



COLLECTING SAP: Eric Arnold demonstrates how Arnold's Sugar Camp, Rockwood, Pa., collects sap using a tubing system to make maple syrup and related products the family company sells year-round.

The *sweetest* season

Maple tours offer taste of tradition

By Kathy Hackleman
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While many people think of chocolate when they think of February, some Pennsylvanians think of a different sweet: maple syrup. February is when maple syrup producers prepare for their busy season, which, depending on the weather, usually begins around the middle of the month.

This is typically the time of year when overnight temperatures can dip to 20 degrees or lower. Combined with warm, sunny days that reach 40 or so, this provides the pressure and suction needed for the sap to run. The season lasts until overnight temperatures consistently stay above freezing.

When Tioga County siblings Richard Patterson and Mary Lee Patterson Zechman gear up for maple syrup season, they are carrying on a tradition started by their grandparents, Oren

and Mabel Patterson. Back in 1920, Oren used a hand auger, wooden buckets and spiles (small, whittled spigots driven into a tree that allows sap to drip into holding containers), and horse-drawn collecting tanks.

“My favorite childhood memory is sleeping over at the sugar camp,” Zechman remembers. “We didn’t have any electricity there, but it was warm with the fire (used to boil the sap) and it smelled wonderful.”

Oren’s goal was to provide syrup and sugar for his family, but his son, Clifton, expanded when he took over in 1944, trading syrup and sugar for supplies at the local general store. What was not sold locally was shipped to New York City. As part of the expansion, he upgraded to galvanized buckets and replaced the horses with a tractor.

Today, Patterson Farms, served by Tri-County Rural

Electric Cooperative (REC), is the top maple syrup producer in Pennsylvania with 83,000 taps. Tools of the trade include electric drills, plastic spiles, vinyl tubing and stainless steel tanks. The roaring wood fire has been replaced by a fuel oil evaporator and reverse osmosis units.

Teaching tradition

Using the internet, Patterson Farms, 119 Patterson Road, Westfield, Pa., sells to customers in more than 35 countries, but it's important to Patterson and Zechman that they keep the family's history alive locally. Participants on the annual Potter-Tioga Maple Syrup Producers Association Taste & Tour Weekend, scheduled for March 19-20, can see memorabilia from the family's first forays into maple syrup production, and they are told about the traditional method of determining when it's harvest time. Native Americans had a special maple sugaring calendar, and the third full moon of the year was known as the "Sugar Moon." More often than not, that's when the Pattersons get down to the work of serious syrup production.

To communicate the story of how maple sap makes it way from tree to table, many producers annually open their sugar houses for public tours (see dates on page 10).

David Raker and his mother, Clesta Raker, owners of Raker's Sugar Bush, 1575 Raker Road, Liberty, Pa., also offer tour participants a traditional look at their family's maple syrup history, which along with their home place, predates the Civil War. David Raker, an attorney, limits production to what he and a few volunteers can make from about 2,000 taps. Once the family and their helpers have enough for their own enjoyment, Raker sells the remaining syrup to a number of long-standing customers, as well as at area craft fairs, while his mother focuses on making maple cream and maple sugar candy.

"We do it because it's a tradition," he explains. "We have done it every year since my great-great-grandfather settled the farm in 1837, except for one year when they were busy building a barn. Most people back then made maple syrup to provide their own source of sugar, and we have continued it."

His enjoyment of the process is twofold: he likes being outside in the early spring and he loves maple syrup.

"I make pancakes every morning for my youngest son and we eat them with maple syrup," he says.

The history of maple syrup production is a story that's told across the state. Participants in the Somerset County Maple Weekend Taste and Tour Event,

scheduled for March 12 and 13, will also be able to tour several sites.

At the Somerset Historical Center, 10649 Somerset Pike, Somerset, Pa., tour participants can proceed from an early 1800s sugar camp where sap is boiled in an open kettle to an 1860s sugar camp to a modern sugar camp. The center offers the modern sugar camp to anyone who is considering getting into syrup production, but wants to experiment first.

Educational tours

The Baer Brothers Maple Camp, owned by Somerset REC members Mike and Sherry Lynch, is located at the aptly named 234 Sugar Cake Road, Somerset, Pa. While the Lynchs give attendees a chance to see their 5,000-tap operation, they also promote their business of selling maple production equipment and offer suggestions for people who want to try maple syrup production.



SYRUP GOES HIGH-TECH: Lowell Friedline, Walnutdale Maple Farms, Boswell, Pa., demonstrates how his family makes maple syrup. The Friedline family, with 1,200 taps and the latest equipment, allows maple tour attendees to tap trees the traditional way using a hand auger.

