

October 2010
Nebraska Knoll Sugar Farm
Blog



Preface

OCTOBER: The season spirals in and still we have so much to do in preparation for next spring's sugar season. This is Year Two of setting up a new sugarbush on state land up behind us, of laying out a new-school system of maple tubing amid trees that have never been tapped. We have this month to wrap up the work before the cold stiffens our fingers and the snow clings to the bark of the maple trees. It's time to hustle!

There is wood to cut, split and stack, but none of this can get done without a truck, and Old Blue, our 1964 International has been in sick bay for two weeks with a shattered steering gear box.

Yesterday, I was startled by an ash tree up by the pile of wood waiting to be split, glowing luminously from within, in myriad subtle shades of gold. I had not noticed this tree all summer. Then the rain came and washed away the splendor.

October startles, as the sun tilts away from Nebraska Valley.



October 4th

WEATHER: It did not freeze last night -still no frost at our place -although I have covered the nasturtiums by the sugarhouse the past two nights in anticipation of a frost. Warm in the sun, cool in the shade. Fall foliage appears past peak from a distance, but individual trees are glorious.

SMALL NEWS FROM THE WOODS: Lew came across the largest tree he has seen up there to date, on a plateau below Mt. Bend: an ash measuring fourteen feet around at its base (four and a half feet in diameter) with two vertical lips on one side of its trunk, lumps of furrowed ash bark separated by a long gully, viewed as a defect by the loggers and thus protecting this tree from the usual fate of handsome ashes.

STEERING NEWS: Lew scoured the country for a week looking for a new steering gear box for Old Blue, our 1964 International truck. The guy at steering.com finally found one, but it wasn't cheap. Meanwhile, C, our young auto mechanic neighbor, thought he could put in a hydraulic system, but every day that route got more expensive and convoluted, so today Lew ordered the first one, to be shipped from San Diego. No one can say if it will solve the problem.

Lew painted the truck forest green and promptly named her Old Blue.



October 6 – What’s for Breakfast?

Bear’s Head grows on dead deciduous trees up in our woods, and Lew picked this one in its prime and fried it in butter for a gourmet breakfast this morning. It is a mushroom with no poisonous look-alikes, thank goodness. Lew calls it Bear’s Head, another name is coral tooth, and the Latin name is *Hericium coralloides* or *Hericium americanus*, depending on the reference book. It has the texture of crabmeat and the flavor is very pleasing. One reference book says it also tastes like crabmeat, but to me it tastes like a chewy mushroom drenched in butter.



On Diversity (courtesy of Lew):
We see them come, we see them go
Some are fast and some are slow.
Some are high and some are low,
Not one of them is like the other,
Don't ask us why, go ask your mother.
—so it is with mushrooms



October 11 – The Shaft is Too Short

STIRRINGS: October stirs the sky like “Fudge Swirl” ice cream; every scoop of the spoon reveals a unique pattern of dark and bright, and the most intriguing scoops occur in the hour of dusk before the sun sets when the sky appears moodiest.

STEERINGS AT 8:30 p.m. : Lew and C the young mechanic neighbor stand side by side in the woodshop staring at two steering mechanisms on the workbench. All is not well. The shiny new one, just arrived from San Diego, has a shaft two inches shorter than the old black greasy one with the shattered case, so it won't fit our truck, Old Blue. C thought he could cut and weld the new shaft, but hesitated in light of a possible guarantee on the whole unit. The men stared and mused and stared some more. With his index finger C rubbed grime off the old one to reveal a part number, not the main number but a smaller one - hmmm, different from the new unit. C said he needed to get home for dinner, but he didn't budge.

October 12 – Quintessential

WEATHER: Today was the rare clear crisp cloudless sparkling autumn day when everything beckons a body to be outdoors. It felt like a sugaring day: the “frost was on the pumpkin” in the early morning but the sun took hold quickly mid-day, tempered by a nippy breeze. The clear skies indicate another frosty night.



TUBING TERMINOLOGY: Before we follow Lew into the sugarbush, let's review some basic terms.

MAIN LINES: Working uphill from the sugarhouse, these are the fat plastic pipes draining distinct sections of our woods — the arteries.

WET DRY LINES: The largest main lines have two levels, or two vertically parallel lines, one wet and one dry. Since maple trees emit CO₂ as well as sap from the tapholes, it helps the sap to flow down the hill if the CO₂ gets separated. Where an ordinary main line joins the wet/dry lines, the gas rises into the higher line, the dry line, and the sap stays low in the wet line.

