

McDowell a must-see for Highland visitors

BY DEBORAH HUSO

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Little-changed since the days of the Civil War battle that made this isolated mountain village famous, McDowell today is home to an interesting mix of newcomers and locals with roots spanning more than a century.

It is easy to miss McDowell. Passersby traveling scenic U.S. Route 250 through Highland County, Virginia's smallest with a population of only 2,500, might note it as a sleepy village with a post office, a couple of stores, and a smattering of well-kept historic homes. But there is more than meets the eye here.

Glenn and Fern Heatwole, owners of the Sugar Tree Country Store, understand the draw of this quiet community. The couple came to Highland County three years ago looking for a change. Originally dairy farmers in Rockingham County, the Heatwoles now operate one of the village's landmark stores. "We were looking for a place that was not as congested," notes Glenn.

And they certainly found it in McDowell, along with a new occupation. "We went from



Glenn Heatwole mans the cash register at Sugar Tree Country Store. (Photo courtesy Deborah Huso)

milking cows to milking trees," says Heatwole with a laugh. Today the couple, with the help of some of their five grown children, collect sugar water from some 6,000 taps each winter to make as much as 1,200 gallons of Highland County's signature maple syrup.

Highland County is one of the few places south of the Mason-Dixon line with a climate cold enough for producing syrup from its wealth of sugar maple trees. The annual gathering of sugar water by local farmers can draw

as many as 60,000 visitors to the county each year for the annual Highland Maple Festival, which celebrates its 50th year this season.

Heatwole says syrup is his biggest-selling item and draws visitors to the county from as far away as Holland and Japan. The Heatwoles also sell syrup wholesale to some 35 stores across Virginia.

Nevertheless, the Sugar Tree Country Store is unassuming with its original potbelly stove still

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The Sugar Tree Country Store, a landmark in McDowell, is owned by Glenn Heatwole, who serves as chairman of the school. (Photo courtesy Deborah Huso)



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