

Farmer maintains link with sweet potato past

EACH FALL, an unusual event happens on the Sydnor family farm in Richmond County.

It's called the Big Dig, and it's a combination sweet potato harvest, party and homecoming for more than 50 friends and family members who visit for days. This year, they harvested 540 bushels of 11 varieties of sweet potatoes.

Two things drew me to the event a few weeks back: the fact that fifth-generation Sydnors are now pulling sweet potatoes out of the loamy soil there, and that the organizer of the event has been one of my best friends since high school.

He's George Sydnor, a hard-working guy who farms 350 acres—some rented, some owned—in and around Haynesville. He raises cattle, hay, corn, soybeans and wheat on land his family's worked for more than a

HERE & THERE

Rob Hedelt



hundred years.

And while that alone is an accomplishment worth commending, the sweet potato harvest gathering is what makes Sydnor Farms unique.

Harvesting large quantities of sweet potatoes requires an extremely expensive rig, so if you don't have one of those, you need a bevy of folks to pull them out of the ground.

When my friend George was growing up, his father hired people to do the harvesting on acres and acres of sweet potatoes. The process remains the same: "turning out" the sweet potatoes by row with a plow blade, then pulling them

SEE HEDELT, C3

► FROM C1

out of the loosened soil by hand and depositing them into bushel baskets.

Though he makes more money on most of his other crops, Sydnor feels driven to continue raising sweet potatoes because his family always has. Indeed, his grandfather died in the sweet potato field.

But my friend said he's not motivated by the same things his father was when it comes to sweet potatoes, nor was his career dependent on the farm. Sydnor was an electrical engineer and manager for NASA in the Hampton area—and is still a part-time consultant there—yet he somehow managed to keep the farm running by shuttling back and forth to the Northern Neck.

“For my father, the sweet potatoes were a much bigger thing—and his livelihood,” he said. “For me, it's really about connecting to our history. I wouldn't really say that I always enjoy it, but I can't see a time when we wouldn't do it.”

The difference now is that Sydnor has found a unique workforce to harvest just under two acres of sweet potatoes.

The Big Dig started as a party to celebrate several co-workers at NASA and has morphed into a “little bit of everything” gathering typically held on the third weekend in October.

Folks start showing up on Wednesday night, with the bulk arriving by the busiest work day: Saturday.

More than 50 arrive in a good year, coming from Washington, Wisconsin, California, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and even Switzerland. All are friends and coworkers of Sydnor and his family members.

Dozens stay at his house, spread out on couches, sleeping bags or other soft spots, while others get rooms at local hotels. There's even a backyard shower with hot water in an enclosure Sydnor bought at a NASA surplus property sale.

Sydnor, his wife Ellen Sydnor, and other family members provide meals for the crowd—anything from delicious tri-tip beef on the grill to some sort of paella for Sunday supper.

Sydnor credits much of his success in private business and as a NASA engineer to the “can-do, figure-it-out” spirit he learned growing up on a farm. He said the Big Dig has become what it is because everyone shares a common goal: the harvest.

It's a traditional pilgrimage for many who enjoy an opportunity to connect with the earth.

“It is odd that these folks who don't do things like this enjoy getting out in a field and doing physical labor,” said Sydnor. “Even if they're sore for a week after doing it.”

But that's just the sweet potato part of the work. From the first year on, getting a bunch of engineers together has led to inevitable side projects which are now as much a part of the Big Dig as the harvest.

While Sydnor and his field crew are busy harvesting sweet

potato varieties including white Hayman, red Cuban, Beau-regard, O'Henry, Covington, Murasaki burgundy and oakleaf, others put together the year's construction project.

Folks who've built wind tunnels, generators and all kinds of other systems around the globe aren't happy unless they're making something. So they set to erecting a sort of sculpture out of whatever materials they can find.

They often include features that provide a good-natured ribbing of my friend George.

These large structures, burned on the last big night of the dig, have included a huge honey badger (Sydnor's nickname in the group), a rocket ship, a wedding cake, a Mr. Sweet Potato Head and a dinosaur. They're often about 15 feet tall, generally have moving parts and include game-playing aspects such as a sweet potato toss featuring the likenesses of Sydnor and his family.

Sydnor's sons Cody and Cutter are both engineers, and his daughter Rebecca is at West Virginia University getting her Ph.D. in physics.

“I think they also get the value of working here on this land I've been on my whole life, which was also home to their grandfather and his father and others,” he said. “Working the land like this, you come to understand that it really isn't yours, and that you're just taking care of it and using it and then it moves on. All you can really do is steer where it's heading.”

