

Tapping into History

By Jeff DeBellis

A simple highway map is all you need to see how important sugar maple trees were to West Virginia's early settlers. Sugar Creek (Fayette County), Sugar Camp (Doddridge County), and Sugar Grove (Pendleton County) are some of the dozen or so towns named for *Acer saccharum*, the sugar maple. Sugar maples grow in nearly all 55 counties, and, in 1949, the West Virginia Legislature named it the official state tree.

Wander through the sleepy woods near one of these towns, and there will likely be remnants of an abandoned sugar camp, where people collected maple sap in buckets and boiled it down to make syrup or sugar. Kent Simmons finds himself in these camps often. His job with a power company frequently takes him into the woods near Sugar Grove. He's found more than a few crumbling stone arches surrounded by large sugar maples—telltale signs of forgotten sugar camps. At one site, he found an old pan with channels, which moved the sap as it thickened into syrup. Often, these quiet vestiges are all that remain of the places where families and communities came together, spent long hours hauling



The numerous holes indicate that this old Pendleton County sugar maple has been tapped for many years, and possibly centuries. All photos by our author unless noted otherwise.

buckets, and boiled sap in the icy darkness of mountain winter.

Sap from the maple tree can be processed into maple syrup or maple sugar, which were the primary sweeteners in most rural West Virginia homes well into the 20th century. Cane sugar was expensive and difficult to come by. "People in this area didn't have money running out of their ears in those days," recalls Kent, who continues to make syrup just as his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents did.

"Everyone was just looking for ways to eat and to stay alive."

Everett Hedrick, whose family has been tapping maple trees in Pendleton County since the early 1900s, shares a similar sentiment: "Most all the farmers tapped their trees and made *sugar cakes* 'cause times was tough back then."

Sugar cakes are hardened blocks of granulated maple sugar that can be stored in a freezer or cellar. When a dish calls for sweetening, the family cook can scrape off some granules from a sugar cake.

"Evolutionary methods are more or less common to all industries, but probably in no way has it played a greater part than in the manufacture of maple sugar and maple syrup."

—D. W. Idleman, *History of Mt. Storm Community* (1927)

Since boiling occurs in late winter and early spring, many West Virginia children used to find sugar cakes in their Easter baskets.

West Virginia never had a large commercial maple industry like parts of New England and the Great Lakes Region, but there were some commercial producers, particularly in the Eastern Panhandle. The 1900 census for West Virginia counted 1,507 farms producing 141,550 pounds of maple sugar and 14,874 gallons of maple syrup. These totals placed it ninth among states in terms of total value of maple products.

Most farmers, though, made it simply because there were no other sources of sugar. In addition, families could trade syrup for other farm products, such as eggs, a cured ham, or part of a cow. In the mid-1800s, a Lutheran pastor in Pendleton County's Germany Valley would accept maple sugar, rather than legal tender, as pay-



Sugar camps, like this one near Pickens in Randolph County, used to be a common site. Early settlers had to trade precious items to obtain cane sugar, when it was available at all. Instead, pioneers often sweetened their food with maple sugar or syrup, honey, or even sugar beets. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives.

ment for performing a wedding. Families would sometimes sell a few gallons of syrup each year, as well. Often, this was their only cash commodity, and they depended on it to pay their property taxes.

The process for turning sap into sugar or syrup is simple but laborious. Sap begins to flow in late winter, when the days become warm but the nights still linger below freezing. Other types of maples have sugar in their sap, but the sugar maple (sometimes called a hard maple) has the highest content, so it requires less boiling.

The first step is to make a hole in the tree to drain the sap. You then tap a thin tube, called a *spile*, into the hole. Plastic spiles have replaced their metal predecessors in recent years. The old-fashioned way was to heat up a thin piece of wire and drive it through a sumac branch's soft pith to create a hollow tube.

You can use a variety of vessels to catch the sap as it flows from the spiles. The earliest method was to place a trough at the base of the tree. Homemade maple wood buckets, called *wheelers*, replaced troughs. Eventually, the norm shifted to store-bought 10-quart galvanized pails, which have become the bucolic emblem of the syrup industry. You can hang the buckets from the spiles, and when the sap is flowing, the buckets fill quickly.

"You maybe couldn't tap all your trees because you couldn't handle it," says Kent. Neighbors would often help one another out. If one landowner had a lot of maples and a neighbor didn't, he might invite the neighbor to help with the harvest in exchange for sugar or syrup.

Historically, as the buckets filled, the team would empty them into open-top 55-gallon barrels, called *hogsheads*. The

barrels would then be loaded onto a sled with a board placed across the top to keep the sap from splashing out. Originally, horses dragged the sleds to the boiling site. Tractors became more common in the 1930s and were replaced in many places by pickup trucks in the 1950s.

It takes 40 or 50 gallons of sap to make a single gallon of maple syrup. Making sugar requires even more. As with spiles and buckets, the methods for boiling down, or evaporating, the sap have varied. The most common method in the past was to suspend a 40-gallon iron kettle filled with sap above an open fire. Some farmers would set up multiple kettles at once. These days, you can also order or build an evaporator and convert your workshop into a *sugar shack*.

