

Pound-cake politics win election

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Tuesday was election day in Virginia.

A woman I know who has sharpened her prosecutorial tactics on a man of my intimate acquaintance ran unopposed for Commonwealth Attorney in Highland County...and won a second term.

I attended her post-election get-together at the Black Sheep Tavern and was able to eat most of the crab dip before the crowd arrived. I am permanently enjoined from visiting her pound cake whose preemptory disappearances over the years have been routinely stuck on my fork.

We had five candidates running for sheriff, three of whom work as deputies for the retiring incumbent. In a county where about 1,400 of the 2,300 residents went to the polls, every vote did matter in this race.

As I drove into Blue Grass to mark my paper ballot, it occurred to me that had General Lee not thrown General Pickett into a doomed attack at Gettysburg, I might have been voting in the Confederate States of America.

If the South had been able to stalemate the North, secession would have probably succeeded. Blue Grass, then called Crab Bottom -- for reasons having to do with apples and not crustaceans, personalities or insects -- would fly a different flag.

Subsequent relations between the U.S. and the neighboring Confederacy might have remained hostile like those between India and Pakistan. Alternatively, the North and South might have patched things up and reunified like West and East Germany.

It's hard to imagine a Confederate States of America in 2011 as a plantation-oriented, slave-holding society with a weak central government. The Confederacy might have evolved into a New-World version of apartheid regimes like Rhodesia and South Africa. To the extent that its agricultural interests would have impeded industrialization, the South would have hamstrung its own modernization.

The South was better off losing than winning, and so was the North. Some who live in the states of the old Confederacy would disagree, though I think they are fewer each year.

Had the South stayed independent, I assume it would have eventually weaned itself from slavery. But I don't think the institution would have crumbled quietly in the night. I doubt that it could have lasted until 1981 when Mauritania became the last country to outlaw it. Official abolition, unfortunately, has not ended the unofficial practice, which continues to ensnare an estimated 12 to 28 million people around the world.

My patch of Virginia's mountains has been a small-farm economy for 250 years. It's not suited to labor-intensive, plantation agriculture. In 1860, Highland County reported about 4,300 white, free residents and 80 black, slave residents. Descendants of these slaves were gone by the 1960s, though some still own land here.

A few remnants of slavery are still around. Several antebellum houses have a slave cabin in the back. We have two unmarked gravestones in our apple orchard that might indicate buried slaves. Wills and tax records show who owned what and whom.

Native Americans left arrowheads. Slaves may have left some bricks. But most of their labor was put into our ground or housework.

The Virginia counties to the north and west of us joined West Virginia and the North. Highland stayed with Virginia. While a handful of the county's men fought for the Union, the overwhelming majority joined Virginia infantry and cavalry units.

A Presbyterian church on the Bullpasture River served as a hospital for casualties from the Battle of McDowell in early May, 1862. A Confederate cemetery -- next to another makeshift hospital -- is located in Monterey, the county seat.

A stone Confederate soldier stands in front of our county court house, facing north, watching for Yankees. He always seems to be looking at me.

Elections here are personal since most of us are familiar with each other.

Our candidates do not solicit campaign contributions as far as I know, and I don't think anyone accepts them.

We try not to spend too much. Candidates buy yard signs or make them. Some hand out vote-for-me pens. A few take out ads in the newspaper. And then there are the election-night galas that combine purchased trays and covered dishes. I know of only one gathering that comes with a North Carolina pound cake that won my heart many years ago.

Our self-imposed caps on spending mean that politicians need not depend on contributions from those seeking to influence public decisions.

We've never organized ourselves into groups to apply pressure through threats, mobilization and money. Instead, we talk with -- and about -- incumbents and candidates. Softball works better for us than hardball.

Officeholders at the state and national levels could follow our example and bolster their own integrity. Simply refuse contributions from lobbyists and pressure groups and then cap electoral spending.

If there's negative campaigning in our elections, it's not shouted through media megaphones. No candidate manipulates quotations or runs photographs of an opponent looking as if he just swallowed a fur ball. Past failures and indiscretions are generally well-known, so they are factored into voters' decisions without having to bring them up.

Many of our office seekers visit every household. They usually appear after work, often during supper. I'm not sure that door-to-door works, but it's expected of first-time candidates and those in close races. Personal visits would certainly not work for the likes of me.

Election to our Board of Supervisors and School Board involves little pay, much time and often thankless service. It's just a small cut above volunteering to clean pens at the animal shelter, but without the rewards.

After serving, our officeholders do not cash in on their connections by becoming lobbyists. Couldn't ex-Congresspersons and Senators just go home after their last term? Washington and Jefferson did.

I usually back losing candidates. I prefer them over winners who are losers...or worse. My record of writing speeches for unsuccessful candidates is unblemished by a single victory.

But I'm always pleased to vote for a woman who can convict me for my many failings while baking a pound cake that still knocks my socks off.

And how many other successful candidates can you recall who reward election-day well-wishers with Aunt Marie's pound-cake recipe...and the scraps of a very good crab dip?

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his weekly columns are posted.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph. D.

Land Consultant

1467 Wimer Mountain Road

Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307

540-474-3297

curtisseltzer@htcnet.org

www.curtis-seltzer.com