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Planks and Pols

BY DIANE YORK



In mid-April, when the spring sun has warmed the waters of the James River to 50 degrees or more, a signal travels downriver to the sea. Shad, small silver fish of 5-10 pounds each, are moved to migrate en masse up the same rivers from where they hatch, to spawn in a furious two-week frenzy ... prime time for shad planking.

Began in the 1930s as a fundraiser for the Wakefield Ruritan Club in Sussex County, shad planking initially celebrated the running of the plentiful fish with an outdoor picnic during which the shad were nailed to oak planks and smoked over an open fire. Over the years, the gathering took on political significance, becoming an event for the major players in Virginia politics to meet and press the flesh.

Some of the state's top politicians, including the Byrds (Harrys Senior and Junior), Mills Godwin, John Warner, John Hager, Mary Sue Terry, George Allen and Douglas Wilder have attended the event held on the third Wednesday in April every year.

"While people see this as a power brokers event, what is really unique about it is that it gives the average citizen the opportunity to speak directly with their representative in government and share their beliefs and priorities," says Robert Bain, chairman of the Wakefield Ruritan Club. Sign wars are a significant part of the event, with candidates vying to outdo each other. Our new governor made a splash in 2009 when he was trying to win the Democratic gubernatorial nomination and lined miles of roads leading to Wakefield with 25,000 campaign signs, surpassing all previous records.

This year's shad planking takes place April 16. The cost to eat smoked shad and get a taste of Virginia's political history is \$25.

ShadPlanking.com

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April 2014

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