Pennsylvania maple tours

Potter-Tioga Maple Syrup Producers Association Annual Maple Weekend – March 19 and 20

Somerset County Maple Weekend Taste & Tour – March 12 and 13

Northwest Pennsylvania Maple Syrup Producers Association Taste & Tour Weekend – March 19 and 20

Endless Mountains Maple Syrup Producers Association Maple Weekend – March 19 and 20

Northeastern Pennsylvania Maple Syrup Producers Association Open House Weekend – To be announced

(For more information about all of the maple tours, click on “Tours” at www.pamappleassociation.org).

“I have been doing this since I was a kid,” Mike Lynch explains. “It gets in your blood. I enjoy being outside this time of year, but nothing beats educating people about maple syrup. Some of what we do on the tour is pretty unique, including making spotza.”

Spotza (from the Pennsylvania Dutch word for “spot on the snow”) involves boiling maple syrup to a “soft-ball” stage, then pouring it over crushed ice, or if available, fresh snow.

Another Somerset County stop is the international award-winning Walnuthdale Maple Farms, 287 Walnuthdale Lane, Boswell, Pa., owned by Carina and Lowell Friedline, a member of the Somerset REC board, and their sons, Joel and Jonathan.

While the Friedlines have won numerous awards, Lowell

Friedline says they are especially proud of a first place in the “very dark amber” class at the 56th annual meeting of the North American Maple Syrup Council Inc. and the International Maple Syrup Institute, held in October 2015.

The Friedlines say their farm is the “Land of Milk and Maple,” as they have been milking dairy cows and boiling maple syrup for four generations. They have 1,200 taps with state-of-the-art equipment, but during the tour, visitors can still tap a tree the traditional way using a hand auger. And, in keeping with the event’s theme, there will be plenty of maple products to taste.

Art and industry

Moving north, the Hurry Hill Maple Farm Museum Association, 11424 Fry Road, Edinboro, Pa., will be open March 19 and 20 for the Northwest Pennsylvania Maple Syrup Producers Association Taste and Tour Weekend. Upon her retirement as a high school principal, Jan Woods decided to start a museum devoted to her lifelong interest in the maple syrup industry and “Miracles on Maple Hill,” a book by the late Virginia Sorensen. One museum section is dedicated to the book, which describes a sugar house between Edinboro and Cambridge Springs. The winner of the prestigious “John Newbery Medal” for children’s literature, the book explains

FROM FATHER TO SON: Lynn Baer, the boiler at Paul Bunyan’s Maple Syrup, Rockwood, Pa., grew up helping out at sugar camps with his family. He says he learned everything he knows about making maple syrup from his father, Barry Baer, who retired from Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative in 2003 after 42 years as a lineman.





TOP PRODUCER: Richard Patterson, along with his sister, Mary Lee Patterson Zechman, operate Patterson Farms near Westfield, Pa. Patterson Farms, the top maple syrup producer in Pennsylvania, has 83,000 taps.

syrup, they also make the following maple products: mustard, barbecue, jelly, butter, cookies, sugar, whip, candy and salad dressing, which they sell at Blooming Valley Landscape and Supply under the name Howles Family Maple Products.

The family has about 4,000 taps, including a few buckets just for fun so people can see how the sap has been collected for years, but the majority of their sap gathering is done with tubing. They use a large fire truck to haul the sap from the woods to their sugar house, where they use a new, computerized evaporator that keeps an eagle eye on the production.

Dee Howles' favorite part of the tour is watching people try new products.

"Some people are afraid to try some of our maple products," she explains. "I love watching their faces when they finally try it and they really like it."

U.S. production of maple syrup in the seven-state Northeastern Region in 2015 was 3.4 million gallons, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service (this region produces nearly 90 percent of the nation's maple syrup yield). About 5 percent of that total (165,000 gallons) was produced in Pennsylvania. Vermont topped the list with 1.4 million gallons. 🌲



what Woods says is the "art" of making maple syrup, not just the science behind it. The medal is on display at the museum.

Northwestern REC Chief Lineman Jim Reagles, a high school student when Woods was an assistant principal, began volunteering at the museum when he decided to learn more about making maple syrup. One thing led to another and soon he was providing details about how maple syrup is made to museum visitors.

"I enjoy explaining to people who don't understand the work involved in making a gallon of syrup," he says.

For example, it can require boiling 40 gallons or more of sap to get just one gallon of syrup, depending on the sap's sugar content.

"It's a lot of work, a lot of effort and a lot of fun, too," Reagles notes.

This will be Reagles' first year to have his 200-tap sugar camp, The Willows at Little Conneauttee, 24507 Highway 99, Cambridge Springs, Pa., open for the tour.

On the other hand, Jason and Dee Howles, 27828 Patterson Road, Guys Mills, Pa., are tour veterans. Members of Northwestern REC, the Howles can trace their family's syrup history back at least five generations. Not only do they produce

SYRUP-MAKERS SINCE 1837: David Raker, of Raker's Sugar Bush near Liberty, Pa., feeds the fire used in boiling maple syrup. Raker's family has been making maple syrup on the same plot of land since his great-great-grandfather settled the land back before the Civil War.