red blinker. We don't even rate an honest-to-goodness, green-yellow-red light. Thankfully.

I am always sobered to realize that Highland County has twice as many functioning lawyers as functioning stoplights. The proper ratio of lawyers to red lights in a well-run, rural polity is no more than one to one, Aristotle wrote. Otherwise, you get speed traps.

The American doughnut emerged about 200 years ago. It probably started out as just a hole (a dough nut), not a ring.

Many cuisines fry dough. Compare and contrast beignets, fritters, jin deui (Chinese, topped with sesame seeds), falafel, vada (Indian, soaked in yogurt and topped with chutney), hushpuppies and sopaipilla, to name a few. Texas invented Fried Coke, a nubbin that substitutes cola for milk and slathers Coke syrup on top.

The Ruritan yeast doughnut is a ballerina compared with the dancing elephant of any cake doughnut.

The Club will make between 7,000 and 8,000 dozen over two weekends. It takes about 90 minutes to go from scratch ingredients to the sale window. A buck each; \$7 a dozen.

The Ruritans' maple glaze is a secret.

Some glaze recipes eliminate syrup in favor of powdered sugar and maple extract. Fah! If you don't use syrup, what exactly is the point?

It's best to start eating these doughnuts before you get the box back to your car. You want the light dough and sugar glaze to melt into one soft, sweet, hot rush.

Since Melissa and I are on a diet, we only ate 14 in two days. I carried more than my share of this local-booster burden with eight. My eyes are aglaze.

I've spent as much time thinking about doughnuts as I have about the Libyan fighting and the Japanese catastrophe. I can send money to victims of a natural disaster but not buy guns or even bandages for Libyans fighting Gadhafi, a human disaster.

Lest we forget, our own rebellion would not have succeeded without the help of outside agitators.

The most familiar are France's Marquis de Lafayette; Prussia's Baron von Steuben who trained Washington's Army at Valley Forge and served as his chief of staff; Germany's Johann de Kalb who led the Maryland and Delaware Continentals and died at the Battle of Camden; Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the brilliant Polish-Lithuanian engineer who served for seven years; and Casimir Pulaski, who organized the Army's cavalry and died at the Battle of Savannah.

And then there was Pierre (Caron de) Beaumarchais, a watchmaker and playwright who set up Roderigue Hortalez and Co., a front that allowed France and Spain to hide their shipments of arms and provisions to the American rebels as early as 1776.

The Libyan rebels don't have the wherewithal to defeat Gadhafi, and it's a bad idea for the United States to intervene in this civil war. But there ought to be a way for Americans -- as individuals -- to send money, arms and even maple doughnuts to help even up that fight.

My, my. The ideas one gets after having too much of a good thing!

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