TAP LINES: These are skinny lines that feed into the main lines, each one zigzagging around three to seven maple trees. Think of how you drew trees as a child, the main line being the trunk of the tree and the tap lines the stick-like branches, opening out like parents' arms as they watch their kids miss a soccer or hockey goal.

DROP LINES: These are the short pieces of skinny tubing spliced into the tap lines at each tree, connecting the SPOUTS to the rest of the tubing network.
Enough for one day.

STIRRINGS: October stirs the morning fog into Nebraska Valley, but not quite up to our place, so one imagines living by the ocean, but not for long, since the sun claims the fog and soon one imagines a valley of hot springs, but again, not for long.

STEERINGS: Cross-country phone calls regarding long serial numbers. The mechanic is away for a week now. It's already October 12.

October 13 – Old Blue

While we wait for more truck parts, you may read our neighbor's reflections on our poor old truck, in this piece written nearly twenty years ago:

OLD BLUE

Lew Coty has a truck, International, with a flat bed and high side boards. Rugged and cantankerous, he calls it Old Blue. He uses it mainly to haul wood chunks out of the forest for firing his sap boiling pans during the sugaring season. For that, the truck must be able to climb steep slopes and with good traction—Lew keeps chains on the wheels rear round. There has to be plenty of weight low down to lessen the risk of the truck turning over on a tipped surface. Our valley has been saddened by deaths from such accidents.

Old Blue is well cared for...most latches, hitches, covers, are functional. One door sticks, but it is possible to enter through the other, with apologies if someone is already on that seat!

The battery is peevish as well—when not in use, unhitch one of the terminals so it won't lose its charge through some kind of electrical leakage.

Driving it takes insight and understanding that is not far from the mystical. It likes the choke, gas pedal to the floor, to ensure floods of petrol. And a long warm-up. But then come clouds of smoke and fumes from partial burning of such a rich mixture and a galloping and wheezing cadence to the engine. Ease back on the choke, up on the gas pedal, but not too quickly or the whole sequence must begin again. The engine smooths, the whooping softens, the cloud dissipates.

Almost docile, 'til one tries to shift and move out.

The gear shift has strange slots for reverse and ahead...five speeds forward, though no one is memory recalls the higher range ever being used for this "always in the woods" truck. And the clutch!...even with caution, the vehicle can leap ahead, like a ghored bull. Turning takes advanced planning; Old Blue turns with great reluctance—slow, ponderous, and with a wide swath.

These curiosities understood, certainly not mastered, the old buzzart of a truck fills the few chores it is given with remarkable practicality. Up and down the mountain, through the woods, carrying loads that would crush or mire lesser vehicles. And it strengthens the moral fiber of whoever drives it. I think it knows that. Certainly, I would never criticize it within its hearing. does a truck hear and have feelings? If any one of them does, then Old Blue is that one.



October 14 – Thud thud thud

WEATHER: Another compelling autumn day of crisp clear air and crisp leaves underfoot. A nor'easter will move in tonight with heavy rain, winds and possibly snow.

FOLIAGE UPDATE: This week features the beech trees, always slow to turn and likely to retain their leaves through the winter. Long, pointy beech leaves turn gold at first,

tempered in the moment by green veins and tan edges, inevitably yielding to a dull tan. They cheer up the November woods by chattering in the slightest breeze.



STIRRINGS: October stirred my blood today, quite literally, as I threw and stacked wood with our crew of three. Aware of the impending storm, we felt it imperative to get the house wood under cover today, and also to buck up some logs for the sugarhouse. Without the truck we resorted to loading up our Chevy van, but it didn't do the van any good.

SUGAR WOOD we burn in the evaporator to boil down the sap; **HOUSE WOOD** we burn in the woodstove to heat the house. Sugar wood can be softwood (spruce and hemlock) or hardwood (beech, yellow birch, maple, ash), but house wood must be only hardwood, since the latter sustains a slow, even fire and does not cause an accretion of creosote in the chimney.

FLOODLIT: Chunks of wood two feet across, two land terraces between us and Miller Brook (glacial moraines), duelling chain saws, one Lew's and one from across the valley.

SPOTLIT: White streaks of pine pitch along the chunks, grunts of women rolling knobby chunks up a ramp into the van, the grip of leather gloves on dimpled spruce bark, tenor thuds of wood against wood.