Cycling trip on W.Va.'s Greenbrier River Trail was, indeed, almost heaven

IT WAS on the second day of our 80-mile, two-day cycling trip along the beautiful Greenbrier River in West Virginia that we heard the sound of a big animal in the brush.

The noises turned out to be a big ol' bear that suddenly bounded up onto the trail in front of us. For a creature its size, about as tall as I am, it moved more quickly than seemed possible. Its thick, powerful limbs took it across the pathway and up the steep adjoining hillside.

We stood mesmerized where the sound had brought us to a stop, feeling thrilled and privileged to have seen the magnificent creature in the wild. And, yeah, glad that it didn't take umbrage because we were intruding in its habitat.

The experience was one of many, many wonderful moments, sights and experiences on the Greenbrier River Trail we rode between its start in Cass, W.Va., and its finish near Lewisburg, W.Va., this past weekend.

I made the trip with my wife and two friends, and I was perhaps the slowest of the cyclists in the group. I was challenged at times by the length of a day's ride (46 miles on day 2), steep hills we encountered to get to and from an overnight accommodation in Hillsboro and heat that rose into the 80s on the second day of the ride.

For experienced and accomplished cyclists, an 80-mile ride along the Greenbrier Trail—converted from a railway to a trailway—would be something easily accomplished in one day without a sweat.

But as someone who's just slowly expanding his cycling and range—having done 60 miles on two days in our last ride together—there's a little strain in slowly working my way to cover more ground in a day.



Rob Hedelt can't help but be a goofball when photographed on a bridge over West Virginia's Greenbrier River during a recent bicycling trip.

HERE & THERE

Rob Hedelt



For others who like cycling, I couldn't recommend the trail any more highly. It's a beautiful path right along the pristine Greenbrier River, a natural pathway covered with the sort of crushed rock that makes a perfect surface for a bicycle, even when it's dotted here and there with mud puddles.

All along the ride, you have the beautiful river on one side and a mix of woods, fields, rocky hillsides and the occasional house or cabin on the other.

For much of the first day out of Cass, it feels like you're alone in the wilderness, nothing but trees, blooming flowers and plants painting the trailside green, pink, purple and more.

One amazing moment came in a stretch where some horse droppings had lured dozens of butterflies in search of its nutrients. The first rider in our group scared them up off the trail, filling the air the others rode through with so many butterflies that we felt like intruders in a magical world.

We also rode through tunnels where you could see the scars of the tools that carved them on the

walls and ceilings, passed numerous waterfalls, crossed more streams than we could keep count of and saw spotted chipmunks, deer and hawks whirling lazily in the sky above.

My first trip on a bike through a tunnel started badly, as I couldn't figure out why it was so dark in there, given the fact that I had a light blazing away on my handlebars. It took me about 30 seconds to realize it really helped lighten things up to pull off my sunglasses.

The only worrisome moments came when a few of us took falls, largely because we weren't ready for changes in the path or roads we crossed.

A steep paved road we needed to take to get to our overnight accommodation caused one of the falls. But thank goodness for a nice motorist who gave three of us and our bikes a quick shuttle over the hill. Nick, our experienced rider, took the hill in stride.

The coolest online advice that turned out to be true in the little town of Hillsboro: They did indeed have a Marathon gas station/store that sells great hand-cut ribeye steaks. They were just the ticket after Nick grilled them up at the house we rented for the night.

We realized Hillsboro came by its name hon-

estly the next morning when we took a different path to get back on the Greenbrier River Trail. Suffice it to say that we walked up much of that gravel road that seemed like it stretched to the sky.

It was nice to find the trail again, which helped a novice like me because it was slightly downhill in the direction we rode it.

I say thank goodness because there were moments when it felt like it took everything I had to move my bicycle along, loaded down as it was with panniers and bags full of food, water, clothing and other gear.

All that stuff in the way posed a challenge just getting my leg up and over every time I needed to mount the bike. And it was part of the reason I ended up on my backside during a fall that happened—thankfully—in soft, thick grass.

It was a bit of a struggle for me on day 2 as the heat, fatigue and pain in certain body parts took a toll by the 40-mile mark of our 44-mile ride.

But with the end getting closer, we all found a surge of energy that pushed us on to the finish.

We'd talked about finding a place in that last stretch where we could get down to the river and dip our toes in. But the threat of impending rain and the steep nature of the paths to the water nixed that idea.

I learned things on this amazing trip that will help on the next one. Chief among the lessons: take only what's absolutely necessary, instead of packing extra clothing and enough power bars to feed a Boy Scout troop.

But the sight of that bear, and all the beautiful spots along the way, provided bright and inspiring moments that will stay with us forever.

