By Jim Zepp
On 3 Dec. 2013, with one year remaining in her term, Valerie Ervin resigned as the County Council’s District 5 Member to take a job in New York City. Although there had been speculation for months that she would not run for another term (during which she declined requests to declare her intentions), she waited until two days after the date that would have required holding a special election to determine her replacement. Consequently, the remaining eight Council Members will appoint someone to complete her term. Because they do not want to give any appointee the unfair advantage of an unearned incumbency, the Council has indicated that the appointment applicants should agree not to run for the position in the next election.

Council will conduct interviews that will be televised on the County’s cable channels and Council Website and open to the public. The Council is expected to have selected the replacement by 30 January. Ervin’s departure comes at a time when important decisions are pending at Council, including debates on the White Oak Master Plan, the Zoning Code Rewrite, and Countywide Zoning Map Amendment. The primary election for all Council seats will be Tuesday, 24 June, for terms beginning January 2015. The filing deadline for candidates is 25 February.

(continued on page 2)
PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Hi, Neighbors.

As I write this message, I am looking out on a beautiful blanket of snow. I love snow, at least snow that is not on the roads. My wife and I love to walk after dark (with our dogs), hearing the scrunching sound under our feet.

Snow brings me back to my youth: days off from school, snow angels, sledding, snowmen, and, of course, snowball fights. I love the joyful sound of children frolicking in the mystical substance. It reminds me of the days when for hours we would play; then, wet with exertion, we would head home, throw our clothes in the dryer, have a cup of hot chocolate, and then head out to do it all over again.

As an adult, one of my habits is, late at night, to step out into backyard, close my eyes, and experience the quiet stillness and peace that snow lays upon the earth.

P.S. Please remember to shovel your sidewalks as a courtesy to your neighbors. The County can and sometimes does issue citations for unshoveled sidewalks (you have 24 hours after the last flake falls). Thanks.

—Brian Morrissey

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■ Post a Message (you must subscribe first): northwoodparents@yahoogroups.com

NORTHWOOD NEWS

President’s Message

Hi, Neighbors.

As I write this message, I am looking out on a beautiful blanket of snow. I love snow, at least snow that is not on the roads. My wife and I love to walk after dark (with our dogs), hearing the scrunching sound under our feet.

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County Council to Appoint Representative for Our District 5

(continued from page 1)

Our Community’s Short-Term Council Representation

Eighteen individuals originally applied for the 10-month appointment, of which 13 were invited to be interviewed by the Council over a three-day period; one person withdrew his application.

■ 17 Jan.—Jeanette Dixon, Kim Jones, Alan Bowser, Dale Tibbets, and Michael Diegel
■ 22 Jan.—Arthur Jackson, Jr.; Herman Taylor; Andrew Kleine; Timothy Male; and Cherri Branson
■ 24 Jan.—Ronald Galvin, Jr.; Jay Hutchins; and Daniel Wilhelm

[At least two applicants live in our neighborhood.]

More information on the Council’s selection process and the applicant interviews are available at www.mymcmedia.org/council-works-to-fill-district-5-vacancy-video. One of the local blogs covering the interviews is at www.silverspringindependent.com/2014/01/17/watching-job-interviews-fill-district-5s-empty-county-council-seat-dont-heres-day-1-report.

During our December meeting, NFCCA members passed an emergency resolution expressing concern that our community has had a continuous turnover in Council representation since 2008 due to the deaths of Marilyn and Don Praisner and the transfer of our neighborhood from County Council to Appoint Representative for Our District 5

(continued on page 3)
County Council to Appoint Representative for Our District 5

(continued from page 2) District 4 to District 5. Consequently, with the one-year appointed District 5 Council Member and the election later this year of a new District 5 Council Member, our neighborhood will have had six different individuals represent it in seven years.

The NFCCA sent a letter to all of the Council members suggesting the following criteria:

1. The appointee must have a history of citizen involvement with the communities located in District 5 and, in particular, the critical issues facing our neighborhoods that the Council will be voting on in the coming year.