October 17 – The season tips

WEATHER: What a raw, wet spell these past three days. The nor'easter blew through as predicted, swelling the brooks, coating the ski trails with snow, knocking out power, washing leaves off trees, announcing the backside of October, when the month tips toward November and if you don't set out on a hike before 2 pm the woods feel too dark and abandoned.

MY TANKA FOR AN OCTOBER SUNDAY (a poem similar to a haiku)

Stream cuts across trail,
Pitched higher than the north wind
Pressing through the notch.
One pauses, the other can't,
Together they silence me.

PUSH IS COMING TO SHOVE. Stay tuned for "Let's Get Technical" from our master woods technician.

October 18 – Let’s Get Technical

RECIPE FOR MAPLE TUBING SETUP, PART I

INGREDIENTS:

SUGARBUSH: A parcel of land containing maple trees. This doesn’t have to be a pure stand of sugar maples and in fact is probably better as a mixed species.

MAIN LINES: From 3/4” to 2” plastic pipe.

- **WET -DRY LINES:** The WET LINE carries sap from the sugarbush to the holding tanks; the DRY LINE carries vacuum from the vacuum pump in the sap shed to the sugarbush.
- **SECONDARY MAIN LINES** branch off the wet-dry lines to penetrate into all areas of the sugarbush where maples are numerous enough to warrant their presence.



TAP LINES: These 5/16” lines run from maple tree to maple tree and transport sap into the secondary main lines.

DROP LINES: These are also 5/16” lines, running vertically at each tappable tree, carrying the sap from the SPOUTS to the taplines.

LINE CONNECTORS, including main line TEES and Y’s and the MANIFOLDS which connect the taplines to the main lines.

*****PART II TOMORROW*****

OUR SUGARBUSH lies on either side of Falls Brook. The new section to the right of the brook is

KEYSTONE; the new section to the left is HERBIE (named after the logger who once worked these woods). Lew worked up on Herbie today, laying tap lines, and hopes to be done with that phase by Wednesday.

WHAT’S BEEN DONE SO FAR:

- Laying Wet-Dry lines, upper Keystone and Herbie
- Laying secondary main lines on both K and H
- Laying tap lines on K and H (nearly done)

The DROP (LINE) CREW heads up to Keystone tomorrow, their work has just begun.

STIRRINGS: October stirs up grief, enough to break the heart, it just does.

STEERINGS: Our mechanic is back in town, and the new steering gear box is in the mail, one hopes.

October 19 – Let’s Get Technical, cont.

WEATHER: A white frost last night; a clear, chilly morning but up to 50 by early afternoon; the sort of day when working in the woods is sheer privilege, the going is soft over matted leaves, the stillness embraces.

RECIPE FOR MAPLE TUBING SETUP, PART II

L, our woods technician, speaks:

DIRECTIONS:

1. **MAP OUT THE MAIN LINES:** This is the most intimidating and skilled part of the whole process. It’s like a game of chess: there are always a zillion moves, but which moves are the best? You begin with a random set of trees and topography and end with a smoothly flowing set of lines, transforming chaos into order. It is important that all lines run at least slightly downhill, and follow routes where they can be easily maintained. I usually run my wet-dry lines at the base of the bush on a more shallow pitch, and run the secondary lines from them vertically up the hill, about 200’ apart. The efficiency of sap transport is greatly dependent on how expertly the main lines are mapped out.
2. **INSTALLING MAIN LINE WIRE SUPPORT:** The wire zigzags through the bush from tree to tree following a route determined by Step One, and is held off the ground by sleeved wire ties wrapped around trees. After rolling it out, I tighten it with the ratchet action of a come-along.
3. **INSTALLING MAIN LINES:** These lines are rolled out using a rotating platform, and are then suspended on the wire by thousands of small wire ties which are “twisted” into place using a crooked tool with an offset handle.



*****PART THREE tomorrow*****

TODAY’S PROGRESS: Taplines on main line H-1 are nearly laid out, one more day. Dropline crew finished cutting in drops on Keystone Left (KL) -1 and started on KL-2, in the vicinity of Keystone’s grandest tree, Tiger.

October 21

WEATHER: Rainy, high in the mid-forties, windy.

LET’S GET TECHNICAL, PART III

OLD BLUE’S ROLE: Our truck can only make it about a third of the way up to the Keystone and Herbie sections, so we unload the wire, fittings and tubing (some coils weigh over 100 lbs.) from Old Blue and either roll them or carry them in our backpacks the rest of the way up the hill.



