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I join the tea party

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Me and three boys from down the road were a-standin' around in grubby, dirt-stained jeans and steel-toed logger boots last Friday at the end of a long, steamy day.

They'd just gotten in from nine hours in 100-degree heat running chainsaws, skidders, dozers, log loaders and trucks. I'd spent the late afternoon cutting and splitting a dead-dry red oak that was so hard that it kept ejecting the blade of my splitting maul like it was a watermelon seed.

We were sweaty, hungry and cranky. Any goats wandering by would have sniffed us up and embraced us as two-legged kin.

I was rooting for the sun to sink quickly behind Lantz Mountain. This was as effective as all other efforts to reorder the solar system from down here.

We were too played out to even spit.

These neighbors work hard every day. The opportunities they've had, they've made for themselves. No one gave them a start. When they aren't working, they're hunting. One had pulled two tours in Vietnam. They're hard guys who will always give you a hand but not a word of praise. I was distinguished by being the oldest, which I had nothing to do with.

None of us had eaten, but we still felt the need to share opinions about those issues we knew would be enriched by our opinions. So we grouched and grumbled, amid logging trucks, pickups, a bulldozer, diesel fuel tanks and my ATV.

Each of us found a position around the front of a pickup. We rested our arms on its hood while keeping both feet on the ground. Many deals out here get figured this way. I've seen a million dollars worth of real estate negotiated over the hood of a banged-up Silverado and then penciled out on the back of a fast-food bag.

I'm even willing to donate my 1995 Toyota T-100 with the bum rear end to the new 12-lawmaker super committee as a bargaining prop for the next round of doing a little something about debt, spending and taxes.

Across our political spectrum, we were of one mind about Washington politics: it stunk. Four days before default, and we still had no deal.

(The pipsqueaky compromise that limped out this week could have emerged months ago. Had that happened, the stock markets would not have lost the \$1 trillion that got smoked over the last nine days. Stock losses due to political ineptness and intransigence are not a federal tax increase, but they reduce the wealth of the citizenry just the same.)

Our group felt that the problems created over many years seemed too large to fix with the small solutions that might be wrung out of a divided politics.

The four of us agreed that we could not run our own lives and businesses by borrowing two fifths of what we paid out every day. We knew what it was like to tighten our belts when money was short, when you couldn't buy because you didn't have. Opinions differed about who was ripping off the system most at our expense.

And then we moved to the more important local topics, including which make of bulldozer had the best blade action, how much we needed rain, bear hunting, the high cost of heavy equipment, how much we needed rain, the reputation of a certain somebody, the high price of gasoline and how much we needed rain.

After 20 minutes of fixing Washington and griping over the growing rain deficit, we were ready to go inside, shower and eat.

Just then, a good-looking blond wheeled in, pulling a cart of solutions.

She started sorting things out and fixing things up, just like any owner of a quick-serve food wagon. She handed out plastic plates and utensils. Then, four tiny tea cups that not one of us could get a pinky through. Then, little plastic discs that her Granddaddy -- the youngest of the grungy four -- thought were chips. "They're crackers, Granddaddy, not chips," she said, trying not to lose patience.

We worked at getting things right, but it wasn't easy to find a consensus definition about each menu item, especially the invisible ones.

We spread pretend jam on slices of nonexistent bread. A pitcher that was filled with as much nothing as we'd heard from Washington all week was sweet tea, she informed us.

Gradually, we stopped talking about politics, machines and rain to better receive the meal she had prepared.

She announced finally that she was serving hot cereal and poured out some orange, octopussian glop that looked like Silly Putty on the run. "Yummm," Granddaddy said.

As the curmudgeonly keeper of our flickering flame of reality, I said that my cereal tasted like boiled Barbies.

"Does not," she said.

"Does too," I said.

"How would you know?" she asked.

"Because," I answered.

"You never boiled your Barbies," she said.

"Did too. I also ate a Barbie leg after Molly flushed its head down the poo-poo."

"Did not! You're pretending! Granddaddy, did he really do that?"

"Anything's possible. Pass the salt, honey."

We stood next to our motors and winches, hydraulic hoses and socket sets, sharing a meal with a preschooler who had focused us on what would endure.

Four gorillas having a breakfast tea party with a four-year-old left me grinning, and I haven't stopped.

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