

## From FESTIVAL HISTORY RECOUNTED, page 44

has become a popular annual attraction since it was first shown at the festival of 1980.

A "maple sugar run" was organized in 1981. The six-mile run over the mountain from Hightown to Monterey was a feature of the festival for the next three years and made a renewed appearance in 1998.

The Maple Museum, spearheaded by Billingsley, was erected on U.S. 220 south of Monterey and dedicated at the 25th festival in 1983. Del. Emmett Hanger and Sen. Frank Nolen were present for the dedication and ribbon cutting by Maple Queen Sherry Whitelaw. Jay Eagle opened his sugar camp in Doe Hill that year; syrup production was excellent, and the crowds swelled to nearly 30,000.

Jim and Lorraine White, then owners of Sugar Tree Country Store, opened a sugarhouse in McDowell in 1987. They used the first reverse osmosis machine in the county, thereby saving time in the production of syrup. Everett Rexrode's sugar camp installed a wood-fired evaporator in 1989. Maple syrup connoisseurs say they can taste the difference in how syrup is produced and have their preferences.

A blizzard on the first weekend of the 1993 festival prompted the organizers to add a weekend to the end of the festival so the civic clubs would still have a chance for their

moneymaking projects. The weekends of Maple Festival represent the most lucrative fund-raising opportunities. Most churches, athletic clubs, and civic organizations in Highland County will benefit from in an entire year.

Two nearly perfect weekends created one of the best years in the festival's history in 1995. The weather is as critical to the production of maple syrup as it is to the success of a maple festival. Trees are usually tapped by mid-February and closed by late March. The sap—or "sugar water" as it is called in Highland County—begins to "run" when the temperature fluctuates between nighttime temperatures that drop below freezing and afternoon thaws. Highland County's mountainous terrain (the county has the highest mean elevation east of the Mississippi River) contributes to a late-winter and early-spring weather pattern that can generate warm, sunny afternoons and crisp, freezing nights. Once the sap begins to run, the only thing that will stop it is a change in the weather.

If nature cooperates, gallons of syrup can be made in a very short time. However, maple syrup production is both time-consuming and labor-intensive. In the earlier days of maple syrup making, local farmers collected the sugar water in hollowed out logs with spiles hand-carved from elder or sumac.

When the Heveners opened their sugar camp for the first maple festival, they were still collecting the sugar water in galvanized buckets hooked onto metal spiles. These were subsequently emptied into barrels and taken to a sugarhouse. The water was boiled in large kettles over wood-burning fires, then skimmed and strained before being sealed in containers.

Evaporator pans, which have a greater surface to allow steam to evaporate, replaced the open kettle method of making maple syrup. Better yet, these large pans can be heated with less wood. Oil-fired evaporators reduced the labor even further. Today, the use of plastic tubing has replaced many of the buckets. This makes collecting sap much easier. Puffenbarger's Sugar Camp introduced the vacuum system in 1976, which increased flow and yield of sap through the plastic lines.

Now, entire stands of maple trees are tapped by using the plastic tubing system. Sap flows through miles of this tubing into a central container. The contents of the containers either flow directly into the sugarhouse or are pumped into tanks and trucked. Visitors to the Highland Maple Festival can observe the entire process—from the collection of sugar water to the production of maple syrup.

Mike Puffenbarger became the latest commercial maple syrup pro-

ducer in Highland County when he opened his camp, Southernmost Maple Products, in 1999. He has the only piggyback evaporator in the county.

The chamber has been the sole sponsor of the event from the beginning. Originally it was hoped the festival would stimulate business in the local hotel, motel and restaurants, but within the first few years the increase in the number of visitors attending necessitated opening eating facilities in the county schools and Ruritan clubs. Forty-two years later, tens of thousands of visitors enjoy a breakfast of pancakes and/or buckwheat cakes smothered in Highland syrup, accompanied by homemade sausage, biscuits, and gravy. This hearty fare is served by the local restaurants, the Highland Elementary and High School, and the Ruritan clubs in Blue Grass, McDowell, and Bolar. The Blue Grass Ruritan Club sponsors the annual Maple Queen Ball on the weekend preceding, and the Stonewall Ruritan Club of McDowell hosts the Sugar Shake-Up Dance and the Festival Fling Dance on the two consecutive weekends. Local cloggers and line dancers perform for the crowds, and church groups, civic and athletic clubs, fire departments and auxiliaries sell foods that range from maple-flavored doughnuts, funnel cakes, barbecued chicken, and apple dumplings

to locally-farmed fresh trout. Today, the juried craft show represents more than 130 artists and craftsmen from nearly a dozen states. The Blue Grass Ruritans and the Stonewall Ruritans from McDowell each sponsor a dance on consecutive Saturday nights during the festival.

In 1998 the chamber, in recognition of the high cost of producing and promoting the festival, began charging an admission fee. For the price of \$1 a maple leaf-shaped key chain serves as an admission ticket to four days of unlimited access to craft shows and entertainment. Although this decision proved to be controversial among Highland old-timers (who took pride in the fact that the festival had been hosted free of charge for 40 years), both the key chain souvenir and the bargain price of admission delighted visitors. Today most local residents recognize the admission generates revenue that makes it possible for the chamber to promote the festival and the county's growing tourism industry.

The festival draws crowds of upwards of 60,000 to a county with a population of less than 2,500 (Highland County is one of the least populated counties east of the Mississippi). The festival has become as important to Highland County's cultural heritage as it has to the survival of the area's maple sugar industry.



### *The Sundance Studio*

**Offering classes for children, teens, and adults in Hip Hop, Clogging, Dance Aerobics, and Competitive Clogging.**

Located in the Mill Alley Courtyard.  
Home of the Sundance Express

For more information contact Dorothy Stephenson, Owner,  
(540) 280-7975 or [clogger4life318@hotmail.com](mailto:clogger4life318@hotmail.com)  
[www.sundancestudio.org](http://www.sundancestudio.org)

## Risdon Photography



Weddings, Commercial,  
Events and Location Portraits  
Over 20 Years Experience  
Courteous, Professional  
Service at Reasonable Rates  
[www.risdonfoto.com](http://www.risdonfoto.com) &  
[www.pkrphotography.com](http://www.pkrphotography.com)  
540-396-4012

## Villas at The Meadows

*"a restful retreat ... with you in mind"*

an exquisite selection of private villas  
for your personal vacation,  
corporate retreat or small group get-away



comfortably appointed  
1,2 & 3 bedroom suites  
nestled in the heart of the  
George Washington National Forest near the  
Jefferson Pools at Warm Springs, Virginia  
**540-839-2124**  
[www.villameadowsva.com](http://www.villameadowsva.com)  
Meadows Drive, Warm Springs, Virginia 24484