INSTALLING TAP LINES: Now comes the challenge of organizing randomly spaced maple trees into tidy lines, with no more than eight taps per line.

- Roll out the coiled lines by taking several coils from one side and then flipping to the other side, so as not to kink.
- Lay them out heading uphill from the secondary main lines in herringbone fashion.
- Tighten (stretch) by hand. These have no wire support. The tension is critical – if too loose they will sag and restrict sap flow, if too tight they will be difficult to repair or may be stretched too thin, also restricting sap flow.

INSTALLING DROP LINES: We make drop lines by cutting tubing into 32" lengths and attaching spouts to one end and tees to the other end.

Cut the drops into the tap line at each tree with a special tool which employs two vice grips to hold the tubing and push the tee into it.

GUIDELINES FOR TAPPING: One drop line for healthy trees at least 10" in diameter, and a second drop line for healthy trees 20" or more in diameter.

THE REWARD for the labor of setting up tubing comes in the spring when we witness streams of sap running off our mountain hillside, without ever moving a muscle to transport it. We are reaping the essence of a wild native plant we never sowed.



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MILESTONE: All the tap lines are laid out on Keystone and Herbie!

TODAY'S PROGRESS: The drop crew finished cutting in drops on KL-2 and KL- 3, finding that the rain lubricated the tubing so it slid nicely over the drop tees, but growing discouraged by the rain's saturation of gloves, hats, jackets, pants, boots and socks, and deciding at noon to stash the leftover drops at Camp II near the base of K-9, the starting point for tomorrow's trials.

STIRRINGS: October rain and wind stirred the remaining leaves from their trees, thirty at a time in the near distance.

STEERINGS: The second steering gear box arrived from San Diego with the proper shaft!

October 22 – Up Herbie’s Highway with the Drop Crew

WEATHER: Blustery, wintry, intermittent sun and hail. A day for thick wool hats, hand warmers, windbreakers with hoods, a thermos of hot tea.

HEADING UP HERBIE’S HIGHWAY, the drop crew carried in their packs:

- Two carpenter’s tape, in case one gets lost
- A spray bottle for lubricating the drop tees
- Tubing repair tools: pruning shears, sheetrock knife, extra fittings, extra tubing
- Extra sweaters, neck warmers
- Lunch and water bottles

UNDER OR IN THEIR ARMS, THE DROP CREW carried:

- Bundles of 100 drops with black tees lashed together with black electrical tape
- Bundles of 25 drops with green tees (used for the tap at the end of each tap line)
- The TOOL

FIRST STOP, Base Camp, where Herbie’s Highway crosses Falls Brook, marked by a mound of old drops that were replaced this summer and await a ride down the hill in Old Blue. Here, the drop crew picked up some bundles of drops and headed up Keystone Road.

SECOND STOP: A pause at **Camp I** on a gentle section of the Keystone Wet-Dry main line. While working on the L’s, we stashed drops at Camp I, but a couple days ago cleaned it out and moved up the line, establishing **Camp II** at the junction of the Keystone main line and K-9.

WORKING UP K-9, 1200’ long, we eventually established temporary camps so we would not have to trek all the way down for more drops.

TODAY’S PROGRESS: About 300 drops cut in on K-9, with 18 tap lines left. It’s one of the longer main lines.

FLOODLIT:

- Framing the view, the blue outline of Worcester Ridge far away through the stark forest
- On the opposing side of the Falls Brook watershed, the ridge of Mt. Bend, resembling an elephant whose trunk droops toward Nebraska Valley.

SPOTLIT:

- Two ivy-like leaves draped in a shawl of snow growing out of a nook in the side of a maple
- A foot-long trough of bark filled with snow
- Copper beech leaves wagging “Yes” and “No”
- One single bird call

October 25 – Old Blue is Back

WEATHER: On the warm side for a late October day, overcast, the cloud bank drooping over the upper parts of the sugarbush.

FOLIAGE UPDATE: Some of the apple trees are turning now, a very pretty yellow, while others are still green and full of apples.

TODAY'S PROGRESS: Lew continues to connect the secondary main lines to the wet-dry lines on Keystone, installing ball valves at the top and bottom of each secondary line - the top one needed for rinsing at the end of the sugar season, the bottom one useful for checking for vacuum leaks.

