

Tapping the Maple Tree

Native Americans had been gathering maple sap from time immemorial for sweetening purposes. It was one of the many skills they taught the Europeans. Their method, and the one used by the Whites initially, was to strike the bowl of the tree so as to cause a wound and place a stick or piece of bark just under the slash with its base resting in a birch bark container set on the ground.

The first improvement on this method, which the colonists made, was the use of a tapping iron. A tapping iron looks like a chisel, and was used the same way; it was driven into the tree at right angles, then a steel sap spout was driven in.

The early blacksmiths couldn't make an auger, but they could make a tapping iron. As the colonial blacksmiths progressed with their technology, T-shaped augers were made, usually having a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch bit. Sap bits were made in Colebrook at least as early as the 1790s. Colebrook historical records show that a blacksmith made one for which he charged .50¢; at the same time he made a chisel for .40¢. One other reference to making a sap bit occurs in 1805, when one cost .67¢, (about what a man's daily wage was at the time). Eventually the size decreased until a $\frac{3}{8}$ inch bit became commonplace. Currently, those who still tap the sugar maples in February, use a T-shaped, hollow pin-like device on which is fixed a long plastic tube, which is then tied to the next tree, etc. until eventually it deposits its sap into a barrel, or some other central container.

The early colonists used metal spouts that were fashioned out of worn-out scythe blades. The blacksmith would cut off the heavy metal rim, from which he would fashion nails, for example, and bend the thin part into spouts.

There was an alternate method of tapping. Wooden spouts, made from red sumac could be easily made at no cost. The method was for a man to gather a quantity of young (usually two-year old) sumac about the diameter of one of his fingers. These were then cut about six inches long. A rod of iron 18" or so long and about $\frac{3}{16}$ inch thick would then be heated red hot and pushed through the pith center of the sumac. This procedure produced a cauterized channel through which the sap flowed without picking up any unwanted flavors. It was a job to be done outdoors, as it created a prodigious amount of white smoke!

This tube was then split back about $\frac{2}{3}$ of its length, exposing the top of the channel. The end that was to be tapped into the tree then had an incision cut around the bark about $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1' from the end. The bark was then stripped off and the wood tapered slightly so that it would tap into the hole tightly just up to the remaining bark. At this point, one more gentle tap was given, which sealed the drilled hole, thus forcing the escaping sap to back up into the cavity and thus out the spout. This method was resurrected, at least on a limited basis, during WWII when sugar was rationed and maple sugar products were in great demand, and metal spouts were not obtainable.

Eventually, metal spouts, which can still be found here and there, replaced wooden and hand-forged ones. These were dipped in zinc to prevent rusting and had a channel around their barrel into which fit a heavy wire loop ending in a hook from which the pail was suspended.

Currently (beginning of the 21st century), most if not all commercial sugaring is accomplished by using plastic tubing.

Syrup weighs in at 11 pounds per gallon. (Water weighs 8 pounds per gallon). To get 1 gallon of maple syrup, you have to boil anywhere from 25-50 gallons of sap, with 27-30 as an average. The reason for this is that sugar content varies greatly from tree to tree. Once in a while you will find a tree whose sap is so sweet it would seem as though it hardly needed to be boiled at all; others, (if you tap the same trees year after year) you know are so low in sugar that you won't bother to tap them at all.

A maple tree having a diameter of 12 inches is large enough to receive 1 tap; 16 inches, 2 taps; 24 inches, 3 taps; 30 inches, 4 taps; 36 inches or greater, 5 taps.

A great amount of know-how and hard work went into the manufacture of maple products. In the old days, before mechanization, neighborhood boys did much of the work. There was a great deal of camaraderie as well as the prospect of staying up all night (if there wasn't school the next day) tending the fire, and the never-ending task of skimming the foam of impurities that collected on the surface. Payment wasn't in money, but at the end of the season, each boy was given a gallon of syrup and a block of maple sugar.

Let me tell you a true story that took place on George Gray's farm on Sandy Brook Road in Colebrook during the war years of the 1940s.

The price of a gallon of syrup locally just prior to the outbreak of war had been \$5.00. A U. S. government agency called the Office of Price Administration was established to maintain stable prices on critical commodities such as food products. There were bound to be shortages in wartime, and price gouging and inflation could thus be avoided. One day a list of goods along with their newly established price caps was unveiled. Maple syrup was listed having a top price of \$3.00! George figured that surely someone had made a mistake, but a few phone calls proved that the price of \$3.00 was indeed the ceiling for a gallon of maple syrup, and anything higher than that carried a stiff penalty consisting of a fine as well as a possible stretch in jail.

George said that if the government though he was going to go to all the trouble of making syrup just so that he could lose money, they were crazier than he thought they were. Our price remained \$5.00.

Now during the war, many items were either rationed or simply not available at all; among these were automobiles and automobile tires. Government agencies were among the very few having access to new tires, for example. Additionally, gasoline was rationed and traveling about was kept to an absolute minimum; frivolous trips became all but extinct.

With this in mind, picture a group of men and boys tending a sap house with billows of steam rising from a slot in the roof, and wading around in mud up to mid-calf. Once, and only once, during the sap season, a shiny black (all government vehicles in those days were black) automobile with new tires would pull up as near to the sap house as was possible (it was about 150 feet off the road). The driver, wearing nicely shined shoes, would get out and as carefully as possible, would pick his way from stone to stone through that sea of mud, up to George, who, knowing what the story was, would go a few steps to meet our visitor. After a few pleasantries, the inevitable question would be asked: could he buy one gallon of syrup? George would ask if that was all he wanted, and the answer was always the same: one would do. "How much do I owe you?" "Three dollars", George would say. The money and syrup would change hands, and our annual

visitor would carefully pick his way back to his shiny black car with its new tires, and drive off in search of the next sap house. Our price went immediately back to \$5.00!

I don't recall ever having heard of anyone being "caught" by one of these government agents in these parts.

-- Bob Grigg