

Nebraska Knoll Sugar Season 2010 Blog

A Field Guide to Maple Sugar Season



Preface:

We started tapping out our sugarbush on February 16th and finished by moonlight on the 25th. That's the day the sap started to run. Sugaring is like back-to-back marathons, and this year we got no time to warm up before the race.

This is the year of the new: new taps on state land, new-fangled taps, new sap shed, new sap tanks, new vacuum pump, new reverse osmosis machine. I feel like a spectator gaping at the latter two. But Lew isn't gaping, he's tackling one crisis after another. New sugaring equipment doesn't come with operating instructions. But then again, sugarmakers are inherently an independent, resourceful bunch, darn good at figuring things out.



So the weather has been good for early season – only about 30 at night and mid-30's by day. Sugaring is an exercise in giving up control, starting with the weather.

Above all, sugaring is a privilege.

March 4

Weather: Low last night: 30 degrees. High today 35. Northwest wind. Mostly sunny. Sap ran, no boiling.

Morning crisis: Flood of sap in the pump room. No one shut the door at 5 am when yesterday's boil ended, so the string that triggers the release tank to release froze up, and the sap didn't have anywhere to go.

Quote of the Day: "There is so much to be thinking of all at the same time, my mind is putty."

Snow Quality: corn snow.

Macro: Blue skies at last.

Micro: The guys heading up into the bush on snowshoes to check lines, wearing sunglasses.

March 5

Weather: Low last night 19, high today 36, bluebird. Sap ran from 11 am to 5 pm.

Boiling Status: Fourth day of boiling today, boiled sap from yesterday and today. Caught up on sap for first time.

Syrup Status: Up to 750 gallons, all Fancy, Coty Classic.

Remarks: The niter is what we filter out of the syrup. It is also called sugar sand; it is not always sandy but today we could scoop up abundant amounts of light golden sugar sand that had settled in the syrup troughs. To us it indicates a shift from early season, when there isn't much niter at all, to middle season.

March 6

WEATHER: Low last night 17, high today 40, bluebird. The sort of early March day when those locals who haven't yet thought about sugaring feel the warmth of the sun on one side of the face and the nip of a cool breeze on the other and mutter to themselves, "I'll bet the sap is running today."

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "The sap is so clear it shines."

BOILING STATUS: Boiled down that shiny sap into Ultra Fancy syrup, a whole grade lighter than Fancy. Not just the color changes, but the nature of the bubbles in the pan too. It's disconcerting how they don't pucker and pop like ordinary Fancy bubbles, until you realize, that's right, ultra is always tricky to read.

MACRO: Sugarhouse built into the side of a hill.

MICRO: Scrape of metal on metal: the iron rake pulling cold ashes over the heavy grates.

MUSIC TO BOIL BY: Hank Williams honky-tonk

March 7

WEATHER: Froze again last night, quickly warmed up this morning, high 43 and sunny. Sap could run several more hours, since at 10 pm it is still above freezing, 36 degrees.

THINGS THE GUYS CARRY IN THEIR PACKS TO CHECK LINES:

Old-style drillbit for tapping missed trees

Hammer for pounding in the spout

Sheetrock knife

Japanese folding saw for clearing small blowdowns

Pruners

Orange tape

Masking tape, good substitute for a bandaid

Extra tubing

Extra caps, tees, splicers

A contraption called the third hand

The red fitting tool

Water bottle and food

MACRO: Woods full of strong tree-shadows on snow.

Air around sugarhouse saturated with maple fragrance.

March 8

WEATHER: Never froze last night, sap ran all night and all day today, but not a spectacular run.

BOILING STATUS: Today was Day Seven. Last year this date, March 8th, was our first day of boiling.

SYRUP STATUS: Up over 1100 gallons, all Fancy.

INTRODUCING...The Main Main, our central mainline in what we call “the old bush”. The wends its way circuitously up and around Nebraska Knoll, branching at The Cache, a wooden storage box on a plateau of stately ash trees intermingled with sugar maples. One branch passes through a saddle - that’s the Saddle Line; the other branch ascends to The Podium.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: “You know that doesn’t drain the hose, you have to disconnect it at the Y and drain it from there. Otherwise you’re only draining half the hose.”