2. More importantly, the appointee should reflect the views of area residents and voters as a duly-elected representative would in these matters. This also requires a commitment by the appointee to seek input from constituents and frequently communicate with residents on issues affecting District 5 neighborhoods.

3. Given the very limited duration of this appointment, the appointee should have an extensive working knowledge of Council procedures, operations, and staff as well as County government in general in order to effectively represent the District 5 residents. To do otherwise, would mean that this person would spend much of this time in a learning mode.

Council Member Nancy Navarro, who represented our community when she was elected to the Council for District 4 in 2009 until we were moved to District 5 in 2012, chose to ask each of the applicants about the concern raised in the NFCCA letter about the frequent turnover in representation. Unfortunately, none of the applicants interviewed on 17 Jan. picked up on the need for citizen outreach and constituent communications, but rather used the opportunity to praise the individuals who previously held the office. As of this writing, the second and third set of interviews have not occurred.

Long-Term Council Representation

The deadline for filing as a candidate for the District 5 Council seat is 25 February so it won’t be definite until then how many individuals—and who—will be competing for the primary election on 24 June. However, several people have already filed as candidates and others have indicated their interest in running, meaning that there will be a broad group from which our residents will have to choose.

So that the candidates understand that our community needs a strong advocate for our concerns in the Council, the NFCCA—along with the South Four Corners and Woodmoor-Pinecrest Civic Associations—will be organizing a District 5 candidates forum in the coming months.
Neighborhood Resident Named ‘Community Hero’
By Civic Federation for ‘Real Food for Kids’ Program

Last month, the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) awarded its Community Hero Award to Karen Devitt (Cavalier Drive), Lindsey Parsons, and their organization, Real Food For Kids—Montgomery (RFKM). The award honors people and organizations from the community who take time from their lives and work hard to make the county a better place for everyone.

“Lindsey and Karen have turned their frustration with unhealthy food options in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) into Real Food for Kids—Montgomery, a nonprofit parent advocacy group that promotes whole, fresh, and nutrient-rich food options in MCPS,” said Paula Bienenfeld, First Vice President of the MCCF. “In a little over a year, RFKM has already made significant improvements in the MCPS system.” In December, because of the efforts of RFKM, MCPS agreed to remove strawberry milk—laden with Red Dye #40, artificial chemical flavor, high fructose corn syrup, propylene glycol, and 25 grams of sugar—from all public school cafeterias.

RFKM also successfully lobbied MCPS to delay turning on candy and soda vending machines until 30 minutes after the end of the school day. The organization is currently focusing efforts on improving the nutritional value of vending and à la carte foods and moving MCPS from processed and reheated foods to scratch cooking at its central facility.

RFKM is a grassroots, parent advocacy group promoting whole, delicious, fresh foods in MoCo public schools. Formed in October 2012, it currently includes parents representing 123 elementary, middle, and high schools and 1,000+ supporters. RFKM’s priorities include improving communication and transparency with parents about what is being served in MCPS schools, eliminating products with harmful additives, and surveying current à la carte and vending items with an eye toward proposing healthier alternatives. RFKM is a project of the Chesapeake Institute for Local Sustainable Food and Agriculture, a 501(c)(3), nonprofit organization.

“We are thrilled to honor these local heroes, working hard to help our children eat better food,” said Bienenfeld.

For more info., or to donate to RFKM, please visit: www.realfoodforkidsmontgomery.org; contact them at RealFood MCPS@gmail.com; or like them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/RealFoodForKidsMontgomery.
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Serving Northwood, Forest Knolls, &
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Preventing Cancer in Pets: Avoid Toxic Chemicals

By Anna Pritchard

To recap: preventing cancer in pets can be divided into three important areas: feeding the proper diet, vaccinating the least, and avoiding and eliminating exposure to toxic environmental chemicals. We’ve discussed the first two in previous issues. Now, let’s talk about exposure to toxic chemicals.

