

Sugaring Off

The production of maple syrup is the oldest agricultural commodity in America. The American Indians in the Great Lakes Region produced it . When spring returned and the sap was running, they made slashes in the maple trees and gathered the sap in wooden troughs. It was a time of thanksgiving and the Indians offered the boiled thickened syrup as a sacrifice to the Great Spirit. The Indians taught the colonists how to gather and use it and the colonists grew to depend on it. Maple syrup was the most important sweetener in the northern colonies in the 1700s. The colonists had “sugaring-off” parties in the woods near the sugarbushes and houses. In the 1800s, it was still widely used, as white cane sugar was very expensive and being made by slaves brought from Africa to the West Indies. The abolitionists used this fact as a reason for promoting the use of maple sugar to achieve self-sufficiency for free men and not to support the slave trade. The artist, Eastman Johnson, who has relatives in Gilbertsville, did a series of paintings depicting the production of maple syrup that may have helped in earlier times to foster independence and to forge a new nation.

The photograph of roadside sugar maples being tapped that accompanies this article was taken by Mary R. Friedlander many years ago and is titled Sugaring Time- Harbor Road. The Greene Historical Society owns several of Mary’s photographs and they are all beautiful. The trees were planted by farmers who were given an incentive by the towns to plant maples that would provide shade for the horses on the road. The farmers were also urged to provide watering spots for the animals. Most New York farmers in the early days "tapped the sugarbush" in the spring and then boiled off the sap to make the thick syrup. The tapping of the sugar maples was an added benefit to the farmers who made enough maple syrup for their own use plus some extra for a supplemental income. A cup of hot syrup was used as a spring tonic and fresh sap was given to the horses as well. A few buckets of the sap was good for the horses’ hair after the winter and gave them a healthy sheen. Eventually using maple sugar was seen as a homespun, old-fashioned way to sweeten foods and was much less desirable than cane sugar bought from the store. After the late 1800's, as some farms declined and others became specialized, fewer and fewer produced the labor-intensive syrup. There are numerous abandoned and dilapidated sugarhouses in the woods. Saphush Road is another reminder that at one time there must have been groves of maples there. Everything comes full circle, because today pure maple syrup is an expensive, sought-after gourmet item!

The settlers tapped the trees with wooden spiles made from willow or sumac. Mike Paquette, whose father farmed in Franklin County, Vermont, donated to the Library Museum very early wooden spiles used for tapping trees.

Nowadays the production of maple syrup is a commercial venture and Chenango County produces 10,000 gallons per year with a value of \$250,000. There are 50 producers in the county with Baker’s being the largest in Bainbridge. The Genegantslet Maple Products is the second largest producer with 1200 to 1500 gallons per year. Joe Tomanek is the owner and the business is located on Round Pond Road, 1000 feet west of Route 41 in Smithville Flats.

Joe got interested in kindergarten when the class went to Smada Farms on a field trip. John Adams showed the class around and Joe went home and tapped one maple tree on his

property which was adjacent to the Adams farm. The next year he tapped eight trees and took the sap to his neighbors, the Flanagans, who later gave him a quart of syrup from the sap. After that he continued to tap more and more trees and sell the sap to producers. He graduated from Cornell University with a degree in natural resources with a study of maple syrup productions. Within two years of graduation, Joe was tapping 6,000 trees and began producing the syrup himself. He presently taps 4,000 trees in three counties: Cortland, Broome and Chenango. He finds maple trees that are 8 feet in diameter that are probably 400 years old and have been tapped continuously to the present day with no harm to the trees. A tree has to be 50 to 75 years old before its first tap. He has in his sugarhouse a slice of a maple tree trunk that shows an indentation where a tap was made and then the approximately 100-year healthy growth of rings to the edge.

His friend and mentor was John Adams who ran Smada Farms. They helped each other out with their businesses when help was needed.

Nowadays the production process is very different from the days of gathering the sap on a horse-drawn sleigh and boiling the sap in pans over a wood fire. The one piece of modern equipment he showed me is the reverse osmosis machine. All the producers use it now and it removes 75% of the water from the sap before boiling. Now one only has to boil 4 to 5 gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup whereas before it was 40 to 50 gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup. He told me he should have taken French instead of Spanish in high school as he deals with French Canadians all the time. And the RO machine was from Canada with all the instructions in French. It took him two years to get the manual in English! We had a chuckle over that as I was his high-school Spanish teacher.

This season has not been a good one for making syrup. Joe was bemoaning the fact that it was March 21st, the Marathon Maple Festival was March 24th and 25th and he and his assistant, Jim Williams, had not been able to make much syrup. The production is completely weather related; there is more to it than just cold nights and warm days. For example, the sap doesn't run when there is a south wind. But I went back on the 23rd and the weather had changed and they had been boiling night and day and now had a goodly amount.

Joe has a display in his sugarhouse of the spiles used through the years made from wood, metal and now plastic. He also has a wall display of different maple-syrup containers with their colorful logos and different shapes. He donated spiles, a Smada syrup jug and a wooden sap bucket to the Historical Society. On top of his display is John Adams's hat-a beatup, black, western hat. Anyone who knew John can picture him in his colorful hat. Also, there is a newspaper article praising John for all he did to promote tourism in Chenango County.

After I left the sugarhouse I drove up Harbor Road to find the spot where Mary Friedlander had taken the photo of the roadside trees being tapped. I could not find it because the photo was mislabeled. It was taken on the Hill Farm on County Road 32. Many of the trees are gone. Being close to civilization has taken its toll through exhaust fumes and salt. Joe says that his two biggest problems now are logging and land development. There are fewer trees and people are leery of letting him tap their trees.

Let's hope that this tradition of making maple products will be carried on for generations, that there will always be sugar maples and people who have the interest in this oldest of industry.

Go get your jug of maple syrup and support this Chenango County business. Make it your spring tonic!