March 9

WIND FROM THE NORTH, SAP FLOWS FORTH

WIND FROM THE EAST, SAP FLOWS LEAST

WIND FROM THE SOUTH, SAP’S A DROUGHT

WIND FROM THE WEST, SAP FLOWS BEST

WEATHER: Today had it all: Wind from the northwest, freezing night last night, full sun, temp. in the high 30’s. The best run of the year, but short, since the lines froze up at dusk. The Morningside taps woke up today.

Part way up the MAIN MAIN, a lesser main line called Ledge Line joins up with it. Ledge Line hugs the contour, past the ledges, past the Plaza, all the way to the Gulch. The Gulch is not “a steep-walled valley cut by a swift-running stream” as its name suggests; it is a cozy nook between a pretty ledge and a rough slope. Follow the Gulch to its highest point and its a short walk down and across to the Cache.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: “The big thing about sugaring is knowing when to work and when to sit down.”

MACRO: An audible wind today.

Shade at the base of trees, sun on the crowns.

MICRO: Old, pockmarked corn snow peppered with hemlock twigs, needles, seeds and beech leaves.

Calls of Chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee and Phoebe, Phoebe.

Sparks emitted from sugarhouse swim into the night sky like orange tadpoles

March 10

WEATHER: Low last night 20, high today 40, bluebird. Another in a string of true sugaring days.

TOUR OF THE SUGARBUSH, CONTINUED: Walk back through the Gulch down the slope to NORTH CONNECTION, a mainline curving around the knoll at a lower tier than Ledge Line, above a cliff draped with dirty icicles, home to porcupines. Now you’re on Dome Road near a tree called Old Suzanna, formerly tapped by the sugarmaker before us who gathered sap with his horses. She’s now in retirement.

REPORT FROM THE FIELD CREW: Snowshoes are no longer necessary for checking lines, except at the top of the Keystone lines.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: “Another perfect draw, number seven!!!” (stay tuned)

March 11

WEATHER: Low last night 25, high today low 40's, overcast. So far, no freezing days during March – unheard of. The sap ran well midday, then slowed down.

BOILING STATUS: Day 10

SYRUP STATUS: ca. 1500 gallons by the end of tonight's boil, all Fancy

A TOUR OF THE SUGARBUSH, continued: From Dome Road you turn left and walk below the porcupine cliff to pick up MARESAN Main Line. Maresan is named for our neighbors from the late 1970's, Mary and Suzanne, whose homes were tucked under the steep side of our knoll. We used to run lines into a tank at each of their houses and pick up the sap daily with our 1964 International truck, Old Blue.

The MARESAN soils are deeper than in other areas, and the trees really thrive here. Notice the Palace Guard, a grand old tree near the top.

DRAWING OFF SYRUP: Every sugarmaker has his or her own method. We finish off the syrup in the front pan. By reading the bubbles and testing the density with a hydrometer we know when to draw it off into a pail. Each pail of hot syrup must be standardized to make sure the density is exactly right. A perfect draw is a pail that is just right without any fiddling. Like a hole-in-one on the golf course, it is worth bragging about, even though luck plays a part.

SUGARHOUSE FOOD: California navel oranges to cut the sweet that saturates our pores.

March 12

WEATHER: Never froze last night, high today 39 and overcast. Sap ran all night and all day but not hard.

BOILING STATUS: Not enough sap to boil today. Finally, finally, a day off. Today marks the end of Marathon Number One.

TOUR OF THE SUGARBUSH, continued: Starting back at the sugarhouse, we'll hike up the MORNINGSIDE Main Line. It crosses Falls Brook just above the falls. We'll cross the brook on a very narrow wooden bridge with hand rails, called the Japanese Bridge. It's a steep hike up to a broad gentle slope where the Morningside trees are. Five lesser main lines branch off and traverse the plateau: M1, M2, M3, M4, and M5. From M5 it's a short steep hike to Mt. Bend, a prominent nob on Morningside Ridge.