Avoiding and Eliminating Exposure To Toxic Environmental Chemicals

Small animals are very sensitive to toxins of all sorts—chemicals, heavy metals, pesticides, etc. They do not detoxify them from their bodies easily. These toxins are carcinogenic (cancer-causing) and negatively affect the animal’s immune system and other cells of their bodies.

The immune system is of key importance. It must be healthy so that it can kill off any cancer cells right from the start so that cancer never gets a foothold. The chemicals can also affect the cells of our pet’s bodies, causing their cells to behave abnormally, which can lead to cancer.

Dr. Richard Pitcairn, in the third edition of his best-selling book, Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats, says, “The dreaded disease cancer is becoming increasingly common in our time. Research suggests that environmental pollutants and chemicals in food are major factors in the development and support of this group of diseases. ...The condition of the thymus gland and its associated lymphatic tissues and immunological functions is extremely important. If an animal can be kept in excellent health—with good food, adequate exercise, access to fresh air and sunshine, and a stable emotional environment—the immune system will be strong. ...Prevention is really the most we can do and it is very important.”

Dr. Pitcairn recommends helping your pet avoid exposure to carcinogens as much as possible. Some of these influences to avoid are:

- exposure to cigarette smoke,
- riding in the back of a pickup truck (from inhaling exhaust),
- resting on or close to a color TV set,
- drinking water from street puddles (which can contain hydrocarbons and asbestos dust from brakes), and
- frequent diagnostic work with x-rays, since all radiation effects are cumulative in the body.

Other suggestions are to avoid close proximity to other sources of EMF and radiation such as Smart Meters (even if there is a wall in between). If possible, opt-out of Smart Meters on your home or, at the very least, shield them. There are an increasing number of anecdotal reports of pets getting very ill and even dying from exposure to Smart Meters and smart phones.

Use environmentally safe and fragrance-free household cleaning products.

Unless they are organic or antibiotic-, pesticide-, and hormone-free, avoid feeding pet foods high in organ meats and meat meal (both are concentration of pesticides and growth hormones that are used to fatten cattle, which can promote cancer growth), preservatives, and artificial colors, which are known to cause cancer in lab animals.

It is also a good idea to supplement the diet with vitamins A, C, and E.

Remember that our pets lie on or are close to the ground and get more toxin exposure than we do. Some practices that will help decrease their exposures are to:

- Remove your shoes before entering your home—and ask anyone entering your home to do the same—to avoid bringing pesticides or other chemicals from outside onto your floors and carpet.
- Don’t let your dog walk where pesticides or chemicals are sprayed on the lawn and don’t use any chemicals or weed killers on your lawn (use nematodes instead).

Dr. Chambreau said in her lecture that flea and tick prevention makes dogs and cats sick and there is the potential for severe toxicity and death. She advises using natural flea and tick control. She discusses the safe use of flea, tick, and heartworm medica-

(continued on page 8)
Dr. Royal advises avoiding plastic bowls for pet food and water because “even small amounts of bisphenol A (BPA) leaching into water or food are a cancer risk.” Unfortunately, some pet food can linings also have BPA. “There is a movement to stop this practice, but some companies still use it as a preservative and for other reasons. The good news is Dr. Royal says that the “small aluminum cans tend to be BPA-free. Large steel cans are likely to have a BPA lining.” Her website, www.royaltreatmentveterinarycenter.com periodically compiles a list of companies claiming to use cans that are BPA-free. It is best to call companies for definite information.

The last recommendation is about kitty litter. It should be as pure as possible—without fragrance or chemicals—and should not be the clumping type because the sticky substance used to cause the clumping may be licked off of the cat’s paws and some say it may possibly cause intestinal obstruction. Whenever I speak to my cat’s holistic vet, she reminds me not to use it.

In conclusion, some holistic veterinary practices have expanded to now be called “integrative”/holistic practices. “Integrative” means that the veterinarian is holistically trained and uses (or has staff members trained in) a number of natural healing modalities such as nutrition, homeopathy, acupuncture, flower essences, chiropractic care, massage, Reiki, and glandulars, etc. “Glandulars” refer to nutritional supplements that contain the hormones and glands that an animal would get if they were in the wild eating its natural diet. My cat’s holistic vet recommended them for her; they give her so much energy that I can’t give them to her every day.

