

Making Maple Syrup was a Sweet Activity in Boone

by Frank R. Stephenson
(1887-1939)



Theodore R. Caldwell ran his sugar camp on the bonny banks of Brown's Wonder Creek for many years as a one man project before turning the sweet chore of making maple syrup over to his nephews. The picture shows him at work in his sugarhouse, or refinery, where the sap was boiled down into what was sheer ambrosia. (Photo by courtesy of his daughter, Miss Ivy Caldwell.)

(Editor's Note: Back in the era when several sugar camps operated in Boone County, the month of February ushered in the season for making maple syrup. Hence, the inclusion in this issue of **Boone Magazine** of "Making Maple Syrup was a Sweet Activity in Boone" is particularly timely.

The late Frank R. Stephenson, a Lebanon lawyer and author of the article, in 1929 dictated to his wife, Drubelle Immel Stephenson, a longtime and beloved Lebanon school-teacher, his recollections of the time in 1908 when he and a partner took over and ran Theodore R. Caldwell's sugar camp in Clinton Township. A typewritten copy of the story was given to the associate editor of **Boone Magazine** by Mrs. Stephenson shortly before her death in 1972.

Theodore R. Caldwell's father, Alexander Caldwell, began operating the sugar camp shortly after he acquired the farm in 1839, a

seasonal operation that was to continue year after year to ultimately end with the last and final "sugaring off" in 1933. The grove of big sugar maple trees stood north of Brown's Wonder Creek, between the stream and present County Road 650 North, and to the south of the Caldwell two-story brick residence.

Miss Ivy Caldwell, the 92-year-old daughter of Theodore R. Caldwell and still living in the old home, recalls that the sugar camp produced around 100 gallons of maple syrup annually, and that her father would give Adam H. Felker a gallon of the tasty delicacy in exchange for a year's subscription to the latter's Lebanon Daily Reporter. (R.W.S.)

A person who has never lived in a wooded country where maple syrup and maple sugar are made, has missed one of the pleasures of childhood. True it is, one

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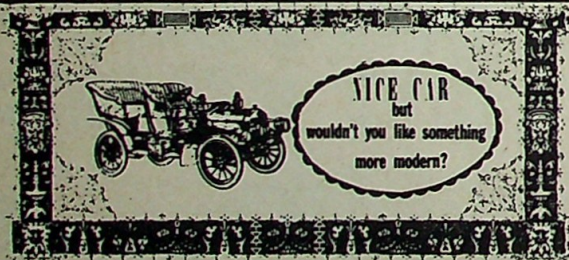
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Making Maple Syrup con't.

has missed some of the hard labor and drudgery incident to the process, but that is forgotten in the joys of "sugar making time."

A long, hard winter tapering off with two or three weeks of freezing and thawing weather, means a good sugar making spring. Along in late February and early March, there is a stir of life in the ground, in the trees, and in the blood of the restless farmer boy. The warm days cause a slight thawing of the ground. The nights are crisp, chilly, even freezing. This causes the sap to flow upward through the trunks of the old sugar maple trees, and the farmer begins preparations for the sugar harvest.

Such a round of long hours, of killing work, of glorious joys and innocent pleasure as it is! Soon the trees begin

to yield their life-giving sap which is hauled to the cooking pans to be transformed into thick, brown maple syrup.

"O bubble, bubble, bubble, bubble goes the pan; Furnish better music for the season if you can. See the golden billows; Watch them ebb and flow; Sweetest joys, indeed, we sugar makers know!"

All this seems long ago in the misty past. Making maple syrup and maple sugar, like spinning in the homes or the baking of good biscuits, is almost a lost art. Many people have never seen a sugar camp, or, perhaps, have never tasted maple syrup except the synthetic kind sold in the "log cabin tins" at the

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corner grocery. For these folks, I shall attempt to describe the making of maple syrup by telling of my experience one spring, many years ago.

School closed March first that year. A neighbor boy, John Stewart, and I came out with no money and little work to do for the next few weeks. After talking it over, we decided to rent a sugar camp on the shares from Theodore R. "Dora" Caldwell, a neighboring farmer. He agreed, after some dickering, to furnish everything—trees, firewood, utensils, and team and sled, or "mud-boat" as the sled was then commonly called—for half the profits. We were to do all the work, i.e., gather the sugar water (maple sap,) cut the firewood, do the boiling down, and refine the syrup. This meant long hours and hard work, but a chance of making good profits.