Another way to reach Morningside is to hike up Herbie's Highway, straight up from the sugarhouse, and cross Falls Brook where the old bridge used to be. Right now you can still cross the brook on snow bridges, but later when the brook open up it means acrobatic leaps or wet feet.

QUOTE OF THE DAY Sugaring: "C'est la maladie du printemps."

MACRO: Lagoons forming in the low, wet pockets of the woods.

MICRO: A mat of beech leaves on the bottom of a 3" deep lagoon, every vein magnified by the clear water.

March 13

WEATHER: 30's by night, low 40's by day. Sap keep running, less during the night, a bit better during the day.

CONVERGENCE OF CRISES, early evening:

1) Filter tank (where the finished syrup is) is full to the top, needing simultaneously to be tested for density and run into a drum (barrel).

2) Evaporator door sticks – it won't open or close.

3) None of the drums are clean and ready to be filled.

L. starts rinsing out a drum with hot water, then leaves it to grease the sticky door. Tells A. to take care of the drum. A. thinks this means she should fill it. Meanwhile the sap roars in the pans, the fire roars in the arch.

4) Syrup gushes out through an opening half way up the side of the drum. The bung never got screwed back in.

5) Flood of syrup on floor.

6) Filter press needs to be changed right away, pressure is too high. This chore requires the full attention of one person for at least ten minutes.

7) Outside, a big tank full of permeate water (water squeezed out of the sap by the reverse osmosis machine) overflows and gushes over the bank, undermining the stone wall and depositing muddy silt at the entrance to the sugarhouse.

Meanwhile, the sap roars and boils into syrup, the fire needs stoking.

8) Turns out there was still water in the drum with no bung, so since the syrup still in there is diluted it must be drained out.

In walks a neighbor and her eight-year old son for a visit. They are sugarhouse rats and pitch right in cleaning up and stacking wood.

March 14

WEATHER: Repeat of March 13, with intermittent rain showers. Sap still running.

BOILING STATUS: Day 12.

SYRUP STATUS: Pushing 1800 gallons, grade is dropping due to lack of freezing nights.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "Man, is that doing that again?" (Uttered by L. at the upper sap shed after testing out a new method of rinsing the giant tanks up there.) What he heard was the vacuum pump suddenly shifting its tone from a tenor groan to an alto whine.

We make syrup with our ears, alert to changes in the pitch of the boiling sap, the roaring fire and the filter press pumping finished syrup. We listen to the reverse osmosis machine in the next room. The timer goes off and we check the temperature of cleaning water heating up in another room. And we listen to music on the boom box and sing along.

ARCHIVAL JOURNAL ENTRY: *O Brother Where Art Thou* has just the right feel as sugarhouse music. It goes with muddy boots, sticky floors, steamy pans, tired sugarers. And it makes all right with the world.

MACRO: Many weekend visitors.

MICRO: Bright-eyed eight-year-old triplets, two girls and a boy, sitting on the back bench, delighted by the steam as it ebbs and flows over their heads.

March 15

WEATHER: 30's by night, high 40's by day, overcast. The sap is still running.

TO BOIL OR NOT? Some days it is a hard call. Today we gambled that the run would be slow and we would have room to spare in the sap tanks. This relentless season is taking its toll and we need to catch our breath. So we decided not to boil. But the sap ran surprisingly well this afternoon, and all the tanks are full at 10 pm, with the sap still running. Instead of sleeping, L. must start up the RO (reverse osmosis machine) soon and monitor it every couple of hours all night. If only it would freeze tonight as forecast and choke off the run.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "No rest for the weary."