In addition, Dr. Chamberreau recommends consulting with a person who is an “animal communicator” when your pet is showing behavior that you or your veterinarian can’t understand. She highly recommends taking your pet to a holistic or integrative veterinarian to increase the chances of your cherished companion living a long, healthy, and happy life.

I would like to add a suggestion I heard recently that you set aside some time to play with your pet every day and give him or her lots of love. That way, your pet will be emotionally healthy, which helps the immune system and will help him or her to be able to resist illness. Plus, it will foster a close bond between you and your wonderful four-legged companion.

[Pritchard is a licensed massage therapist, certified Montessori teacher, nutritional counselor, Doctor of Naturopathy, and R.N. She also is trained in reiki for animals. She lives on Ladson Road and can be reached at 301.593.5463 or annapritchard@aol.com.]
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Fabulous Fungus: The Social Media of the Forest

By Carole A. Barth

In my article on stumps in the last issue, I mentioned how fungi is the lifeblood of the forest. Indeed, without fungi, there would be no forests. There are four major roles fungi play in keeping the forest ecosystem healthy:

1. recycling deadwood, returning nutrients to the soil;
2. partnering with roots, to the benefit of both plants and fungi;
3. enhancing soil structure and carbon storage; and
4. binding soil particles and linking trees.

Many people with a bit of woods on their property feel the need to “tidy up” the forest floor, removing dead leaves and fallen branches. They think of these as waste materials which need to be disposed of. In reality, when we remove these food sources, we run the risk of starving our trees. Trees cannot grow on sunlight alone, they also need fertile, healthy soil.

So where does healthy soil come from? The mineral components come from weathered rock fragments, but most of the nutrients come from organic matter. The breakdown and decay of dead organic matter like leaves, stumps, and branches is crucial for cycling nutrients and building soil structure.

Did you ever stop to think how something as massive as a 100-year-old tree can return to the soil? Animals cannot digest lignin (the complex polymer that gives wood its rigidity). Certain fungi, however, can break down the lignin, providing a feast for a wide variety of soil organisms which further process the detritus, thus setting the stage for new growth and the next generation of plants.

Other types of fungi prefer a living substrate. *Mycorrhizae* (from *myco*, meaning fungal and *rhiza*, meaning root) form mutually beneficial associations of roots and fungi. There are two types of *mycorrhizae*: those that grow around the root hairs and those that actually live (partially) inside the root cells.

In both types, the fungus obtain sugars manufactured by the plant, and the plant receives phosphorus, nitrogen, and moisture through the fungus. The millions of tiny fungal threads massively increase the effective surface area of the roots, making them much more efficient at absorbing water and nutrients. *Mycorrhizae* also help increase plant resistance to diseases. Some plants just grow better with *mycorrhizae*, but others depend upon them for survival. For example, this is why pink lady slippers usually die when transplanted from the woods: they cannot survive without their fungi partners.

Some *mycorrhizae* also produce a protein (called *glomalin*) that binds soil particles and stores carbon and nitrogen. Binding soil particles into “crumbs” is the basis of good soil structure—a mixture of crumbs and voids which permit air and water to penetrate soil.

In fact, some *mycorrhizae* create an extensive feeding web that goes far beyond the tree’s roots. This links the soil together, making it less likely to erode. It can also bridge the gap between food sources or, in arid climates, between scarce water sources. Such fungal mats have been found to physically connect trees, allowing them to share resources. Scientists have actually documented food from the mother tree being transmitted to her seedlings.

This can be essential for plant reproduction where light resources are scarce. A seedling may not be able to photosynthesize enough to grow on the shaded forest floor, but, with the extra boost it receives by linking into the *mycorrhizal* mat, it can grow and it can afford to wait for an opening in the canopy.

