

Sometimes a 'sticky situation' proves quite worthwhile

By Beth Hemminger
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Lately, Peggy Wolf has been in a very sticky situation. During this time every year Peggy is gathering gallons and gallons of sap from the many sugar maples lining the long winding lane to the Wolfs' house and barn.

Peggy's inspirers were her sister and a book by Yule Gibbons. Upon completing the book, and because of her sisters continual prodding, Peggy began several years ago to tap the sap from the farm's numerous sugar maple trees.

Peggy remarked, "Commerical operations would laugh at my method of collecting, but I am the homestead type and enjoy doing it the primitive way." Along with collecting sap, Peggy milks a cow by hand for fresh butter, tends to several beef animals and has chickens for the family's eggs.

Peggy added, "My husband is a forester so I had no trouble en-

couraging him to help me out with my project."

So she said they rigged up a crude, but simple method with tools and equipment from the house to begin collecting sap. According to Peggy all you need is a bit and brace to make the hole, steel pipe and quantities of buckets in gallon and 5-gallon sizes. She has retrieved her buckets from local eating establishments where they just throw away the used cans.

This year Peggy is tapping twelve trees — some are new and some are old. She said she adds a few new trees each year giving the tree she has used for four or five years a rest. She pointed out that the experts say that the trees don't need a rest, but her experience has been that the newer trees have a stronger flow. Also, when she selects new trees for tapping she has to make sure that they are at least 12 inches in diameter,

otherwise the tapping will harm or kill the tree.

Peggy begins tapping the maples in January or early February. She stated that the flow of the sap is very dependent on the weather. Sometimes in January the sap will be running day and night, but other times it won't reach its peak until mid-February. The ideal weather for a good strong run is very cold nights hovering in the low and mid-20's and warm days reaching into the high 40's.

Peggy remembers one year she started gathering a little late and missed all of the choice sap and only caught the dregs.

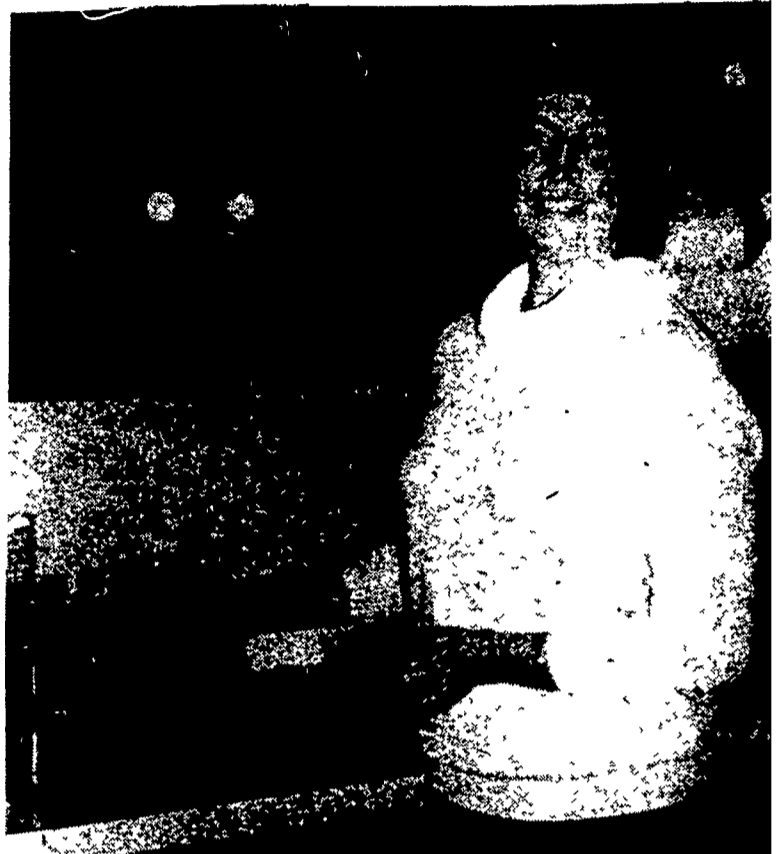
She said, "Never again, I am an early starter now. I am like the early bird, but I am catching the sap instead of the worm."

