

Favorite fare enjoyed most when surrounded by ambiance of nature

It has been a long, cold winter, and the grill is tired and weary. Although mostly shielded from the elements, he's felt the chill from the freezing temperatures and the aches that penetrate when snow and ice leach through backyard sanctuaries.

It's a few weeks before Memorial Day, and I roll him out on the patio into a spot where sunbeams warm the concrete.

Opening the lid, I hear and feel the creak of age. After a thorough inspection, however, I see that he is good to go for another season.

He is dusted, cleaned and cleared of any arachnid webs. I leave him in the sun to warm and breathe the fresh, clear air of spring. In a few days he will be ready for summer's big kickoff.

•••

As a child, cookouts were exuberant, boisterous affairs. Family descended, children squealed, adults laughed. It was a time to embrace loved ones, reminiscent about the past and enjoy the present.

And, of course, it was a time to eat.

Mom had no fancy equipment. Our grill was the small, round type that required charcoal and could be picked up inexpensively at any local retail store. It worked well on the back porch and the riverbank —



Samantha Perry

□ □ □

On this day, the charcoal is not so cantankerous. One piece of junk mail ignited in a fiery blaze is all that is needed. The briquettes begin to burn.

that was enough for us.

Mom could cook a feast on that tiny grill. Burgers and hot dogs for 10, 20 or even more.

In retrospect, the burgers may have been a little well-done, but in the spirit of cookouts a healthy dose of ketchup and mustard can hide any flaw.

The most entertaining part of the cookout occurred long before any food was placed on the grill. It was the lighting of the charcoal — a task known to break men, aggrivate women and cause good people to go bad in fits of frustration.

Back in the day, it was not easy getting charcoal to light. It required skill, patience and a ready supply of paper products. As a child, I was a runner in this game — meaning I would run and do as I was told.

"Run and get yesterday's newspaper," my parents would ask. Of course the paper in reference was the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*. Now,

as editor, the burning of its pages seems almost blasphemous, but at the time we were hungry.

Quickly, I would scurry in the house and scour the magazine rack for the day-old edition. Back outside, Mom or Dad — whomever was Supreme Grill Starter for the day — would crumple the pages, douse them with lighter fluid and toss a match. With hope it would light ... yet it never did — at least not immediately.

From the newspaper we would move on to napkins, paper towels and, finally, loose-leaf notebook paper. More lighter fluid. More matches. For a good half hour or more, the efforts would be futile. Then, finally, a "whoosh" — the charcoal would catch in a burst of flame.

I always expected someone would lose an eyebrow or two in this endeavor, but it never happened. Chalk it up to amazing grace, good

karma and pure, dumb luck.

•••

On this day, the charcoal is not so cantankerous. One piece of junk mail ignited in a fiery blaze is all that is needed. The briquettes begin to burn.

Our current grill is much larger than the one I knew from childhood. It features two layers of racks, a thermometer and more. I can cook burgers, hot dogs, squash, corn and veggies all at one time.

Unlike those who have evolved into gas for grilling, I maintain a steadfast loyalty to the little black squares that have cooked my outdoor fare for decades.

They are constant and true. I like the familiarity of starting our cookouts with black dust on my hands and a pack of matches.

•••

The husband is going grocery shopping, and I present him with a list. It contains all the staples needed for three days worth of grilled fare.

"We're cooking out the whole weekend?" he asks. "Wouldn't it be easier to use the stove?"

Probably — but that's not what is important.

Grilling out is about the sound of a sizzling burger interspersing with a

cardinal's call. It's about eating a hot dog under a blue sky and not worrying if chili drips on your shirt. And it's about communing with nature while communing with family — all the while enjoying a hearty meal.

Cookouts feed the soul as much as the stomach. They get us out of the house and into fresh air, where the appetite only increases.

And, in my opinion, cookouts in May are among the very best. They allow us to spend time enjoying the "spring greening" — the trees, the grass, the shrubs — while letting our hair down and chowing down on favorite fare.