**Chemical Communication**

Recent research has also shown that trees (and other plants) communicate chemically. (Trees have had their own social media for millions of years.) When one tree is attacked by a pest, it sends a warning to nearby trees of the same species. I wonder if the fungal mat carries these messages as well as food and water?

“But wait (I hear you ask) aren’t there fungi that parasitize and even kill trees? What good are they?” Indeed, there are some species of fungus that get their nutrients at the expense of living plants. It turns out that fungal pathogens cause the most damage to single-species plantings (monocultures) and, thus,

(continued on page 11)
Fungus

(continued from page 10) they are of greater concern in agricultural settings. In the forest, these fungi play the same role that wolves play for caribou. By preying on the sick and weak, the overall population is kept strong. Because of the pressure of predation, the prey population does not multiply beyond the area’s carrying capacity. So even the parasitic fungi has its job to do.

Interestingly, a particular parasitic fungus is the largest (and possibly oldest) organism alive on the planet today. An *Armillaria ostoyae* occupies about 2,384 acres of soil in Oregon’s Blue Mountains. This is the equivalent of 1,665 football fields, or nearly four square miles. Based on its current growth rate, the fungus is estimated to be 2,400 years old but could be as ancient as 8,650 years. This type of fungus attacks conifers at the roots, causing *Armillaria* disease.

In addition to all these ecosystem services, fungi are an important component of the forest food web. Soil organisms eat the fungi underground, and several species of ants and termites maintain fungus farms. Some ant and fungus partners have become completely dependent upon each other. Then there are the mushrooms, truffles, and earthstars. These above-ground fungi are actually the fruiting bodies of a much more extensive underground organism. When animals eat the fruiting bodies, they help distribute its spores, seeding a new generation. Thus, fungi links the living soil, trees, shrubs, herbaceous plants, insects, people, and other animals together into an interdependent ecosystem.

So the next time you walk in the forest, try to imagine the millions of tiny fungal threads inhabiting the soil, dead wood, and roots all around you. Be grateful for this humble organism, that stitches the forest together, creating new life from death. Try to imagine what it would be like if we were truly “plugged in” to our environment like the mycorrhizal fungi. We humans are so proud of our electronic communication networks, when all the time, quietly in the dark, a living internet has been there under our feet all along.
Bus Rapid Transit: Well-Intentioned Policy Meets Financial Self-Interests; Fantasy Thinking Results

By Jim Zepp

In the rush to promote the BRT on Colesville Road, the MNCPPC staff have recently recommended making this one of the County’s top priorities for available transportation construction funds, even though no design/engineering studies have been done and location of the BRT stations have been specifically avoided in previous discussions.

Nevertheless, the BRT advocates are apparently unhappy with the structurally unsound and unuseable Silver Spring Transit Center and so want to add the Colesville BRT to the County’s collection of boondoogles costing residents millions of dollars, while ignoring genuine funding needs and wise decision-making processes.

Bus Rapid Transit on Colesville Road and University Boulevard

On 26 November, the County Council voted to adopt the Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan (BRT Master Plan). The Plan amends the Countywide Master Plan of Highways to potentially have dedicated BRT along eight corridors, including Colesville Road and University Boulevard. The adoption of the Plan means the County will go forward with more-detailed studies that will look at the potential impacts for each route. They will consider where the stations might be located, how much land would need to be acquired, and what the impacts would be to surrounding neighborhoods, traffic circulation, and pedestrian safety.

The next steps will involve requests to the Council for funds for these additional studies. The Council agreed during its final deliberations that a Citizens’ Advisory Committee will be established for each route. At the last minute, Council Staff made the following changes to the Plan with new recommendations to be studied for our area:

- **Colesville Road between 16th Street and Lockwood Drive:** Dedicated lane for BRT (previously recommended buses in mixed traffic between Sligo Creek and Southwood). This would either be in the existing curb lane or in the median area with median removed and stations in the median. Please note that the entire ¼-mile length of Lockwood is only two lanes wide.

- **University Boulevard from New Hampshire Avenue to Williamsburg Drive:** A two-way busway in one dedicated lane in the median area. The buses would pass each other at varying intervals. This treatment would require road widening. This segment was previously recommended for mixed traffic treatment.

