



# BOILING IT DOWN



*The author provides a short story of a conversation between father, Harold P. Wright, and daughter discussing the collection of maple tree sap by Wright family members John Harvey and wife Elizabeth along with their daughter Mamie plus son Eldon and his wife Esta.*

By Kathy Wright-Wainer

**D**uring the course of my youth, Dad frequently spoke about boyhood days harvesting maple tree sap with his father (Eldon) and grandfather (John Harvey). Additionally, Uncle Than (John's brother) and extended cousins occasionally worked alongside them in the woods of Mercer County Missouri during the 1920s and early 1930s. These stories were usually broad overviews. However, this changed one mid-October day in 1992 during a stay at my house.

In my neighbor's front yard stood a stately tree over 70' in height bursting forth in all its golden glory. Every fall bright flaxen leaves that grew as large as the breadth of a man's hand graced the azure Sylvania sky. Eventually each withering grip released its hold borne along by an Indian summer breeze. Swaying to and fro while riding on gusts of wind, one by one coming to rest on the ground. Prior to this visit, I never knew what type of tree it was because I was unaccustomed with the bark and leaves. Both my childhood home and current neighborhood were littered with varieties of red maple, cottonwood, elm, weeping willow, mulberry, peach, walnut, apple, cherry and pear trees along with a spattering of buckeyes as well as many differing ornamentals. Still nothing was as vibrantly gilded as this!

Dad sat on the porch utterly fixated in deep thought gazing at that splendid tree. By the look on his face, it was obvious that he was a far distance away from sitting with his daughter. After a time, he turned to me with a softened expression on his face and asked, "Did you know that is a sugar maple tree?" I had to confess my ignorance and say that I assumed it was a sycamore. He was a little amused at my lack of knowledge but I attempted to cover it up by telling him that it didn't look like the maple trees at our old homestead or here. Being the wiser, he asked, "Didn't you know there is more than one type of maple tree?" The little kid within me shifted the blame, "Well, you never told us that before." He simply shook his head and said something to the effect, "Oh, dear daughter," and continued, "That is the same tree we used to tap when I was a boy to gather sap for making maple syrup."

He recounted how they would have to wait until the weather was at the perfect occasion for carting out the seemingly endless supply of well-worn clunking metal buckets into the cold and often snowy woods of their farms in Princeton and Mill Grove. Hands and feet first grew cold and then numb from exposure while they worked the tree lines.

Amusement struck again when I mentioned that I thought they just went out in the fall and hung the buckets at any old time. Turns out the day time temperature had to be at an optimum opportunity of beginning to thaw so the sap that had been stored in the underground root system would commence its daily ascent and descent. Consequently, no fall sap collection occurs when the tree is still processing the dropping of its leaves and definitely none in the spring once it transitions to the budding stage.

Next, I was told the family was well versed in the broad diversity of trees because they all had grown up and owned land in that region since around 1869 after John and Than's father James Jefferson (J. J.) Wright settled the family from Ross County Ohio. Of course, this brought me to question why he never tapped our maple trees to make syrup for us as kids. The reason given was that the sap isn't the same in the reds or even silvers. The sugar maple is most sought after because it is the sweetest and best tasting. Consequently, because of the higher sugar content, the quantity of sap needed was less than the others. Before switching the conversation to discussing the quantity of sap captured, he continued on telling how "the old timers" knew beforehand which sugar maples they were going to tap. Again, this was because of all the prior years where the Wrights had all worked together in farming the sugar maples that richly populated their farms.

In my child's mind, I always envisioned they would find a random maple tree and simply hammer a tap into it, hang a bucket, stand there while it filled, grab the bucket and off they would go. I guess growing up with running water and pumping gas into the car will do that to a person. Again, he had another *oh, dear daughter* type of sigh as he instructed me on the correct method of inspecting the potential donor tree to ensure the spile would not be inserted into a previous tap hole nor a diseased or rotted spot. The men first had to drill a small bore to obtain a sapwood sampling. White shavings were desired and indicated none of the aforementioned problems existed. They also had to take into account the diameter of the tree in order to determine how many taps the tree would safely accommodate. He spoke of respect for the woods in caring for what the Lord provided by safeguarding the health of the trees to give them long lives. After a successful inspection, they would bore a full size hole with a very slight upward angle (which aided the gravitational drainage), gently tap in a spile, hang the bucket and stand watch for those first few glistening drops of clear sap to resoundingly echo, "plop, plop" as it successfully hit the bottom of the covered metal bucket. "By the way," he said, "even though I was just a tadpole, it was my job to make sure each bucket was clean. No debris of any kind could be in there or I would hear about it and maybe get a backhand across my face by Grandpa," meaning his father Eldon.

It was during this part of the conversation that he also cleared up my misconception that one simply doesn't turn the tap on and off like a water spigot. I erroneously thought that the sap was right there waiting to gush out the spile downward into the bucket. By the

wry look on his face, I could hear the thought inside his head, “Girl, didn’t they teach you anything at your school?” This liquid collection is a steady process. That day I learned that the sap doesn’t stay in the tree trunk all day long every day. Pressure from both the daytime thawing and nightly freezing causes the vital life’s fluid to migrate up and down daily during the short four to six week sap season. Or if the overnight temperature stayed above freezing, the sap continued to circulate until the next drop below freezing drew it back to the roots. One by one each clunky and dented grey bucket was carefully secured to a corresponding iron spile and left to melodically rub against each other by the cold breeze. Needless to say, timing the return into the woods was crucial so that they would arrive before the sap filled buckets overflowed. Depending on how the sap flowed, this sometimes meant repeated daily rechecks.

