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## SHORT HISTORY OF THE BOLDOC FARM MAPLE SUGAR BUSH

Maple sugar or syrup has been produced at the Bolduc Farm at Morrill St. in Gilford, New Hampshire from the late 1700's to the present without interruption. That the Bolduc farm sugar bush is the oldest in continuous operation in the country has long been established. Fortunately the family which homesteaded the property and who were among the first to settle in the "Upper Parish" as the Gilford area was then known, kept records, diaries, account books, ledgers, etc. which documented much of the maple sugar production. Much information was also obtained from Mr. Harvey Jewett who at a great age visited the old homestead shortly after my grand father, Gideon Bolduc had purchased it and spent a day there in which he gave much information about his childhood remembrances which included maple sugaring. Both Charles and Ora Bolduc who were quite young then recalled vividly the visit of Mr. Jewett whom they described as having white hair and having only one leg and in his 90's

When the Jewett family decided to settle in Gilford three members of the family, Samuel, and I believe Benjamin and Richard spent the summers of two years clearing trees for the building of houses and farm land.

Samuel settled in a part of Gilford which is now in Laconia. His home still stands at the corner of Dewey Street and Gilford Avenue. Benjamin and Richard settled on Morrill Street.

Sugar was hard to come by and expensive as it came by ship from British possessions in the Caribbean. Sugar, molasses and rum filled the holes of many ships sailing to Boston, Portsmouth and Dover. Thus the presence of mature sugar maples would not have been over looked by the Jewett's. The Jewett family was quite prominent in the area where they operated a tavern, country store, and a farm. Benjamin Jewett, Esq. was also Postmaster, Justice of the Peace, and held various positions in early town affairs. A notation in Benjamin Jewett's diary for the spring of 1779, states that several pounds of maple sugar were produced in that year. Later there is mention of "trading two pounds of maple sugar to Gove the Blacksmith for four pounds of nails."

Production of maple sugar differed greatly in those days of course. The first efforts were to make slash marks on the trees, and using birch bark strips to direct the sap into containers which were often made of birch bark, or tin. The sap was boiled down in a kettle on the fireplace inside the house as more trees were tapped and quantity increased, the procedure, of necessity moved out of doors. Mr. Jewett recalled that the first attempt at boiling sap out of doors was to suspend a large kettle from a "green wood" tripod, and keep a hot fire of "pine knot's glowing beneath the kettle. Later a lean-to covered above and on the ends with pine and fir boughs protecting the kettle and fire from rain, snow, and wind. At first the entire process from sap to sugar was performed in one and the same kettle. In the early days syrup was not made, the sap being boiled down to sugar. The sugar was packed or molded in blocks or cakes and grated as needed to sweeten tea or other foods. Later, according to Harvey Jewett, several kettles were utilized expanding the scope of the boiling process. Most of the maple syrup operation was conducted in the same vicinity where the original sap house still stands.

Another method used was to build a crude foundation of stones or bricks and setting large kettles on these which had an opening at one end for feeding the fire. A remnant of one of these with a broken iron frame for a kettle could be seen for many years close to the old sugar house.



Several of these large kettles still survive at the Bolduc farm. These kettles were very versatile being used alternately to make soap or scalding pigs during the fall butchering.

Eventually the Jewett's build a crude sugar shack or sap house as they were commonly called. Gideon Bolduc, father of Charles Bolduc purchased the present evaporator and pans in 1924 from Mr. Clifton Waldron for \$68.75, the receipt for this transaction hangs framed in the new sugar house. Sap buckets and spiles were also purchased at this time. Some years ago when the evaporator arch was taken to Burlington, Vermont for reconditioning, the Leader Evaporator representatives said it was made in the 1870's and was one of the oldest they had ever seen. It is still being used although the old evaporator pans made of English tin were retired in 1999 to make way for ones made of stainless steel.

As sugar became more plentiful most producers boiled all their sap into syrup. Maple syrup was important to farmers as it provided a quick cash crop, which was usually set aside for paying taxes.

Slashing trees was replaced with boring holes and the use of hand carved wooden spiles and eventually with metal ones. Collecting sap was accomplished at first on foot with wooden yokes carried on the shoulders with a bucket hanging from each end. Eventually wooden barrels were put on a sled pulled by oxen or horses into which sap was collected. Large, galvanized collecting tanks came into use which greatly facilitated the gathering of sap. When hauled to the sugar house the tank was emptied into storage tanks which fed directly into the evaporator. Pine slabs or split pine chunks was the fuel used to fire the evaporator as pine, created a quick, hot fire needed to evaporate the water from the sap. A large supply of pine was always kept on board for this purpose.