- **University between Williamsburg Drive and Lorain Avenue:** Mixed traffic on University between Lorain Avenue and Veirs Mill Road (two-way, one-lane median busway with passing at intervals). This will set up a situation similar to when the Metro is single tracking trains for the promised rapid transit of BRT vehicles.

The County Executive stated that his priorities for BRT treatment are on Route 29 and Route 355 (because of pending mega developments in White Oak and White Flint), not the five routes previously approved through public participation processes in area master plans years ago. The Plan has the potential to significantly alter the Four Corners neighborhood which has had services and amenities within walking distance for many decades. The Planning Board’s recommendations are available at: www.montgomeryplanning.org/transportation/highways/brt.shtml.
The White Oak Master Plan: You Are Now Entering Fantasyland

By Jim Zepp

SCHEDULE: Tuesday, February 4, 7:30 p.m., County Council Hearing, Rockville

On 2 October, the County Council returned the proposed plan back to the Planning Board because the transportation capacity (existing and proposed) is not in balance with the large amount of density being proposed. They requested a more complete analysis of how the level of density would work with the transportation infrastructure.

In December, the Planning Board voted to keep its previous recommendation of an increase of over 25 million square feet of new residential and commercial development in the area north of the Northwest Branch, south of Cherry Hill Road, and east of Colesville Road. The proposed level of development would make the area larger than Downtown Silver Spring and every other planning area along the eastern leg of the Metrorail Red Line. Since the current surrounding infrastructure is insufficient to support this level of development, planners recommended transportation infrastructure changes, including the construction of six grade-separated interchanges along Route 29 north of New Hampshire Avenue as well as Bus Rapid Transit corridors.

So we may soon find ourselves living next to the equivalent of Tysons Corners, but without the transit capacity of the Metro’s Silver Line. In the belief that developers will stand by their commitments for contributing to transportation improvements, the County will permit development to proceed and assume that infrastructure will somehow keep up. However, in his latest proposed capital improvements budget, the County Executive has noted that the special taxing district set up for needed transportation improvements in the White Flint area has failed to raise sufficient funds, so $300 million will be needed from general revenue funds to close this shortfall and will somehow be made up by the special taxing district at some undetermined future date.

Planning staff recommended staging the development to ensure that the infrastructure kept pace with the development. County Executive Leggett asked that the development be exempt from any staging requirements and the Planning Board voted 3-2 to support his request. The Planning Board’s recommendations are available at www.montgomeryplanning.org/community/wosg.

Foxes’ Screams Can Sound Human

By Jacquie Bokow

Heard any short, unearthly screams outside your home at night recently? It could be a red fox looking for a mate. I’ve heard the sound, and it can seem nearly human. Despite its name, “Vixen’s Scream,” the shrill cry is also used by males.

Red foxes look a bit like small dogs but have reddish fur with white underbellies and, at most, weigh no more than 12 pounds. (Around here, I’ve seen raccoons larger!) Mainly nocturnal, they are omnivores, eating almost anything edible. They hunt alone.

If you’ve been bothered by the sound, it’ll probably stop soon. According to a Brookside Nature Center docent, the fox screams usually stop around February, when they’ve either mated or given up.
By Ken Hawkins

In the April 2013 issue of this newsletter, architectural historian and former Northwood neighbor David S. Rothenstein used the Read house on Dennis Avenue to highlight the transition of our neighborhood from farms to subdivisions. As he noted, the original Read connection to the area dated to the mid-1850s, when William A. Read and his bride, Mary Eliza Beale, received a deed of trust for 202 acres. If we pick up the evidence there and follow it further into the past, we can illuminate the history of antebellum summer retreats of Washington’s social (continued on page 15)
In the summer of 1850, Mrs. Emily Beale purchased 60 acres, later known as Indian Spring, described in 1854 as “wholly covered with pines large enough to be cut for wood, interspersed with beautiful chestnut trees. The land lies well, and the soil is kind.” Today it comprises the Woodmoor and Indian Spring View neighborhoods. In 1854, Mrs. Beale and General Edward F. Beale “(of California, now sojourning in the City of Washn.),” paid off and transferred to her daughter Mary Eliza Read, wife of William Read, additional property—west of the road from Colesville to Washington and north of the Bladensburg Road—for their residence and use for the remainder of their lives. Eight decades later, this area was developed as Northwood Park and other subdivisions.