Peggy gathers the sap at least three times a day. And when it is really flowing she said she has to start at 7 o'clock in the morning and collects every three hours after that until 10 or 11 o'clock at night.

During the tapping season Peggy collects as much as 73 to 150 quarts a day. She hauls the sap into the summerhouse in the family car. She added, "After you have walked a quarter of a mile with a full 5-gallon bucket, your arms get very, very tired."

Once the sap reaches the Wolfs' summerhouse, the syrup making process begins. First Peggy strains the clear juice, removing any debris like pieces of bark, a dead leaf and an occasional bug. Then the sap is poured into a large iron kettle to begin boiling over a wood fire. At this stage, the sap is boiled down until it is half of the original volume. Then once again she strains the "almost syrup" as she removes it from the kettle transferring it to the kitchen for the final steps.

Now in the kitchen, she boils it down again to half the volume in the pot. She said at this point the syrup is boiling at about 219° or more to evaporate all the water and concentrate the sugars. She stated that everything could be done in the iron kettle in the summerhouse, but she has more



The "homestead type" Peggy Wolf makes the family's supply of syrup from the farms sugar maple trees. Here she shows a jar of syrup ready for use.

Homestead Notes



Here, the steaming sap bubbles and boils. The sap is boiling at a very high temperature of 219° or above.



Peggy stokes the fire below the kettle of boiling sap. The sap boils down to half the original volume in this first stage of the syrup-making process.



A crude but effective method of collecting sap from the sugar maples—a pipe and gallon tin buckets. It takes approximately three hours for the buckets to fill.

control over it in on the stove. Peggy added that the last boiling down is critical because the syrup can be easily scorched or burnt at these temperatures.

Peggy remarked that she was glad she had a summerhouse to complete the major part of the process. She said, "I have heard horror stories about women doing the entire process in their kitchen, and after hours and hours of boiling, the steam and heat made the wall paper begin to peel away."

Next, Peggy puts the hot syrup in jars to once again let it settle. Once the sediment collects in the bottom, the transparent golden brown syrup is poured out and reheated for storing.

Storing the product is simple, she merely boils the syrup, boils the lids, and sterilizes the jars. She immediately pours the hot syrup into the hot jars and seals it with hot lids; this process acts the same as canning, the heat causing the jars to seal tightly.

"I have kept jars of syrups for three years or more and they are still fine," remarked Peggy.

She stated, "That was just a clean version of the process. But from January until the end of March our household is in the "sticky business."

Once the first batch of sap is collected, the process starts in the summerhouse, then there is always the daily sap to be hauled in and more sap to be boiled down and it goes on and on she explained.

Once the bugs start to appear and the ants collect around the pipe in the tree, Peggy disappears. She said that she usually retires around the end of March and by that time she has collected enough

sap to make six to eight quarts of "delicious syrup."

"It takes a lot of time and effort to make syrup, but it is fun and definitely not confining," said the tapper. She remarked that she is not collecting and making syrup for a business, so if a batch doesn't get boiled down for a day, it doesn't matter. Sap will keep when it is cold outdoors, but when it begins to warm up something must be done immediately. As the temperature rises the sap will begin to ferment and turn into a jello substance. Peggy added, "It looks like a dead jelly-fish."

Over the years, tapping the sap has become a Wolf family project.

Peggy remarked, "Everyone pitches in and helps. The children, Kathy, Wilbur Jr., Rebecca and Elizabeth carry in the sap and usually enjoy taking a sip or two of the sweet liquid." Peggy's husband, Wilbur, enjoys tending the fire and keeping the sap boiling.

She remarked, "Wilbur keeps the first going better than I; he splits the wood in tiny pieces and keeps the first going. The sap generally boils down faster when Wilbur mans it."

During her years as a sap tapper she has made but one modification in her operation. At first she tried to hang the buckets on the end of the pipes, but that didn't work. Now she said we have made a hook at the end of the pipe that holds the buckets securely. "That stopped the bucket chasing."

Since Peggy has started tapping she has heard many tales and legends about the discovery of tapping trees for their sweet juices. She said the one that she