

Dr. Billingsley practiced medicine, serving as Highland County's only physician for most of his career. A general practitioner, he did everything from delivering babies to treating terminal illnesses, often making house calls. He was the prototypical "country doctor" who was known for whistling while he worked.

A native of Marysville, Kan., Dr. Billingsley was the only child of the late Leslie Kirk and Belmont Hazel "Monty" (Collins) Billingsley. After graduating from high school in 1943, he joined the U.S. Army Medical Corps and became a lab technician, spending time in New Guinea, Japan, and the Philippines. Following World War II, he met Anita on a Methodist mission trip while earning his undergraduate degree from Baker University in Baldwin City, Kan. In 1953, he earned his medical degree from the University of Kansas. After medical school, through the Virginia Council of Health and Medical Care, Dr. Billingsley sought out an area in the country in need of a physician. He and his family decided on Highland County and with generous support from the Stonewall Ruritan Club, they moved to the county in 1954.

Dr. B, as he was known by many in the county, made countless contributions, a humble man, he didn't just preach his strong values, he practiced them every day. He was active in a number of community organizations, including the Stonewall Ruritan Club, Monterey United Methodist Church and the Highland County Chamber of Commerce. It was through his involvement with the chamber he became instrumental in starting the Highland County Maple Festival.

MONTEREY – What began as a simple inquiry about the relatively inexpensive maple syrup from Highland County 50 years ago has blossomed into this area’s biggest, most important annual event.

It all started with a conversation.

Dr. Thaine Billingsley, Highland County’s longtime physician, heard about a maple festival in Ohio from a salesman who called on him. Billingsley happened to be the president of the board at the Highland County Chamber of Commerce and mentioned the idea to his fellow board members.

Billingsley retired to Harrisonburg about five years ago but remembers the festival’s beginnings clearly. “To me, it doesn’t seem that long ago at all,” he said Wednesday.

He and his son, Gary, plan to visit this Friday. Sunnyside retirement community, where he makes his home, has organized a bus tour for its residents. Billingsley will drive over, and tour Mike Puffenbarger’s sugar orchard and the Maple Museum, which he helped open many years ago.

Once the idea for the festival was hatched at the chamber, a small open house was held in 1959. The Recorder’s March 5 article on the event noted 600 people attended the demonstration at George P. Hevener’s maple sugar camp.

From that one gathering, the festival grew by the thousands over the years. Today, over the course of two festival weekends each March, as many as 70,000 visitors make the trek over the mountains into Highland. They tour the sugar camps to learn the variety of processes

used to make the sweet syrup, eat everything from pancakes to trout, patronize more than 100 vendors with arts and crafts, and get a real taste of this rural community.

The event serves as an important annual fund-raiser for every civic club, church, and nonprofit group that sets up a booth to sell food or other items to tourists. These organizations rely on festival revenue for a large chunk of the money they use year-round to support volunteer efforts, issue student scholarships, and other good deeds.

Billingsley declines to take much credit for getting it all off the ground. "It just kind of fell in my lap," he says. "The idea wasn't original with me, but it came at a time when (Highland) needed it.

"It certainly worked out," he laughed. "There was some question in my mind then, that people might come a year or two but not return. But they just keep coming and coming. I think it's the food that brings them back every year.

"The festival now is too big, but there's nothing you can do about that. I suppose it's cause for rejoicing because it brings business into the county during a quiet time here. It wouldn't be at all possible without the volunteers."

Today, much remains the same about the Maple Festival here as it was in the beginning. Residents and organizers are concerned, though, about how it will keep going. It has become increasingly expensive for Highland's small chamber of commerce. The number of maple syrup producers is dwindling, with only five or six camps now open to the public each year. And the volunteers behind the scenes who divvy up meals and keep the clubs and churches in business are aging, with

fewer in the younger generations to take up the hard work in the booths. That said, Highlanders are a resilient bunch, and it's likely that with some ingenuity, the festival will continue, adding new vendors and attractions over time. Maybe even a bigger parking lot.

The festival, while integral to this county's economy, is also a well-loved event. So much so that many visitors return every year. The times may have changed, but the fun of being here at the edge of springtime in the mountains is especially sweet.