

LIVING

Morganton is not the only town with pride

There's so much to be proud of in our wonderful town of Morganton, most noteworthy of late being those super Little League ballplayers that we all followed with pride to the playoffs. We also have the friendliest people I've ever come into contact with, a sense of belonging to a family rather than surrounded by strangers when I walk the streets of our busy downtown area, a sense of curiosity when I hear about a new restaurant or business that has decided to make our home their home and a heartwarming sense of thankfulness when I look around at the exquisite beauty of the foothills.

But other towns share some mighty fine pride, too, and I thought I'd share some of those notable distinctions with you this Sunday. Special thanks go to USA Today for providing many of the facts for this column.

Let's start with the town of Gilroy in the middle of the great state of California. Gilroy boasts an annual garlic festival attracting more than 122,000 people from all over the United States. Bands play in the streets as happy people with hats shaped like cloves of garlic clamor to taste all sorts of delectable dishes heavily flavored with their claim to fame — more than 60 million pounds of garlic are shipped from Gilroy every year so that you'll have that extra zip on your Italian bread.

Traveling a little west from Gilroy, our next stop is Blackfoot, Idaho, which houses the Idaho Potato Expo, a museum dedicated to the tuber. Remember "Mr. Potato Head," a popular childhood toy? You stuck plastic arms, legs, eyes, ears and funny hats into a large Idaho potato that your mother made you promise to return so she could add it to tomorrow night's dinner.

Well, Blackfoot boasts 68,767 acres dedicated just to the potato and even has a special section in its museum devoted to Mr. Potato Head. Check it out and share it with your children — although sadly enough they may not see why you've dragged them across the U.S. just to look at a potato decorated with plastic parts.

Rogue River Valley, Ore., doesn't have a museum or a festival, but it does produce 95,200 tons of pears annually in all vari-



As I
see it

Peg
DeMarco

eties, shapes and colors. Its neighbor, Wenatchee, Wash., is the apple capital of the U.S. with a projected harvest for 2004 of 34.1 million 42-pound boxes of apples. Unlike Rogue River Valley, however, Wenatchee holds an annual Apple Blossom Parade and Festival in April.

The largest employer of Austin, Minn., is Hormel, maker of that yummy American icon, Spam, so naturally its claim to fame is producing 435 cans of Spam per minute, instituting the Spam Museum and creating a Web site to attract visitors entitled simply, www.spamtown.com.

The next time you visit a county fair or your favorite theme park and take a ride on the Ferris wheel, the residents of Jackson, Ill., will thank you. Its family-owned firm of Eli Bridge has manufactured more than 1400 Ferris wheels in more than 30 countries.

Our southern neighbors have some distinctions as well. Claxton Bakery in Claxton, Ga., produces 6 million pounds of fruitcake per year, while Vardaman, Miss., hosts an annual Sweet Potato Festival, complete with a sweet potato-eating contest using some of its \$50 million worth of its prime crop per year.

And who could ever visit Louisiana without tasting its crawfish? The Town of Breaux Bridge celebrates World Crawfish Day every year and offers its residents and visitors crawfish in every conceivable concoction from crawfish dogs to crawfish pies.

Most of you in North and South Carolina have probably driven past that peach-shaped water tower in Gaffney, S.C., on your way to the outlets, but Johnston, S.C., boasts the most peach trees within a 20-mile radius of its town hall than any other town in the U.S. Two counties in South Carolina, Edgefield and Saluda, produced 47.4 million pounds of peaches in 2003. Now that's a lot of peach pits!

The USA Today article listed High

Point as North Carolina's representative town with furniture, of course, as its claim to fame. It was interesting to note that 60 percent of the nation's furniture is made within 200 miles of our own High Point — quite an achievement.

Our northern neighbors are pretty unique, too. We're all familiar with the bright lights of Manhattan, but did you know that Westfield, N.Y., is home to Welch's Grape Juice and that Welch's net sales in 2003 was more than \$579 million? Fruit must reign in this region because nearby Hammonton, N.J., boasts the world's largest crop of cultivated blueberries.

On the other hand, New Castle, Penn., has an explosive claim to fame. It attracted one of its most famous residents in 1893 — Antonio Zambelli, who arrived from Italy to establish the Zambelli Fireworks Manufacturing Company. Today, New Castle still houses Zambelli's company, one of the largest fireworks manufacturers and exhibitors in the world.

There are other states, of course, and just not enough room in this column to list them all. Their claims to fame might all be different, but there's one thing that is synonymous in every single town or city listed — pride in what they stand for and what they offer to everyone who chooses to pay them a visit.

So the next time you visit Arkansas, map out the route to Warren for a first-hand look at a pink tomato at Warren's Annual Pink Tomato Festival. And if you're taking a winter vacation in Florida, check out Venice's Shark's Tooth Festival for a close look at colorful fossilized shark teeth that have washed up on Venice beaches.

Finally, for those of you that want to bask in nostalgia, the next time you're in Ohio, make a point of visiting Marion, home of that wonderful caramel/popcorn treat, Cracker Jack. You'll want to take a tour of the manufacturer that produces 50 million pounds of Cracker Jack per year and still manages to include those silly little toys in each box. I don't know about you, but to me those plastic, useless "freebies" were worth their weight in gold when I dug into my box of Cracker Jack so many years ago.