



late winter/early spring is the prime time for maple syrup production, as evidenced here by the bundled up Wright family & friends. This photograph, taken in the late 1940's, pictures Clarence Wright, Doris Thompson, Leona Wright, Clyde Wright and Dr. George Drury standing over a pot of boiling maple sap at the Wright sugar camp south of Princeton. Photograph originally published in *Linn's History of Mercer County* & was taken by Mrs. George Drury.

WRIGHT FAMILY SWEET SPOT' REVEALED

by Lindsey Lowrey

A few select few Mercer Mountians have glimpsed the rusted and time-worn sap buckets that rest in the woods southwest of Princeton. These withered pieces of metal are the remains of lip-smacking and very popular trade of Mercer County's past—the Wright family's maple sugar business.

The Wrights had been a mainstay in the maple syrup industry not just Mercer County, but much of our region. The family has lengthy ties to the land on which the syrup was produced, as our generations have tapped the maple trees.

James Wright, his son Elijah, his son Clarence, and his son Virgil, all of whom are now deceased, all learned the family trade that produced the sweet treat.

It isn't known by living family members just how the Wright's began in the maple sugar making

and continue on their family legacy.

In the 1950's, Clyde and Leona updated the site with a new house, a far cry from the cabin that they had occupied since childhood!

Later still, in the late 1960's, Clyde and Leona's nephew, Virgil Wright, bought the farm. Virgil, a fourth generation maple syrup maker, was the son of Clyde and Leona's older brother Clarence. After Virgil passed away and his wife, Hazel, wished to move from the farm, the house and land was sold out of the Wright family.

Although the Wright family exhibited a powerful connection to the house site itself, perhaps the greatest tie that the family has to the land sits in the woods yet today. The hardwood maple trees that are perched on and around the banks of the Weldon River hold the greatest role—they are the Wright family's legacy.

At one time, the Wrights were tapping over 200 trees in the area, gathering the plentiful sap that



Sap buckets filling to the brim in the woods south of Princeton. This maple tree, just one of many in earlier times, supplied the sticky liquid which would cook down into amber-colored syrup.

Photograph courtesy of Peggy Fair and Patsy Hagan.

His mother, Hazel, still possesses mason jars filled with maple syrup, after all these years!

Hazel resides in a nursing home in Gardner, Kansas, near Vernon and some of his children. She has kept some of the original sap spigots and buckets, all of which tell the story of the Wright family legacy.



**GOSHEN CHURCH
CENTENNIAL**

abundance it was said, forming groves of the towering sugar factories.

On the bottoms and bluffs of the Weldon River southwest of Prince, the Wrights came to settle. Today the original Wright land, located in Sections 8 & 9, Township 64, Range 25, is owned mainly by locals Darrell Shelton and Dennis Evans.

Interestingly, the house site in which the Dennis Evans family lives has a long history—even before the time of the Wrights. The current house, a 1950's dwelling, stands on the site of one of Mercer County's first homes. Built around 1843 by James Weldon, who is argued to be Mercer County's second permanent resident, the original log home became quite a legend.

James Weldon, the namesake of our local "Weldon Fork of the Grand River," built the log house from native timber. In the beginning, this log structure was actually two separate log houses that were connected by an open breezeway or "dog trot."

Later occupied by Mr. Weldon's son-in-law, Alfred Bogley, the house was enlarged and the "dog trot" closed in. It was at

this time that the original log structure was probably hidden by a clapboard-type siding.

In 1895 this house saw yet another great change—the arrival of the Wright family. Elijah Wright, at least a second generation maple syrup producer, bought the Weldon farm and moved his family into the home. It is not known where Elijah lived before this time or where his father had lived in Mercer County.

Elijah's children did pass on much of the information that we do know about the family, however. Many Mercer Countians can recall these Wrights even today—namely Clyde, Leona and Clarence Wright.

As third generation maple syrup producers Clyde and Leona Wright, brother and sister, occupied the current Dennis Evans residence for many years after their father, Elijah, had. The pair consistently headed into the woods each year to tap the trees

ordeal; however, the Wrights continued the process for decades, happily continuing a family tradition.

Many local residents had a hand in making the syrup as well. Bob Fair, father of Princeton residents Peggy Fair and Patsy Hagan, was a close friend and neighbor of the Wrights who offered his help during production time. Peggy and Patsy both recall the ordeal involved in hauling the sap and boiling it down all night long. They are some of the now-too-few individuals who know the extreme measures involved in producing maple syrup!

Gerald Gentry, a long-time Princeton resident, was raised about one and a half miles to the south of the Wright farm. Gerald recalls walking to and from town by way of the road that crossed in front of the Wright home and continued over the Weldon River near the current Bob Franklin home.

Gerald, like many other children, looked forward to the time when the Wrights' "sugar camp" was in full swing. Fresh maple syrup and even small cakes of maple sugar candy were produced and sold to the public.

"We kids got to have the candy only as a treat," Gerald recalled. "Mother, (Amy Gentry), would use the maple syrup at home, but the candy is what we were after!"

Although the Wright family is no longer living in Mercer County, one descendant and his family live in Gardner, Kansas, and has recently shared his memories of the sugar camp.

Vernon Wright, son of Virgil and Hazel, visited his grandparents' farm in Missouri many times, although he and his family mainly resided in Washington state. Although he and his children have never produced the syrup, Vernon recalls his grandparents and parents working through the night, talking and laughing with friends and family as they all took turns stirring the vats of sap.

"It was a neighborly thing, then. Everybody got together and made syrup for fun more than for money," said Vernon.

Watch for more information about the Wright family and the practice of making maple syrup in future editions of the *Pioneer Press*.

Information gathered for this article was, in part, found in two back issues of the *Post Telegraph* newspaper dated April 2, 1930 and April 3, 1952.

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