

Sweeten The Cup Of Life

by Lynne Belluscio

If I had wallpaper on the walls, it would be falling off by now. I decided to make some maple syrup this year and I'm boiling it off on the stove. I've made about 3 quarts, so if it takes 40 gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup, I've boiled off at least 30 gallons of water. I put the stove fan on full blast and took out the filters, so the steam leaves the kitchen as fast as it can. I suppose that means I don't need a humidifier.

I suspect it will end this week with the temperatures going up past 50. The ideal weather is above freezing during the day with bright sun hitting the trees and below freezing at night and snow on the ground. So far the sap has been nice and clear. I don't have a hydrometer to test the sugar content of the sap, but it's sweet right from the tree.

I found our old bit and put it in the drill with a very very long electric cord and tapped three trees in the front yard. I only have one metal bucket and lid left from the 50 or so that we used when we tapped 1200 trees. Most of the taps were hooked up to pipe lines, but we had a few buckets. I still have 5 or 6 wooden buckets that belonged to my mother's cousin in Cincinnati, but they have to be soaked in the bathtub to swell up before I can hang them outside. So I used the old metal bucket and two tin paint pails with tinfoil lids.

I tapped the trees fairly low so my two grandsons could peek inside to see the sap dripping from the spiles. So I bring the sap inside and strain it through a paper towel and put in two large pans on the stove. The object is to boil off the water as fast as you can so the sugar isn't cooked very long or it will darken. I have to confess, the first night I had everything cooking, I overestimated how long it would take and I burned the first batch and spent an hour using steel wool to work the black off the bottom of the pan. Ugh!

Historically most people in the 1800s were apt to make maple sugar instead of maple syrup. The syrup was boiled to the point that when it was taken off the fire



and stirred, it would crystallize. It looks like granulated sugar. Sometimes it was poured into molds. Most of the time it was poured into small barrels. People had small metal sugar augers to break the sugar apart.

The production of maple sugar was very important to the pioneers and the early settlers. The Indians tapped trees and were known for cooking meat in the sweet sap. Benjamin Rush wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1791: "In contemplating the present opening prospects in human affairs, I am led to expect that a material part of the general happiness which heaven seems to have prepared for mankind, will be derived from the manufacture and general use of Maple Sugar."

In 1860, the Superintendent of the United State Census wrote: "The land-holder who appropriates a few rods of land to the preservation or cultivation of the sugar tree not only increases the value of his estate, but confers a benefit upon future generations." Few people realize that the production of maple sugar was part of the abolition movement. Abolitionists preferred maple sugar to sugar produced in the West Indies by slaves.

As early as 1807, Robert Thomas wrote in the Farmer's Almanac: "Economy now calls your attention to your maple trees. Make all the sugar you can, for you know not what

may happen to prevent its importation. Besides there is a great satisfaction derived from living as much as possible upon the produce of one's own farm; where no poor slave has toiled in sorrow and pain ..."

In 1844, Walton's Vermont Register wrote: "Hurrah for the Sugar-Orchard! Let the sunny South boast her sugar-cane and the West her beet or corn-stalk sugar; but we Green Mountain Boys will stand by the rock-maple . . . Stick to the maple; and so long as the maple forests stand, suffer not your cup to be sweetened by the blood of slaves." Thoreau as a young man was reprimanded by his father for making maple sugar. He wrote in his journal "Had a dispute with father about the use of my making sugar ... He said it took me from my studies. I said

I made it my study and felt as if I had been to a university."

E.A. Fisk wrote in his report to the Vermont Board of Agriculture in 1874, "The true Vermonter never loses his taste for the sweet of the maple. Although in after years his home may be in the great city or on the prairies or in a foreign land – when he knows that it must be early spring in the old homestead, his thoughts go back to former days and he forgets the weariness and toil, the bitter part of his early life, and he remembers the sweet alone ... may it long be the mission of the maple thus to sweeten the cup of life."

(Just as I finished this article and was ready to send it off to the *Pennysaver*, the switch on my stove burned out. It smells terrible! Guess my syrup-making is finished for a while.)

OATKA FESTIVAL MEETING

Town Hall

April 16th, 7:00 pm

PUBLIC MEETING

Food • Vendors

Encouraged To Attend