In the following years, the Beale family remained closely connected with Four Corners. Martenet and Bond’s map of Montgomery County, published in 1865 (page 14), shows that Mrs. Beale kept property and a house adjacent to her daughter and son-in-law’s house, fronting on Bladensburg Road (now University Blvd). She also owned land along the Sligo Branch a short distance away. Also visible is George N. Beale’s property to the east, just south of the Northwest Branch. Another map from this period denotes his property as the “Hermitage.” His family resorted to its shaded groves and pure spring waters during the summers, a welcome retreat from the heat and humidity of Washington, and at least one of his daughters was born there.

When Mrs. Beale died in 1885, her three children most closely associated with Four Corners—Gen. Beale, George N. Beale, and Mary Eliza Read—bought her property holdings here from her estate. Two years later, George N. Beale moved to Takoma Park and sold the Indian Spring Farm to a colorful and wealthy former newspaper editor from New York City, Carolan O’Bryan Bryant. This opened another chapter in the history of Four Corners, which we will narrate in an upcoming column.

[Hawkins, a program manager at the National Archives, has a Ph.D. in history and lives with his wife and children on Lorain Avenue.]
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– Barbara Ciment

Associate Broker, Long & Foster Real Estate, Inc

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Making Mead—Memorably—in Maryland

Hwæt!* A Home Brewer Tries to Make a Beverage Fit for a Monster-Slayer, and How it Did Not Quite Turn Out as She Had Hoped

By Keri Thompson

As you may already know, our neighborhood has a thriving home-brewing scene anchored by our local brew club, Brewers and Drinkers Around Silver Spring. I joined the club very soon after it formed more than two years ago, which coincided with the beginning of my brewing adventures. I began brewing because I like beer, like cooking, and had a large empty space in my basement which was crying out for a time- and space-intensive hobby.

Although folks in our club primarily brew beer in all its many variations, one member and almost neighbor, Rich Suchoski, is also an avid mazer, or brewer of mead. Having sampled some of Rich’s delicious mead, and being fascinated by the myth and legend surrounding this traditional beverage, last fall I decided to try to make some myself.

History

Mead has been made throughout the world for at least the last 4,000 years. T’ej, the national drink of Ethiopia, is essentially a mead with the addition of a bittering agent derived from the ge-sho tree. Aside from t’ej, most of us probably associate mead with the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons, though it was an equally popular drink in the Celtic world. Mead is found in several places in the Welsh classic Mabinogion, and, in fact, the word for spiced mead, metheglin, comes from the Welsh for “healing liquor.”

Mead is mentioned several times in Beowulf, where the mead hall Heorot plays a key role: “The benches filled with famous men/who fell to with relish; round upon round/of mead was passed....”—Beowulf line (1012-1014, Seamus Heaney translation).

Nowhere does mead play a more important role than in the culture and myths of the Norse. In Valhalla, dead heroes feast on the meat of a boar that is reborn every day, and drink an endless supply of mead milked from a goat. (How you get mead from a goat is not explained. I assume Vikings knew how goats worked, and this is some sort of metaphor.)

Aside from myths and legends, mention of mead is also found in the works of Aristotle and Pliny the Elder. Pliny the Elder has a recipe in his Naturalis Historia for “milities,” which is certainly a honey wine: “... a wine is also made of only water and honey ... adding one part of old honey to three parts of water, and then keeping the mixture in the sun for 40 days after the rising of the Dog-star. Others pour it off after nine days and then cork it up. This beverage is called in Greek ‘water-honey,’ hydromeli; with age it attains the flavor of wine.”

