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Maple sap runs free, but celebration takes work

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—This weekend may be the worst of my year. It depends on the weather. On a really bad Saturday -- bright, sunny and warm -- as many as 25,000 people might drive over four mountains on a serpentine two-lane road to multiply our county's population tenfold.

Our one stoplight will go nuts--winking, blinking and nodding in all directions. Traffic might even stop and lock. We'll all sit on our porches watching the creep show. But even visitors stuck in the jam will be in good spirits. All come bearing their appetites--for a nice day in the Virginia mountains, for crafts and trinkets, for junk they never dreamed they wanted, for old-fashioned scenery, for sweet-faced calves hiding behind their wary Moms, for new lambs boinging around on their pogo sticks.

Everyone's come to celebrate sap.

Most rural counties have now found an excuse to promote something local. It's good for business and provides peppy tonic for things as usual. Highland is the southernmost county where maple syrup is produced commercially. So we have a two-weekend-long Maple Festival in mid-March. (www.highlandcounty.org.) I've also heard the claim that we have the highest mean elevation of any county east of the Mississippi River. We've not figured out how to celebrate being high, save for the guy who used to sell feathered roach clips at the Festival. (I think he might have inhaled!) He was not from around here; I better point that out.

Perhaps we can boast about our meanness, which is far more interesting than trumpeting our averageness. I'm speaking here of statistics; I better point that out too. We may or may not have the fewest full-time residents of any county east of the River. But if we're not first in being least, we're still pretty high on the low-down list. That, to me, is the real cause for joy. But my neighbors would think I was a weirdo if I proposed that we hold a Fewest People Festival.

So here we are—the highest mean, lowest low and southernmost. Our thousands of visitors like our farmy looks. I carry a pitchfork and try to resemble one of Jefferson's yeoman farmers—rustic, democratic, muddy and debt-ridden. If I'm asked driving directions, I quote Yogi Berra: "When you come to the fork in the road, take it." I add: "There's always Festival food at the end of a fork." Many visitors pat me on the head. Some give me a dime.

Many of us make money from our land—pasturing livestock, logging, buying

and selling, showing tourists where the ooohs and aaaahs are and providing modest opportunities to share their wealth. Maple syrup is one of our land industries. We produce about 4,500 gallons annually, each of which started as 40 gallons of sap. Sap drips when warm days follow cold nights, which is when I drip too. Syrup production these days is largely a matter of plumbing and heating.

Taps are drilled into sugar maples. (We try to avoid hemlock.) Plastic tubing of increasingly larger diameters drains the sugar bush downhill into a tank. The quaint buckets and horse-drawn sleds of the past now exist mainly as pictures on metal syrup cans. Plastic tubing means no buckets. Squirrels like to tight-rope walk along the tubing, stopping occasionally to nibble through for a drink.

From the tank, the sap might be squeezed through a reverse-osmosis machine to concentrate the sugar and then boiled down to syrup. The first order of Festival business is eating. Visitors run a gauntlet of choices—maple thises and thats, pork rinds, funnel cakes and every other somewhat edible item that is routinely fried between the Shenandoah Valley and the West Virginia line. No one sells lentil beans.

The best of the best is maple-glazed donuts sold by the Mill Gap Ruritans. Each is hot, sweet and the airiest 10,000 calories you'll ever consume in three bites. When I was younger, I ate a dozen sitting in my truck one morning. I thought about going for a second box until wiser gastronomic judgments made themselves heard.

Almost as good is the pancake breakfast put on by the Blue Grass Ruritans. The idea here is to start with a sausage patty and three buckwheat pancakes. Drench everything with one or two quarts of maple syrup and a gallon of hot sausage gravy. Slosh the whole mess around until you can use your spoon. This glop is so good I can't stand it.

Additional pancakes are hustled to your table. The first breakfast my wife, Melissa, and I attended, was in 1984. She ate 27 pancakes, equal to about twice her body weight. No cake was left behind. When I asked Melissa about this several months later, she said, "Well, our new neighbor Conley was bringing around seconds, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings by saying no." None of our major big boys have ever gotten much past 22.

Melissa was elected county prosecutor last year; nobody messes with a girl who knocked off 27 pancakes without trying. What's really important about our Maple Festival -- and all the other festivals in rural America -- are the people who do them. All of the county's volunteer organizations sell something, and many of us volunteer for a shift or two at a food trailer. This

work is hard and fast. It's fun if your crew comes together as a team.

The first customer of the day always wants to buy a cup of coffee with a \$100 bill, because, he says, he needs the change. You always know who worked where by their smell. I was foot-long chili dogs with onions from the Band Boosters. I've also been barbecued cluck.

Finally, it ends. Traffic evaporates. Main Street is down to its usual three souls in three blocks. The entire county washes up, hoses down and is glad to have survived another Festival.

Highland may be a tiny speck on America's population map, but we have a first-rate clinic, rescue squad, VFD, public library, community radio station and business incubator. We're building a community pool. Each was started by local volunteers with local dollars, many carrying a hint of maple.

Volunteers and DIY and grit...and visitors. Rural America, 2008.

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