STEERINGS: Our mechanic came over and popped the second steering gear box into Old Blue. It fit, he took her for a test drive, and all is well. "Once you have the right part, it doesn't take much to get it in," he said. "Just insert the shaft, tighten all the bolts, and that's it."

STIRRINGS: The pungency of October stirs a memory of childhood: coming home from school and raking maple leaves into a heap, then running and jumping into the heap, feeling startled that so high a pile did not offer much of a cushion but eager for the next jump, and the next.



October 26 – Puffball

TODAY'S PROGRESS: The drop crew finished cutting in drops at the top of K-9 and started down K-10, for a total of 300 taps. It was a mild day, the lines were wet from a rain shower, and the main challenge was finding a level spot to rest the bucket of drops at each tree. Lew is still connecting main lines.

PUFFBALL:

Poof! Dainty gray powder swirls around my shoe and vanishes. Unawares, I have just stepped on a puffball. It lies lusterless on the forest floor, a sack of lizard skin, cracked open to reveal a cache of powder, finer than flour, greener than wood ashes. Up close it smells of intimacy with damp, dark places. Its stubby hide jiggles when you poke it, like a rubber bathtub toy. It won't roll, though, since the earth grips it from below. Minute hairs wave gray-gree on the edge of the puffball's crater.



Leaning into this puffball is another one, intact except for a hole in the top the size of a little finger. It sure looks dark in there. A few inches away rests a fully opened puffball, its inner wall exposed as a whorl of bluntly cut flaps, smooth and yellow and smudged black by the spores that never got puffed away.

October 28 – The Hemlock Forest

WEATHER: Another in a string of balmy days, the last, according to our weatherman, Roger Hill, who says, "October is a runway of sorts into the murkiness [of November and December]." This statement does nothing to encourage the crew at Nebraska Knoll who are far from done with their labors.

FOLIAGE UPDATE: The lilac bush by the house glows today, in yet another shade of autumn gold.

TODAY'S PROGRESS: Three loads of sugar wood cut and brought to the landing in Old Blue, who steers just beautifully now.

Several hundred drops assembled in the wood shop for the drop crew to take up the hill tomorrow.

THE HEMLOCK FOREST: Just thirty trees in a cluster on a steep ledgy bank can seem like a whole forest. After a day's work in the sugarbush I seldom choose to walk home through the hemlock forest just below the nob we call The Plaza; I prefer to stay in the light. By intention only do I sometimes step over its hem of ferns onto the brown mat of leaf and needle mold. Then the hemlock forest enfolds me in its dense shady hush, particularly at dusk, demanding my attention, knocking me out of day-dreaming or planning dinner.

October 29 – Green, Green, Green

WEATHER: Friday it drizzled all day, high in the 40's. I am writing this post two days later, and the drizzle has morphed to snow. "There is snow in them thar hills."

THE DAY'S PROGRESS: The drop crew finished lower K-10 and started up K-11, cutting in about 325 drops, stashing the leftover drops at CAMP IV near the top of K-11.

NOTABLE WAS THE GREEN of:

- Moss on trees
- Moss on rocks
- Club moss growing in mats of 4" stems
- Reindeer lichen
- Some of the ferns
- Hemlock saplings
- Two-leafed tender young tree shoots
- The tee on the last drop of each tap line

CHANT OF THE DAY: "Green, green, green," sung by the drop crew at the top tree of each line, as a reminder to cut in a drop here with a green tee rather than the usual black tee. The green tees are blocked on one side, preventing the sap from going uphill from the top tap. We have been known to mix up our colors!



SONG OF THE WEEK: “Charlie and the MTA” by the Kingston Trio

A NOTE ON PHOTOS: They are added after the fact, so it’s worth scrolling back to find new ones on old posts.

November 1 – The Splitter Goes Into Sick Bay

WELCOME, NOVEMBER! October’s work has spilled over into a new month, dragging this blog along with it.

WEATHER: If November exhilarates you as it does me, today was your day: the smell of snow in the air; the milky middle distance; purple hills; stillness; hats, longjohns, wool jackets and lined leather gloves for the sugar wood crew; the thermometer stuck at 32. One can divide people into two groups: those who prefer the feel of warm air against the cheek, and those who prefer cold bracing air against the cheek. November, for the latter group, announces that all will be well for the next several months.

MILESTONE: The wood crew brought in three **final** loads of sugar wood in Old Blue, some as chunks two feet long that will need to be split, and some as skinny three and a half foot lengths that will fit right into the evaporator as is. **Next step:** splitting, loading back into Old Blue, stacking in the woodshed.