Ronnie Moyers of Highland County, Virginia, just south of Sugar Grove, continues to make syrup the old-fashioned way. Each year, his family constructs an evaporator by dragging two large green logs into place with horses. They then flatten the tops of the logs with hewing axes so they can set a large, old English tin pan across them. They build a chimney with rocks and dirt and start a fire beneath the pan. "The boiling is a big community event," says Ronnie. "Folks . . . get together and drink hard cider and play fiddle music, mountain music."

Finishing the syrup or sugar is one of the more nuanced parts of the entire process. Back in the day, there were no



Spiles are used for tapping into the tree and draining out the sap. This bucket shows two different eras of spiles: hand-carved wooden ones and newer metal ones.

hydrometers, which precisely measure the liquid's density. To test the viscosity without a hydrometer, some farmers used to dip a wooden spoon into the thickening sap and observe how quickly it ran down the handle. Another method was to sprinkle a few drops onto a bucket to see how long they took to solidify.

Kent Simmons describes how his family clarified the syrup by taking it off the heat and throwing in scrambled eggs. The eggs would attract most of the residual dirt, which could then be scooped out. Then, they would bring the syrup back to a boil to finish it and strain the finished syrup through fine mesh into storage jars.

Making sugar, rather than syrup, requires extra boiling time. The old-fashioned way was to pour the boiled-down sap into a pan, leave it on a stove to dry, stir the sugar

with a wooden paddle until it hardened, and then break it up with a rolling pin. For this reason, it's called *stirred sugar*, which can be converted into sugar cakes or stored in a crock on the kitchen counter. And if you decide you want some hotcakes, you can always reconstitute the stirred sugar into syrup (just as syrup can always be cooked longer until it becomes sugar).

Family-scale maple sugar production was already starting to taper off at the beginning of the 20th century. Nationwide, the amount of sugar and syrup being produced fell by a third between 1850 and 1900, according to the 1906 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) *Farmer's Bulletin*. "In the Southern Appalachians and Kentucky the decrease seems permanent and undoubtedly comes from the cheapening of cane sugar in the mountain districts," the bulle-

The Maple Syrup Industry Today

In 2016, the USDA included West Virginia in its *U.S. Maple Syrup Production Report* for the first time, acknowledging the industry's growth. In 2017, West Virginians produced more than 9,000 gallons of syrup—a 33 percent increase from 2016. With a growing appetite for locally and naturally produced foods nationwide, these numbers are expected to rise. According to the director of Cornell University's maple syrup research and extension field station, West Virginia has more tappable maple trees than Vermont.

There's also evidence that the syrup in southern Appalachia, including West Virginia, may be higher in antioxidants than northeastern syrup. Commercial maple syrup-making methods have advanced considerably since pioneer days. The process has become much more efficient in the past 20 years, in particular. There are, however, still plenty of Mountaineers that hang empty milk jugs from their maple trees each season and make just enough syrup to share with family and friends. —Jeff DeBellis

tin read. It added, however, that “in Western Maryland and the adjacent parts of West Virginia the production has decidedly increased, showing that sugar and sirup [*sic*] are . . . being produced for the market, and that the southern mountains possess latent possibilities for the development of the maple-sugar industry.”

Thomas Condit Miller and Hu Maxwell confirmed the decline of family-scale maple sugar production in their 1913 *West Virginia and its People*: “In recent years, sugar making has greatly declined for two reasons: Sugar can be bought much cheaper than it can be made at home; and most of the old-time sugar groves, which usually occupied a field or a hillside,

have died of old age, or have been cut down [to allow room for] farm crops.”

In the Sugar Grove area, which is more remote than many places, it wasn't until the mid-20th century that production began to decline. That's when sugar became available and affordable at general stores, so syrup makers lost their bartering power. Everett Hedrick offers another explanation that doesn't pull any punches: “I think the younger generation got too lazy.”

To preserve this heritage of old-fashioned sugar making, Highland County began a maple festival in 1958. Mike Richter of Pickens was so impressed that he wanted West Virginia to have its own festival. He

started the West Virginia Maple Syrup Festival in the early 1980s. “[Pickens] was planning for 200 or 300 people,” Mike remembers. “They got 2,000. It was quite a success. Pickens had never seen anything that big.”

With maple syrup, as with so many things in West Virginia, memory and modernity exist side-by-side. This is evident at Rachel and Adam Taylor's Frostmore Farm in northern Pocahontas County. The Taylors run a modern maple sugaring operation. A vast network of pale blue plastic tubes carry sap from the trees to a stainless-steel evaporator, where it's boiled down to syrup. The tubes run past a silent wooden building, surrounded by waist-high grass, where Adam's grandparents boiled sap when they bought the property in the 1960s. The family had started constructing a new sugar house but discovered that their evaporator had holes in it. “Progress on the sugar house came to a halt, and it sat empty and unused for over 30 years,” says Rachel, “until a new generation of Taylors decided it was time to give syrup making a try again.” ❁

JEFF DeBELLIS has lived in Pendleton County off and on since 2008. Look for more of his recent work in *Appalachia*, *Gastronomica*, and *The Wilderness Medicine Newsletter*, where he is a regular contributor. He is a member of the West Virginia Maple Syrup Producers Association and makes, at most, about a gallon every year. This is Jeff's first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.