A sugaring-off party was a yearly event inaugurating the sugaring season. After a new snow word would spread around and relatives, friends, and neighbors would gather at the sugar house for the treat. Fresh snow was gathered and the old one scrapped away, and hot syrup poured over it. As the syrup cooled on the snow it would take on the consistency of taffy. Long handled wooden spoons or Paddles as they were more commonly called were handed out. The gelling maple candy was wound around the bowl of the spoon. It was delicious. The treat for children was to have slivers of bread placed in tin bowls and a ladle of hot syrup poured over it. The men liked to gather around the small pan of hot syrup set on a stand outside the sugar house and mix scrambled eggs into the hot syrup. It was not unusual to mix a quantity of whisky or brandy with this mixture for added flavor. Grown ups also liked a glass of hot syrup seasoned with brandy.

The boiling process for the maple syrup called for close attention at all times. As the sap flowed through the flues of the evaporator pans it was subject to intense heat as the excess water evaporated in dense clouds of steam which raised and escaped through openings in the sugar house roof. The sap now in the process of becoming syrup works its way through the pans, thickening as it goes till it arrives at the "finishing off" pan. There its weigh or dentistry is checked often by a hydrometer. When it arrives at a certain stage it must be removed or it will quickly turn into sugar. It can take up to fifty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup depending on the sweetness or sugar content of the sap.

The Bolduc sugar bush had the reputation of being the sweetest sugar bush in Belknap County. Once someone suggested that my father was adding cane sugar to his sap causing the excessive sweetness. My father



was furious. He took up the challenge and a bet was placed. Supervised samples were taken directly from the trees and tested. My father won the bet. Many agricultural agents and maple sugar producers deliberated this fact for years any time a group of maple producers got together the topic of Bolduc's super sweet sugar bush was bound to come up. Some actually walked the length and breath of the orchard taking soil samples in an effort to discover why the sugar content was so high. No conclusive verdict was ever reached, but it was finally determined that it was most likely caused by the fact that the Bolduc's dairy herd was pastured each night in the maple orchard. The manure deposited there over many years, it was felt sweetened the soil which was absorbed by the tree through its roots causing a high sugar content.

It wasn't unusual for people to stop by and watch the syrup process. There was something comforting about the smell of the sweet steam vapors, the door of the evaporator fire box glowing red hot and the foam billowing up high over the pans. When the foam got too high and threatened to over spill the pans, we were treated to a phenomenon which always intrigued anyone who saw it for the first time. At the critical moment my father would reach over to the shelf where he kept a jar of cream with a wooden spoon. He would put one drop of cream into the pan and instantly the foam would subside as if by magic. Those visiting the sugar house over the years liked to leave a memento of their visit. They did this by writing their names and the date of their visit on the wall or on the sides of the storage tank. Over the years the graffiti which includes original bits of poetry grew to cover every inch of the tank. The earliest date I found was dated 1929. One of the most amusing slogans states....."A man's ambition must be pretty darn small, when he writes his name on the out house wall."

In the 1950's a near death blow was delt to the venerable old sugar bush. The state decided to put a by-pass right through the center of the orchard. We fought this action, but eventually eminent domain prevailed. The crews arrived with chain saws and bulldozers and the stately old maples which were producing maple sap to make maple syrup when George Washington was President groaned and crushed to the ground. Some of these trees were five to six feet across the stump. The day the trees were cut down, my father stood in the front door of the farm house looking up towards the orchard watching one after another of his trees die. Tears were running down his cheeks. It was the first time I had ever seen him cry. He knew everyone of those trees intimately. He was familiar with each branch and where each tree should be drilled and tapped to produce the best flow and how much sap could be expected per season from a given tree.

There were enough of the trees left to warrant a limited degree of sugaring. Nevertheless, not one year went by without the orchard being tapped for its sweet, golden nectar.

The advent of advanced technology did not over look the maple sugar industry. Where trees were once hung with familiar picturesque buckets with their high crested roof like covers, now drab, green and black tubing run the criss cross the orchard feeding into the sap house collecting tank. The old sap house that had been used for generations had to be abandoned as it sat on high ground. Gravity feed demanded a house on a lower lever. Thus a new house was constructed on lower land close to the road. But a number of trees close to the sugar house are hung with buckets each year for old times sake, and for the visitors who want to photograph a tree with buckets or got a drink of fresh sap right from the tree.

The old sap house was fully restored and has become a repository for some of the old equipment used in the maple industry of by gone days. Technology however has not effected the end product. The syrup tastes as good as it did over 200 years ago. 1979

Next year when the maple season comes around, the Bolduc sugar bush will have the distinction of having been operating in four centuries----the 1700's, the 1800's, the 1900's, and 2000. Being close to the road the new sugar house attracts more visitors. Passing cars are apt to stop anytime to watch the operation and be invited to partake of the delectable treats that are served to all who visit. Armand tends the evaporator while Ernest is busy serving up helpings of pancakes, donuts, sausage, ham and eggs, etc., all served up with fresh, hot maple syrup. Anyone in the area is welcomed to drop by, although it is wise to call ahead to make sure there is sap to boil on that day.

Rev. Hector L. Bolduc



NEW SUGAR HOUSE (BOLBUC) BOLBUC SUGAR HOUSE 1779

GILFORD, NH.

Morrill Street





1779 Sap house .



1779 Sap house repaired.

