

Maple syrup is not enough

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Agro-tourism. Eco-tourism. Gusto-tourism. Wino-tourism. (I think there's another name for the last of these.)

Tourism is the thread that ties these rural journeys together.

And why do folks like me want tourists to visit and gawk? Simple: Tourists spend money in our community. Nothing wrong with that.

Highland County, Virginia, has put on a Maple Festival for 56 years. It's our largest and most successful venture in agro-tourism.

We claim that we are the southernmost county in America that produces maple syrup commercially. It's something—and better than celebrating parsnips or roadkill.

(I'm considering starting America's only Peace-and-Quiet Festival in mid-January to attract wealthy tourists who want to hear and see nothing in below-zero temperatures.)

The Maple Festival attracts as many as 50,000 visitors each March to a county with about 2,200 full-time residents.

Tons of maple-glazed doughnuts, maple-syrup, maple confections, maple barbeque, pork rinds, "loaded" baked potatoes, buckwheat pancakes, sausage gravy (the nectar of certain down-home gastronomical gods), deep-fried Oreos and every other food that 70-year-old male volunteers can fix in a trailer are consumed.

We have a dozen or so "sugar camps" where a visitor can stand in the presence of 40 gallons of maple sap being boiled down to one gallon of syrup. (This is more exciting than watching dinosaur bones petrify, but less gripping than witnessing trees doubling in diameter.)

We also have a Maple Queen who governs very nicely without a Maple King. Our Queen is only supposed to produce smiles and handshakes. It's not like Great Britain; no one's expecting an heir.

Everybody has a good time eating food with too much fat, salt and sugar and too many carbs and calories. What the heck? Is there any better reward for surviving a miserably cold winter than a dozen hot, slick maple doughnuts on the first warm Saturday of the year?

The Festival supports clubs that do good works in the community, churches and school all year. It also puts cash into the pockets of maple

producers, assorted crafters (most of whom are out-of-county) and local retail businesses.

In the 31 years I've lived here, I've watched the county lose about one-third of its residents. Some believe this is an effect, and I am the cause.

Over that period, we've lost our two major private employers (both primarily employed women), our largest grocery store, a general store, car dealership and appliance store. We've gained a Dollar General, about a dozen B&Bs, medical center and a small custom slaughterhouse that doesn't sell retail.

When I came in 1983, the county was trying to lure businesses to locate here. For a time, a locally owned data-entry company employed several dozen women. That was about it for 30 years.

Our problem is that we have so many disadvantages -- no rail, no Interstate, no airport, no natural gas line, no college and a tiny workforce -- that our economic advantages -- cheap labor, reasonable communications and agricultural resources, including timber -- are inadequate lures. Small manufacturers have realized that they would be better off building a plant somewhere else. I'm not letting a new cat out of our old bag.

Our recent focus has been on attracting agro-tourists instead of "industry." The Maple Festival is the success on which we've built much smaller summer, fall and winter tourist activities. We also bring in mountain-hungry bicyclists one summer weekend, and we're known for hunting and fishing.

Tourist cash arrives here irregularly and lands on those few who cater to it. It doesn't multiply employment very much. I can think of only a handful of residents who are employed full-time in tourism—and they work at our inn and motel.

The largest stream of private money that's come into Highland over this period has been second-home purchasers and relocating retirees.

Retirees are able and willing to pay inflated prices for what they see as relatively cheap pretty old houses and marginal farmland. A few have started sole proprietorships.

My guess is that retirees have brought far more economic benefit to the county than tourism. But neither has stopped us from losing ground.

There's nothing wrong with agro-tourism as an economic-development strategy for a very scenic county that can't compete against other locales for job-generating businesses.

But tourism as a *primary* development strategy works only if the destination is special and scaled up big. We're cute and we're old-fashioned, but we're not special in a commercial-tourism way.

We have lots of natural amenities of one type, but no beaches or lakes for swimming and boating. There's little modern entertainment here, thank goodness, which, of course, is one reason why we're losing young people. The other reason we have a net migration loss is that there's no real money to be made locally.

Big tourism would change what's neat about a small, out-of-the way, pleasing place. Disneyland of Appalachia would increase our per capita income, but we would be magically transformed into costumed Tinkerbells spreading pixie dust.

Tourism of the kind that fits a county of 2,200 people will never generate much day-to-day, full-time employment. Only tourism that doesn't fit can do that.

Many come-heres and some been-heres favor little, if any, economic development. That's another problem. They like living in Brigadoon, and I don't mind it myself.

Highland County is not alone, of course. About 15 percent of America's population -- some 46 million -- live in rural counties. As a group, these counties lost 40,000 people in 2011-2012.

Recent data suggest that Boomer retirees are slowing their move to small, rural retirement destinations.

Attracting Boomer retirees remains a sensible strategy for aesthetically advantaged, population-losing rural counties, but it's not a growth strategy that will widely benefit the community's economy. For that to take place, you need a critical mass of younger people with energy, access to money and feasible ideas of how to make a living out here from off there.

For some time I've thought that counties like mine are going about economic development backwards.

Rather than chase industry and lure tourists, perhaps we should focus our very limited resources on recruiting people, both those with family ties here and those without. A lot of this approach is just networking and analyzing information.

If rural counties like mine continue to lose population, we will eventually lose the ability to support our very small government, K-12 school system (now down to about 200 kids) and whatever commercial

infrastructure remains. In that event, we'll probably be parted out to adjoining counties.

Perhaps the minimum population that would achieve sustainability for us is 3,500 to 4,000. Some here will not like more people. I think the alternative is less appealing.

Our strategic networking might focus on people in their 30s, 40s and 50s—individuals who have business experience, connections and ideas that would allow them to set up something here that would sell into metropolitan markets.

Where might such people be found?

Any convention where businesses are involved in marketing information and certain types of research, writing and editing, Internet sales, mail-order, specialty warehousing and distribution, small high-tech start ups that don't need to be nursed 24/7 by a silicon-valley mother, venture capital, software development, value-added food products and some environmental NGOs—all come to mind.

The Maple Festival trades on nostalgia. It looks back more than forward. People like to see wood buckets hanging from tin stiles tapped into sugar maple trees. Often as not, they now see reverse-osmosis machines run by diesel generators and a multi-colored collection of plastic collection lines hanging from tree to tree like deranged spaghetti.

It's fine for what it is. But agro-tourism based on nostalgia has not grown either our population or our local economy.

So here's the pitch to those who don't live here.

Consider a low-population, rural county like Highland as a low-stress place to work and a good place to live. Figure out a way to make a living and move here with a core group and a business plan.

I hope that this thought compensates for all the people who left after I arrived.

One other thing. We don't need any more lawyers. Two are plenty, even more than enough.

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