•••

My grill no longer appears tired and worn. Spruced up with aluminum foil and holding a full load of burgers and veggies, it seems to have embraced the season.

As the food enters its final countdown, I load up the patio table with condiments, chips and drinks. A few feet away I hear birds chirping, and at edge of the distant woods a young doe makes an appearance.

We enjoy our meal amid the ambiance of wild, wonderful West Virginia. And that is what cookouts are all about.

Samantha Perry is editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. Contact her at sperry@bdtonline.com. Follow her @BDTPerry.

Bluefield Daily Telegraph

Randy Mooney
Publisher

Samantha Perry
Editor

News Editor Andy Patton
Sports Editor Brian Woodson

Senior Editor Bill Archer
Asst. Managing Editor Charles Owens

"The LORD brings the counsel of the heathen to nothing: he makes the devices of the people of none effect. The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations."

(Psalms 33:10-11 AKJV)

Outrageous!

Trash the Blue Ribbon report now

So much for common decency and basic fairness. Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's highly-touted Blue Ribbon Commission has determined that the hard-working citizens and business leaders of southern West Virginia should foot the bill for highway construction projects across the Mountain State from now until this unforeseeable future.

That's right. The commission is recommending lawmakers not only keep turnpike toll booths intact along the 88-mile toll road long after the original bond indebtedness associated with the development of the turnpike is paid in full come 2019, but that turnpike tolls also be increased as part of a series of scheduled toll hikes. The commission also is recommending the creation of a West Virginia Transportation Fund that would be used to leverage turnpike tolls annually. The commission estimates the fund could raise upwards of \$50 million a year — from the pockets of area residents.

The commission believes that residents in Bluefield, Princeton, Welch, Beckley and other parts of southern West Virginia should pay the bill for road repairs in Charleston, Huntington, Morgantown and all across the rest of West Virginia while critical highway projects right here in southern West Virginia — like the King Coal Highway and the Coalfields Expressway — are left to linger. Shameful!

Even more preposterous is the fact that it took the commission members more than a year to come up with this outrageous suggestion.

We are outraged over this proposal. We call upon West Virginia Senate President Bill Cole, R-Mercer, House Speaker Tim Armstead, R-Kanawha, and Tomblin to reject this unacceptable and unfortunate report that is nothing more than a blatant attack upon families and business leaders in the deep south

counties.

And we call upon Democrats and Republicans alike, including Sen. Mark Maynard, R-Logan, Sen. Daniel Hall, R-Wyoming, Delegate Marty Gearhart, R-Mercer, Delegate John Shott, R-Mercer, Delegate Joe Ellington, R-Mercer, Delegate Linda Good Phillips, D-Wyoming, and Delegate Clif Moore, D-McDowell, to reject the unfortunate recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission.

This study has accomplished one thing. It has shed a renewed light upon the great level of arrogance that some in Charleston continue to display toward the southern counties. This attitude can no longer be accepted. If the commission wants to raise funding for highway repairs through turnpike tolls then it is time to place toll booths on Interstate 64, Interstate 79 and other places across the state. No longer can we simply collect tolls from southern West Virginia.

The real solution is clear and painfully obvious. Trash the Blue Ribbon Commission. It was a waste of time and money. Remove all turnpike toll booths once the original bond indebtedness for the toll road is paid in full in 2019, disband the Parkways Authority, and place the 88-mile turnpike under the maintenance and control of the state Division of Highways.

It's time to put this political cash cow to bed once and for all. No longer can we expect the hard-working families of southern West Virginia to bear the burden of this unfair tax.

This study has accomplished one thing. It has shed a renewed light upon the great level of arrogance that some in Charleston continue to display toward the southern counties.



Our unwillingness to fix infrastructure will cost us dearly

The other day I took the Northeast regional Amtrak train from D.C. to New York City, got out and took the next train back.

I spent \$146 to see just how bumpy the tracks on the publicly funded rail system are (very). And I wanted to think about the eight people who died and the more than 200 who were hospitalized after Train 188 derailed on May 12.