SEVEN DAY NITER PRIMER. *Monday*: Niter is what you don't get when you purchase a gallon of maple syrup; like coffee grounds, it stays behind in the filter. Every time you boil sap, either in a canning kettle in the kitchen or in a modern evaporator, stuff precipitates out of it: niter. Sometimes it resembles sand, hence the common name for it, sugar sand. The quality of the niter changes day to day and year to year. Sugarmakers consider niter a nuisance for two reasons: it burns onto the sap pans and it clouds up the syrup. They devise ways to filter the hot syrup so it flows clear when you pour it over your pancakes or vanilla ice cream.

MACRO: Hillsides taking on a reddish purple hue.

MICRO: Red maple buds are round, red and swollen. As always the red maples are ahead of the sugar maples.

March 16

WEATHER: Below freezing (27) for four hours last night, high today in high 40's.

SAP STATUS: This warm weather sap is no longer as clear as a glacial lake.

SYRUP STATUS: As a result, the grade has dropped. Today we made borderline A Medium Amber/A Dark Amber syrup. Passed the 2000 gallon mark today.

TOUR OF THE SUGARBUSH, continued: Starting back at the sugarhouse we'll hike up to Keystone, the parcel of state-owned land we are tapping for the first time. This parcel fits between Morningside and the Main Main like a keystone, or like the space between the two arms of the letter V.

Keystone Main Line follows Herbie's Highway, named after Herbie Leach who hauled logs out on this logging road in the 70's and early 80's. It ascends steeply at first, then moderates where it cuts close to Falls Brook. Just before the Falls Brook crossing, we will leave Herbie's Highway and follow the mainline up another logging road. The entire south and south-east flank of mountainside to our right is Keystone. The woods feel spacious and welcoming to hikers and snowshoers. There are many beautiful maples. Presiding over the higher, rougher terrain is The Old Foreman.

SEVEN DAY NITER PRIMER, *Tuesday*. The quality of the niter indicates how far along sugar season has progressed. During those early runs there is little niter, you don't see it except as it sticks to the pans. If a sugarmaker dips her scoop into the trough and what comes up is half syrup and half sugar sand, she knows early season is over. She is happy to see the coarse, gritty sugar sand since it means the season is here to stay for awhile. And heavy, sandy niter filters well.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: " M says to tell you she's bringing dinner up."

March 17

WEATHER: A decent freezing night last night, getting down to 26 for seven or eight hours. Today was the mildest yet, in the low 50's and sunny. Good run.

MORNING CRISIS: Blew a hose trying to start up the RO before the line to the permeate tank thawed out. Down at the hardware store impatiently buying five feet of new hose, I told the owner it was a sugaring crisis and he said that's all he's been dealing with these days.

KEYSTONE, continued. The tubing here is state-of-the-art. Eight main lines run vertically up from the big main like tree trunks, and the skinny tap lines run into them like branches. Each tap line has only five to eight taps. The terrain dictates the layout: in a gentle bowl at the top of K6, many many tap lines converge at Penn Station.

SEVEN DAY NITER PRIMER, *Wednesday*. Technically, niter is malate of lime. It is not toxic but it could give you the runs. Some people prefer their syrup with the niter in it. They'll catch the syrup in their cups as it is pouring off the evaporator and drink it straight up.

DRIVEWAY MACRO: Mud or mud-covered ice bordered by receding snowbanks, tall pines or brooks.

DRIVEWAY MICRO: All you hear is water flowing: spring runoff. All you feel is cold air emanating from the brooks.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "What is the other mistake I keep making? My mind is in such a fog I can't think of it."

March 18

The adrenaline has worn off; we are living on vapor, waiting for a second wind, then a third and a fourth. I intended to write this entry last night after the boil, but at 2:30 am it was too much. And this is my second attempt to write yesterday's entry because I was kicked offline by the dial-up connection we in Nebraska Valley must endure, and the draft disappeared.

What with all the fatigue and commotion I am quick to forget the ongoing miracle of the sap, the trees and the sun.

WEATHER: Very poor sugaring weather, low's in the mid-thirties, high near 60. It feels like May.

SAP STATUS: Still running, but it resembles milky whey.

SYRUP STATUS: Dropped to Grade A Dark Amber. Gallon count nearly 2300. We speculate on whether or not the season is crashing or if we will get a shot of cold weather in time. People ask, "Is it a good sugar season?" We won't know til it's over.