Rob Hedelt: 540/374-5415
rhedelt@freelancestar.com

Steamboat pilothouse flies high to become exhibit

IRVINGTON—The pilothouse of the steamboat Potomac, where officers steered and slept, traveled many a maritime mile atop the elegant craft in the era when waterways were the region's highways.

Built in Philadelphia in 1894, the 176-foot steamer with 37 state-rooms and a crew of 36 transported freight and people on the water for 42 years. Its initial run was between Baltimore and spots on the Potomac River, later shifting to a route between Baltimore and Norfolk, with stops all along the Rappahannock River.

Last Wednesday, the 14-foot-wide, 25-foot-long pilothouse traveled some very different miles in the Northern Neck's Lancaster County.

It made the short trip between a wood shop near Ophelia to the Steamboat Era Museum in Irvington on the bed of a "Wide Load" truck. And there, at the museum dedicated to telling the story of the workhorses of the Chesapeake Bay region, the 10,000-pound wooden structure went airborne.

Hefted up in the air by a 155-ton crane from Reebals Crane Rental of Charles City, the gleaming white pilothouse was carried up, over and to the rear of the museum building that sits near the town square.

With nary a hitch—aside from a tense moment or two as the structure almost had a run-in with a large holly tree—the pilothouse was lowered to a spot where a wooden cradle had been created to receive it.

Under the watchful eye of John Morgenthaler, the woodworker and shipwright restoring the Potomac pilothouse, it was slowly pulled into the building by a winch driven cable that rolled it



PHOTOS BY THE STEAMBOAT ERA MUSEUM

It took a huge crane to get the pilothouse of the steamboat Potomac up, over and into the Steamboat Era Museum in Irvington, where it will become a new exhibit.

HERE & THERE
Rob Hedelt



atop pipes on a wooden beam that formed a track that terminated inside the museum. Much of the rear wall of the museum building was removed to receive the pilothouse.

In less than 20 minutes, the pilothouse was sitting exactly atop the tape marking its final resting place.

Morgenthaler breathed a big sigh of relief when the wooden structure was safe and sound inside.

"It was touch and go there for a minute, because we only had eight inches of clearance," he said. "But it all worked out."

Barbara Brecher, the museum's executive director, became emotional seeing the pilothouse get settled in.

"It's taken a lot of work by a lot of people, and we're thrilled," she said as well-wishers flooded into the museum to see the



John Morgenthaler, the shipwright and woodworker restoring the pilothouse, checks the winch.

unique piece of history. "John still has some work to finish, but after so long, it's here."

The pilothouse will be used to tell the story of how steamboats served to change and mold the culture and heritage of those living along the 11,684 miles of shoreline of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

In 2016, the museum began a major capital campaign to raise \$350,000 for the project and for new exhibits to tell the story of the Steamboat Era and the Potomac. Museum officials say the pilothouse is the only

place in America where visitors can step aboard a surviving structure from a 1813–1937 Chesapeake Bay steamboat.

In February 1936, the Potomac was forced into retirement when her stern was badly damaged in a collision with a freighter in icy waters in the dark of night. In 1937, the Potomac was sold to the Colonna Shipyard in Norfolk. It was taken apart, and the hull was made into a barge to carry pulpwood.

The pilothouse structure was saved by the shipyard owners, Capt. Ben and Willoughby Colonna, who barged the

structure up the Rappahannock River for their family to use as a summer cottage at Taft Beach.

Morgenthaler, who has been painstakingly restoring the structure at his home shop, said there's still work to finish on the interior. The front section of the pilothouse is the wheelhouse, dominated by an authentic ship's wheel. Behind that space are sleeping quarters for the captain and other officers.

"I've got cherry paneling to install in the forward cabin, and need to work with the windows in there," he said. "Like the rest of the front, they're curved and will work better once I get the weights on them worked out."

Other work to be done includes the installation of doors, steps and a built-in bunk in the captain's quarters. People will be able to watch the shipwright do that work and other touches, if they happen to visit the museum at the right time.

One onlooker Wednesday was struck by the personal history of the moment.

"It's like a dream come true," said Anne McClintock, whose grandfather, Archie Long, was a longtime captain of the ship. She and others in her family have pushed the project and provided countless artifacts and historical data to help interpret the steamboat.

In addition to work done on the pilothouse, the interior of the museum has been painted and new carpet has been installed. New exhibits are in the process of being installed.

Work on the exhibit will continue through the 2019 season, which will begin June 11. The museum will be open until Nov. 16, Tuesday to Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Rob Hedelt: 540/374-5415
rhedelt@freelancestar.com