STIRRINGS: Bucking up pine and spruce logs in the woods stirs up soft or tangy or lively scents that evoke sawmills, Christmas or Vermont.

STEERINGS: If it’s not one thing, it’s ten others. Old Blue is back but the hydraulic splitter broke today. All is at Parade Rest once again, while we haul the splitter off to Leo’s in Morrisville for repairs. The next two days are predicted to be the only good days this week, so most likely we’ll get the splitter back just as the rain resumes, groan.

November 3 – Turned Back by ice

YESTERDAY, the drop crew hiked from autumn at the sugarhouse into winter at Camp IV. We pulled our stash of drops out of their casing of crusty snow, crammed them into the bucket and headed up a tapline. Ice coated the line and nothing worked; the stiff icy tubing would not give enough to slide over the fittings. After two lines we gave up. Across the way the sun caught an entire ridge of icy tree tops, evoking a winter scene in Narnia.

THE DROP CREW hiked back down, losing probably 1500 feet in elevation, hiking back to autumn and the drone of the splitter. We made a batch of maple sugar instead.

FALSE ALARM, the splitter runs after all.

PROGRESS: Two good days of splitting and stacking. The rains return tomorrow.

November 5 – Stymied by the rain

WEATHER: Cold rain and more cold rain, with snow in the higher elevations.

PROGRESS: Nil. Tomorrow should be dry enough to split wood again, and by the middle of next week we’ll have sun and highs in the 50’s. So much of sugaring has to do with waiting.

Bright Spots: Partridge Berries

These cheery, edible berries keep their color through the winter.
Here they are in early November, laced with frost.



Here they are in early May after the snow has melted.



These partridge berries are the variety we see in Newfoundland, during July and August.



November 9 – Back to Work

PROGRESS, a MILESTONE DAY: The wood is in, the woodshed is filled, the splitter put away. If you are thinking that the wood will not dry out before sugar season – aren't we really exceedingly late filling the woodshed? – you have a point. Most likely we won't need it until sugar season 2012, but if 2011 is a banner year, wet wood will be better than no wood.

WEATHER: Still bleak, but most of the snow melted during the day as the temp rose to 40 degrees. Roger Hill suggested in his weather report this morning that if anyone had a three-day project to complete before winter, Wed through Friday would be the days. Blue skies and 50 degrees? That's the forecast.

THREE-DAY PROJECT TO COMPLETE? Can we finish cutting in the drops in the next three days? We'll give it a go.

DEER HUNTING SEASON opens on Saturday, this weekend will be a good time to stay out of the woods.

TURKEYS stop by every day now to forage for apples, either on the ground or by launching their cumbersome selves into the apple trees.

November 11 – Moving Along

WEATHER: Hard frost last night but the sun dissolved it by late morning – yes, the sun. Excellent working day, highs in the 40's.

PROGRESS: MILESTONE – The drops are cut in on Keystone, about 1700 total. The drop crew started the day at the top of the Herbie lines and finished H-6 and H-5.

As I write, Lew is still in the woods cutting in fittings, three hours after sunset, working with a headlamp.

November 12 – The Mystery of the Missing Drops

LEFTOVER AFTER KEYSTONE: 223 black drops and 81 green drops in the woods, 300 blacks and 50 greens in the sap shed. Took up 200 blacks and 50 greens Thursday morning. At the top of the steep pitch on Herbie Wet-Dry, came across the 223 blacks and 81 greens brought over from the top of Keystone by the guys late Wednesday.

THAT EVENING: “Are you sure you had 223 blacks and 81 greens after Keystone? How could you run out of drops at 1:30 pm if you had all those and took up another 250 from the sap shed? I figure you only put up about 275 on H-6 and H-5 combined.”

A QUICK CALL TO THE OTHER HALF OF THE DROP CREW: “So, help me reconstruct the day. You had a bundle of 100 blacks and 50 greens, I had a bundle of 100 blacks, right? Do you remember if we left some along Herbie Wet-Dry?”

“No, I don't think so, remember we decided to take them at least to the top of the steep pitch in case we needed them up higher, and then we came across the guys' stash. —It will all be clear tomorrow.”

“Did the guys' stash LOOK like over 300 drops?”

“Hard to say, there were so many little piles of them. It will all become clear tomorrow.”