It was a routine many followed regularly, most of them for their jobs, some for vacations or to visit family. They never thought they would be in danger.

I also wanted to nurse my anger at Congress for wringing its collective hands about our failing ports, bridges, highways, tracks, electric grid, etc., and doing nothing. In fact, after the horrific crash, Republicans further cut the Amtrak budget, which already is insufficient to maintain rails and implement new safety technology.

So much for 750,000 people who use the trains in the Northeast every single day.

Perhaps it's a regional bias. Westerners grumble, "Let them drive cars. Why should we subsidize trains we don't use?" But that is not how this country works.

Washington to New York and Boston is important for the entire nation's economy. Also, many of those

Westerners would be appalled at the East's traffic jams, pollution and potholes. Yet they see no reason why

Easterners should not pay to build and repair Western dams.

Folks, this total lack of regard for fixing the things that made this country great is scary. It is pennywise, pound-foolish thinking, and it is going to bite us where it

hurts.

Other countries that compete with us economically have bullet trains, new dams and entire new cities.

Granted, those countries have problems, too. But failing to take care of valuable roads and bridges when the money is available is singularly our failure. (Think what we could have done with the trillion dollars we borrowed to spend in Iraq — and have not yet repaid.)

Crumbling infrastructure. Such an overused, oxymoronic term. If it is collapsing, it's not infrastructure.

We have heard the word so often that we don't even think about what it really means. But it is as dangerous to our economy as greedy Wall Street manipulators, currency exploiters and violent acts of nature.

When Minneapolis' eight-lane, steel truss arch bridge across the Saint Anthony Falls of the Mississippi River collapsed in rush hour on Aug. 1, 2007, the nation was shocked.

"Infrastructure" became a rallying cry among politicians and the public. Did anything seriously change to start paying to fix things? No.

Nearly every city has a major infrastructure problem lurking. The week after the Amtrak tragedy, in the nation's capital, a lane on a major artery from Virginia into the District on the Arlington Memorial Bridge

had to be shut down because of corrosion.

The former D.C. General Hospital, now the city's largest homeless shelter and home to at least 400 children, was found to have peeling lead paint and the first two children tested had elevated lead levels in their blood.

President Obama has talked about the nation's failing infrastructure dozens of times. Two days after the Amtrak disaster, he said: "We need to invest in the infrastructure that keeps (our economy growing) and not just when something bad happens like a bridge collapse or a train derailment but all the time. That's what great nations do."

It is Congress, keeper of the purse strings, that has failed to act. I for one will never vote for any politician who doesn't campaign, hard, on the need for an extensive, intensive, expensive but vital paint-up-fix-up campaign.

Incidentally, the members of Congress who want to cut taxes for the rich and embark on new military campaigns but won't spend money to fix infrastructure (and who also refuse to raise the national minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour) earn \$84 an hour.

Ann McFeatters is an op-ed columnist for Tribune News Service. Readers may send her email at amcfeatters@nationalpress.com.

Letters...

Family humbled by support, prayers

The family of Shan Brittany Martens and Bria Shan Hensley wish to express our thanks to all of you for your support and prayers.

We especially want to commend those at the accident scene who bravely tried to save them Sunday, May 10, at Wytheville, Va. The young woman first on the scene who called 911, and those who prayed while several nurses worked on Baby Bria.

There aren't enough words of praise and thanks to Sgt. Trooper Johnny Pack, who risked his own life to save Baby Bria. Our prayers are with you for your complete

recovery of the burns you sustained.

There will surely be jewels in all of your crowns. We are overwhelmed, and humbled by everyone concerned.

We are under God's grace and consoled that Shan Brittany is with her Daddy Richard and Baby Bria in heaven!

We also extend our prayers and condolences to the Asbury family in Wytheville, Va.

God bless America this Memorial Day weekend. We are all in God's hands!

Thanks again and love to all.

Joyce E. Martens
Princeton