From this point, the precious harvest would be poured into clean milk cans waiting in the back of the horse drawn wagon or sled if too snowy. Methodically they worked their way toward home. By this time, the setting sun intensified the penetrating cold. If they didn’t see their breath in the air before, they did now as teeth chattered along to the creaking wagon and thud of horse hooves striking the frozen ground. As the farm appeared within sight, the biting cold was made worse as their stomachs grumbled even louder when their numb noses caught the aromatic scent of an awaiting hearty hot supper which was lovingly prepared by Elizabeth, Mamie, and Esta.

After the treasured sap was brought to the smoke house, the horses were watered, set free of their harnesses and put in the barn to feed and slumber. The tack was hung. It was only after all of this that the men finally went into the house where at the door, they were welcomed with warm smiling embraces and kisses from the exuberant women. The grumbling bellies were warmly satiated and bodies were nourished as fragrant steam from savory meat, potatoes, and vegetables along with laughter and conversations of the day’s events filled the room. Soon after, the men returned to the shed to begin the all night process of “boiling it down.” Dad fondly spoke of this event being what he looked forward to during the whole process . . . an occasion to “really warm up, thaw out, and spend time with the men folk.”

Another one of Dad’s jobs was to ensure that enough wood was stacked nearby to maintain the necessary fire throughout the long brisk night. Oh, the sheer excitement of being together with Pa and Grandpa. A little boy absorbing the moment and learning by watching them carefully transfer the crystal sap into the oblong galvanized metal tub which was perched on a rack over the awaiting timber. With a *glub, glub, glub*, gallon after gallon surged out of the milk cans and swooshed into the now gleaming tub. Swirling waves lapped the sidewalls and steadily calmed to resemble a quartz sea. The fire was lit with the familiar sight and smell of hardwood smoke upwardly venting at the roof line. Now it was time to *hurry up and wait*; and *stir, stir, stir*. Replenishments of

cherished sap would be added as the evaporation process was underway wafting warm humidity through the air infused with a delightful maple scent.

Dad was all warm and cozy with no need of a coat, hat, or gloves. He lovingly recounted how in the early stages, a favored spot on the ground within a few comfortable feet from the gently simmering tub would be sought out. Soon this whippersnapper would lie down and attempt to fight away the impending sleep. Struggling to stay awake, the last image those heavy eyes saw was the men in the foreground stirring the softly murmuring sap while juxtaposed against wooden cases of sparkling Mason jars carefully set in place by the ladies. Hearing their voices tenderly reminiscing about crop plans for the spring, bygone days and family members who were no longer with them he fought no longer and contently drifted off in sweet sleep.

The sap's evaporation rate along with color and size of bubbles produced during the cook off were indicators as to the progress toward reaching the final product. Constant watch of the temperature was maintained with the fire adjusted as necessary and continued *stirring, stirring, and stirring* to discourage scorching. As this wonderful concoction's final moments closed in, the sugar content caused a rise in temperature resulting in a rich darkening of color and smaller bubbles. The end was in sight with all this work taking approximately 40 gallons of raw sap to produce just one gallon of syrup!

"Paul," as they called my dad, "Time to wake up." On those mornings, Grandpa (Eldon) didn't have to say it twice! Springing to his feet, he saw jar after glistening jar of their liquid gold sealed and ready to be "put up." But wait! "First things first." Nothing is finer than to be the one who was allowed to taste the first delicious sweet sampling of their labor! John and Eldon along with the women had already ensured the perfect purity prior to bottling and left some aside for Paul. This was the "Wright" way to perform quality control! But the best was yet to come. This was Dad's favorite moment of the whole evaporation process . . . the reduction of syrup left in the tub to become the coveted maple syrup candy! His face lit up with a glint in his eyes as he talked about this final rendering. He counted himself fortunate because the majority of the sap was processed for table syrup as it was most needed for personal consumption and sale to local residents. He also had the benefit of helping to clean the tub and other utensils. This was one chore for which a complaint was never uttered because it was as good as being allowed to lick the mixing spoon after Grandma (Esta) blended up a decadent cake batter and frosting or yummy cookie dough! The whole end stage process was nearly as exciting as Christmas morning.

Beyond this, I was told of the anticipation and joy this toothsome syrup (and candy) brought the family and neighbors as the sweet adornment to steaming hot stacks of johnnycakes, waffles and biscuits. Oh, my! Not to mention the other ways that the women used it as a sweetener in baking and cooking in lieu of honey and/or sugar. By

the same token, clean snow would be scooped into a bowl as ice cream and similarly topped with the 100% pure, dare I say organic, golden maple syrup. Hmmm, and to think we thought 7-Eleven originated snow cones and *Slurpies*!

Lastly, as all moms know their children's points of temptation, Grandma knew the maple candy was her son's weakness and had to be exceptionally sly in hiding the tantalizing sweets about the house and rationing thereof. Again, the supply was extremely limited. My grandparents wanted to assure it lasted as long as possible to especially honor guests with a mouth-watering morsel. As is today, boys will be boys and seek out the adventurous rewards of a good treasure hunt. Now and then Dad stole away enjoying the reward of raiding a hiding spot. Indeed, a day soon arrived when company came to call. Like a flash, the bandit retreated to a favored hiding place such as the hay loft, root cellar, chicken coop or smoke house. Grandma was eager to proudly share the fruit of the family's renown. Rather than being lulled off to tranquil sleep next to a warm fire while savoring deep breaths of the yummy maple scent and hearing the hushed voices of his dad and grandpa as before, Grandma emphatically called him to account. "Harold Paul Wright! You know better than to get into that maple candy! Get yourself in here and bring me the butter paddle . . . Now!!!" Wherewith, he would promptly receive a different warming--- a "burny butt" (as he called it) no matter who was present. Nonetheless, the toasting of his buns did not preclude this thrill-seeker from pursuing the escapade time and again after subsequent sap seasons.