The sugar camp was along a small creek, the trees being scattered over a plot of rough ground containing fifty acres. There were, in all, sixty sugar trees of varying sizes. The sugar tree, or hard maple, grows to a height of one hundred and fifty feet, with a trunk three feet in diameter. We had twenty trees of that size. The bole of the sugar tree is very symmetrical with few branches up to a height of forty or fifty feet. Of course, where the trees grow alone, they may spread with long hanging branches.

We took down all the pails from the barn loft, tightened the hoops, and scrubbed them thoroughly. These pails were, actually, large wooden buckets, holding approximately three gallons each. Now, however, galvanized iron pails and metal "dripping spiles" are used.

The spiles at that time

were wooden, made from the stems of the elderberry bush, and were some eight inches in length. The pith had been removed and the spile sharpened at one end so as to fit snugly into the hole drilled into the trunk of the tree. The spiles had to be carefully washed, and inspected for leaks. When they were too badly cracked, we replaced them with new ones. All this work occupies the first day.

Early the next morning we

began the tapping. Each of us, equipped with a five-eighths inch auger, started through the camp, boring one hole in each tree about three feet above the ground. Where the tree was exceptionally large, we made two holes, one on each side of the trunk. Unless the ground was very rough on that particular side, we placed the hole on the south side of the tree. This method insured a longer and steadier flow of sap on account of the

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(Nappie's photo by The Village Photographer, Zionsville)

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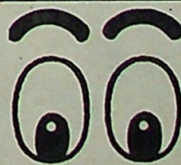
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thawing effect of the sun.

The holes must be bored just through the sapwood (cambium layer,) and not into the heart of the tree. The usual depth is five to six inches. They would be at a slight elevation toward the interior to cause all the water to flow. As we tapped each tree, we drove in the spiles and hung the buckets on them. Making the buckets secure was a problem that we solved rather successfully by building a crude platform of dead wood or branches upon which the pail was allowed to rest. Today, hooks are used upon the metal spout or spile that holds the pail securely.

Before we finished the tapping, the buckets at the first trees tapped were overflowing. Thus, it was necessary for me to start the next part of the process, the

gathering in of the sap. I loaded two large barrels on the mud-boat, and drove from tree to tree, alternately emptying and replacing the pails. After making the rounds of the camp, I drove back to the sugarhouse, or refinery. The sugarhouse was a shed built on the slope of a hill. The furnace was dug into the hill, leaving one end open.

The furnace was lined on three sides with bricks. Three heavy iron strips were placed across the top on which the vat rested. The vat itself was a shallow iron pan, flat-bottomed and light in weight. It held about one hundred gallons of sap, but could be easily removed when the syrup was done, or in danger of scorching. A vatful or one hundred gallons of sap would yield a little over two and a half

gallons of syrup, or, when boiled further down, from ten to twelve pounds of maple sugar.

We were now in the work full blast, with everything needing attention at once.

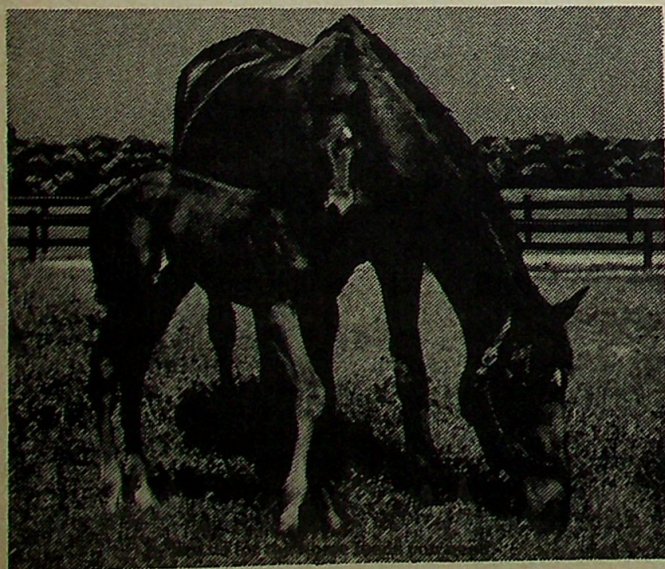
The vat was to be cleaned, there was firewood for the furnace to get, more sap water to be gathered, and the boiling process to be begun. The freshly gathered sap or sugar water must not stand any length of time, or it ferments, and then is fit for vinegar only. While I scrubbed the vat, my partner, who had finished the tapping, got wood for the furnace fire. Getting wood was no simple matter, as we soon learned. Green wood or soft wood would not do. It took dry, hard maple or white oak to give the necessary heat. After some experimenting, we found it better to cut the wood in advance, each day.