TOMORROW dawned. We took up 300 black drops made late in the night, and knew we still had 69 greens and 3 blacks up there. This time, we did not chat on the climb up Herbie Wet-Dry. Got to the top of the steep pitch and there they were, 2 bundles of black drops, 100 each, lying in a depression near the guys’ old stash, just where we’d laid them

“I SAW those from a distance yesterday,” she said, “and then I spaced it out!”

OUR DIAGNOSIS: Confusion over the layout of the Herbie lines. It was a mistake to stash drops in between two main lines and out of view in a depression.

PROGRESS: EXCELLENT. The manifolds are all cut in, and the drop crew finished H-4 and H-3 and part of H-2. All that remains are about 275 drops to cut in.

November 15 – They’re Like Grease

WEATHER: Back to November greys today.

“**I WAS AT THE BOTTOM OF MARESAN** [a section of the old sugarbush],” he says. “You know those steep lines. I was just about to make a cut and you know how the wet leaves cover things up, well, I slipped on a log that was under the leaves – they’re like grease – and I don’t even know what happened. I guess my hand got in the way of the sheetrock knife.”

THE DOCTOR STITCHED HIM UP, running a row of stitches along the fleshy pad under his left thumb, and by then it was too dark to head back into the woods.

THIS BLOGGER knows about greasy leaves; one day last week she slipped on a rock hiding under a mat of leaves and fell over the bank, suffering bruises, while her pail and its contents rolling on ahead of her toward the brook.

WHAT’S LEFT TO DO?

- Cutting in green tees on the tops of all lines in the old sugarbush (the final step in the summer’s project of replacing all of our old drops and spouts with the latest model).
- Walking the entire sugarbush before it snows to check for blowdowns and other damage.
- Finish up drops on Herbie, H-2 and H-1.

November 18 – A Bubblegum Chew

SMALL NEWS FROM THE WOODS: Some creature is chewing the lines, really chewing them, not like the red squirrels who shred the lines but don’t chew, or the deer who make clean slits as though they had cut the tubing with scissors. “It’s nothing like what I’ve seen before,” says Lew. “They are treating the tubing like bubblegum.”

He pulled a few mangled snippets of tubing out of his pocket and laid them on the table. They were flattened from the chomping and in places we could trace a tooth imprint, not much smaller than a human pre-molar.

“Where did you find this damage?” “All over the place. I first noticed it on Dome Site.”

PROGRESS: The green drops are all replaced in the Old Bush, next is Morningside. Some damage repaired, but there is so much.

BUT WHERE ARE THE PHOTOS? No chance lately to get over to a WiFi cafe, tomorrow...

November 23 – Many Milestones

WEATHER: Unsettled one day, settled the next. Still snow in the upper bush, just enough to please the deer hunters.

PROGRESS: The drops are all in!!! We'll have about 9100 taps next spring, up over 5000 from two years ago. Our two-year project is complete!

MORE PROGRESS: Morningside lines have all been checked. There was minimal damage on that side of the brook, but on the other side it is slow going. Some large trees were down over the lower Keystone Wet-Dry lines; elsewhere the moose have plowed through, leaving bits and pieces of lines lying about. We are hoping to be done this repair phase by the weekend.

ODDLY, THE WILD TURKEYS no longer stop by for apples, even though one tree still holds several dozen apples. The domestic white turkeys at the goat farm blocked traffic on our road yesterday, and today one of them sits on a tray in our frig.

A gray squirrel has taken to pulling off one apple at time and running off with it in its mouth.

Getting the Tubing Monkey Off His Back

AT 4 PM SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 27, Lew said, "I'm done." He worked straight through Thanksgiving to finally get that tubing monkey off his back. "It's been twenty-five years since I've seen so much damage," he said. "The moose take honors for wreaking the most havoc up there. Some lines were lying in so many pieces I had to roll out new tubing and start fresh. Then there was that bubblegum business, some squirrel, maybe it's all squirrel. Would the deer chew like that? Funny, they'd chew one line to pieces and leave the lines on either side."

Blowdowns and the Sugarmaker: A Tanka

Rifle crack, then crash
Of maple tree to my left,
Kept working along.
Another rifle crack, crash,
This one from just where I'd been.

Mystery of the Bubblegum Chew

Clues in the snow lead to a plausible theory: a dog is the culprit! Lew has observed dog tracks in the sections where the bubblegum chewing occurred. They are all at lower elevations, closer to houses. We don't have a dog but neighbors do. But why just this one summer?