Though Europeans’ consumption of mead declined after the Reformation, it remained popular in Central and Eastern Europe where drinks such as Medovina are widely commercially available. In the last few years, mead has enjoyed a renaissance in the United States and, while still primarily the product of homebrewers, a number of commercial meaderies have sprung up around the country.

So What Exactly is Mead?

Sometimes referred to as honey wine, mead is simply a fermented honey beverage. Usually a golden straw color, like grape wine it can be sweet, dry, or sparkling and can vary in strength anywhere from eight to 20 percent alco-

(continued on page 19)
Making Mead

(continued from page 18)

h (ABV). Like both beer and wine, mead is made through the magic of yeast consuming sugars, turning them into cellular energy, and producing alcohol as a by-product.

The chemistry can get a little complicated, but, at its most basic, making mead requires only a sterile container fitted with an airlock to let air out but not in, honey, water, and yeast. Brewing beer, on the other hand, requires many more steps because you first need to extract the sugars from the grains (usually malted barley) before you can ferment them.

Like beer, subtle changes can be made to mead made by changing the base ingredient—for instance, using clover honey versus orange-blossom honey. Of course, mead doesn't have to be just honey and water. If made with spices and herbs, it's called a metheglin. If made with apples, a cyser; with grapes, a pyment; with other fruit, a melomel.

I started out trying to make a metheglin by adding cloves, cinnamon stick, and ginger to the nine pounds of honey that made up my three-gallon batch of mead. Yep, you read that right. Nine pounds.

In retrospect it would have been prudent, and much more economical, to make a one-gallon test batch, but what's a good story without a little hubris? My goal was to brew mead and have it finish fermenting in time for me to give it as Christmas gifts to my relatives who don’t drink beer. Spoiler alert: they all got socks.

The Process

I warmed the honey briefly in the microwave to make it flow better, and mixed it with around 2.5 gallons of warm spring water. The spices were soaked in ¼ cup of vodka for an hour to “sanitize” them then added to the honey water mixture which is poured into a carboy (the brewer’s term for one of those big jugs you may see in a water cooler). After the mixture cooled to room temperature, I added a special strain of wine yeast designed to ferment to a high alcohol content; this is not your supermarket bread yeast. After putting an airlock on the carboy that would allow the gases produced by the yeast during fermentation to escape, I moved the carboy into a darkened part of my basement.

Then I read a little more about mead and found out that mazers often let their mead sit in the carboy for one to two years. Whoops. Well, mine would have three months to sit before I planned to bottle it. Every month or so I would take a sample to taste, and use a hydrometer to check the specific gravity. Specific gravity measures the density of a liquid compared to plain water, and knowing this measurement allows you to calculate how much sugar the yeast have converted to alcohol, and when it has stopped converting, i.e., fermentation is complete.

For all its simplicity, there’s a lot of chemistry going on inside a container filled with yeast and honey, which means there’s also opportunity for messing that chemistry up. Introducing oxygen when it’s not needed during the fermentation process produces a similar result to leaving a partially cut apple out on the kitchen counter, i.e., it makes it a lot less appetizing. It’s also critical that everything that comes into contact with the mead be sanitized properly. Although I was pretty sure I sanitized everything, it seems that somewhere in the process I introduced oxygen into the carboy, possibly while I was transferring it from one container to another, or when I sampled it to see how things were going. This added a musty, cardboard-y taste to my mead.

The result of my first venture into mead making was drinkable, but not really good enough to give as presents. After experimentation, I discovered it was much tastier after being mixed with carbonated water, which produced the color and flavor of a (not very expensive) Champagne. Thus, sham-mead was born.

If there’s some sort of lesson here it’s “measure twice, cut once” or maybe it’s “all’s well that ends well.” Take your pick. At any rate, don’t let my accidents put you off trying something new like brewing mead. It was drinkable in the end.

[Hwæt, an Old English word which Heaney translates as “So,” is the opening word to the heroic epic poem Beowulf. Thompson lives on Loxford Terrace.]
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