We also found that by collecting all the water late in the afternoon, we could boil it at night, thus leaving the morning free for getting wood and cleaning the vat.

This routine constituted our program for sixteen hours out of the day's twenty-four. When the hard labor of the day was done, however, we really enjoyed boiling down the sugar water. After filling the pan, it was simply a matter of time, patience, and keeping up a hot fire. We could rest, talk, read by the flickering light of the fire, or just lie back and enjoy the luxury of blissful rest after a day of tiring labor.

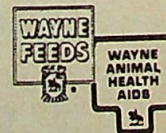
Sometimes, when the boiling became too violent, it was necessary to remove the vat, or to pull the fire. One night, Mr. Caldwell found us doing this unnecessary work, and told us a little secret of

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the craft—to put a small amount of fat meat into the vat each time. The fat acted as “oil upon the troubled waters,” and was quite effective.

It usually took four or five hours to boil a full vat of sap down to a thin syrup. When that point was reached, we were forced to exercise extreme care. The thin syrup, spread over the large flat surface of the vat, was in danger of burning or scorching. To avoid this, we found it best after a time to remove the syrup after it had become a light golden color, and to refill the vat with fresh sugar water. The half-finished syrup was then slowly cooked in copper kettles on stoves until the proper consistency was obtained.

When maple sugar was desired, we cooked the syrup longer, or until it was almost to the point of burning. To see whether or not it would crystalize, we tested it by dropping small amounts into cold water. When it was ready, we removed the mass and poured it into molds to cool and harden, or, in some cases, we stirred it rapidly, thus causing it to whiten and crystalize into a mass of light brown maple sugar. This process was known as “sugaring off,” and was always a holiday occasion. Friends from miles around were always ready to come to a “sugaring off” party.

Folks came in mud-boats, on horseback, or even walked. They brought food including baskets of fat hens and fresh eggs which we wrapped in paper and plastered in mud, and then baked in the hot coals of the furnace. The merrymakers sang the “sugar maker’s refrain” as they stirred their wax in a contest to see who could get the whitest sugar in a given length of time—but all this belongs to the reminiscences of one who is growing old; and I am not



(Photo courtesy of Rush Livengood.)

Festive friends and kinsfolk gathered on a sunny day in late March in 1912 for a “sugaring off” in John N. “Uncle Johnny” Stark’s sugar camp at the north edge of Whitestown. The camp was last operated in 1919. “Uncle Johnny” is pictured sitting atop the cupola. For many years, the annual Whitestown Red Men’s Picnic was held in the shade of the old sugar trees of the grove, which was once called Stark’s Park, and is now known as Lions’ Park, of the Whitestown Lions Club.

growing old!

“O bubble, bubble, bubble,
bubble goes the pan;
Furnish better music for the
season if you can.
See the golden billows;
Watch them ebb and flow;
Sweetest joys, indeed, we
sugar makers know!

“If you say you don’t believe
it,
Take a saucer and a spoon;
Though you’re sourer than a
lemon,
You’ll be sweeter very soon;
Till everyone you meet,
Whether at home or on the
street,
Will have half-a-mind to bite
you,
For you look so very sweet.”

Simple? Yes.
Emotional? Perhaps so.
Unnecessary? No, indeed!
It was part of the life and the
pleasures of young men and
women who knew little of the
foolishness of life, but much
of the sordid side, the care,
and the hard labor. They
grew into strong men and

women— leaders in their
communities and in their

I shall always remember
them as true friends. I shall

always remember their
hardships; and, above all, I
shall always remember the
joys of “sugar making
time.”



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