CORRECTION: Some of you may have noted that Penn Station is not on K6 but at the top of K7.

THE HILLBILLIES: From L: "These two trees are not far from Penn Station but down in the city you'd never know they existed. They are at the top of a steep wanderlust line that goes through nothing for a ways. Then you see them, healthy but scraggly, dancing away at the top of the knoll, all moonshined up."

SEVEN DAY NITER PRIMER: *Thursday*. Backyard sugarmakers, tapping just a few trees, may filter out the niter with cheesecloth draped over a colander. A more sophisticated apparatus is the filter tank. This tank is a high, rectangular metal box. Inside, three thick felt cones hang from a frame like upside-down dunce caps. You take paper filters, like coffee filters but in the shape of the dunce caps, and fasten them to the felt cones with clothes pins. Then you pour the hot pail of syrup into the cone and close the lid. You can hear the syrup dripping onto the bottom of the tank.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "In thirty-five years I've never seen a sugar season like this one."

MUSIC TO BOIL BY: Ladysmith Black Mambazo

March 19

WEATHER: A repeat of yesterday. T-shirt weather.

BOILING STATUS: Day 16

SEVEN DAY NITER PRIMER: *Friday*. Early and mid-season syrup filters nicely through the cones, but the niter in dark syrup clogs them up. The syrup sits in the cones and cools off. You must lift out the cone and pour the cool syrup into a clean cone, then quickly rinse the niter out of the soiled one. Often the dark syrup must be transferred three or four times. Sugarmakers with this old-style filter dread making dark syrup. That slimy niter clogs the felts so darn fast!

NOONTIME VIEWS FROM THE BUSH: LOOKING UP, lacy silver twigs of sugar maples, opposite twigs reaching for the sun in a gesture of praise. LOOKING DOWN, patches of wet corn snow, new lagoons where the snow just melted, or dry crackly beech leaves. LOOKING ACROSS: gas bubbles chugging silently along in the tubing lines, put out by the tree in addition to the sap.

MACRO: It's hot.

MICRO: Smell of the earth for the first time. Moths in the sap tanks.

QUOTES OF THE DAY: "What it boils down to is the bottom line." "You mean the red line, the top one." [*a reference to the hydrometer*]

March 20

WEATHER: Balmy this morning, chilly this evening. A northwest wind set in and suggested a change of weather. Moody skies.

SAP STATUS: No sap in the tanks.

BOILING STATUS: No boiling. Will we boil again? No one knows. One neighbor said years ago, "Sugar season isn't over until the fat lady sings." We haven't heard her yet.

SEVEN DAY NITER PRIMER, *Saturday*. Larger sugaring operations filter syrup by pumping it through a filter press. First they stir diatomaceous earth into the hot syrup. DE is a white powder of one-celled organisms deposited on ancient ocean floors. It does not dissolve in the syrup but forms a suspension. The DE sticks to paper filters lining a whole rack of square metal waffles and spacers. As the syrup passes through, the DE absorbs the niter. When the filter press is full, the crew takes it apart, replacing the paper filters and dumping the waffle-like cakes of mocha residue in a bucket. Lots of light syrup can be run through the filter press before it must be cleaned, not so with the dark syrup and its slimy niter.

MACRO: Nebraska Valley kids, two boys and a girl, cooking sugar-on-snow on the picnic table in front of the sugarhouse.

MICRO: The sixth-grader spooning bubbly syrup on a bowl of snow to test it.

The high school sophomore smiling as she cuts up pickles.

The third grader rolling up sugar-on-snow on his fork for the fifty-ninth time.

March 21

WEATHER: Wet accumulating snow in the morning, melting snow in the afternoon, high near 40. No sap run.

SEVEN DAY NITER PRIMER, *Sunday*. The easy way to filter syrup is to pour it into a jug and wait. The niter settles out as sludge in the bottom of the jug. Then why don't sugarmakers use this method? It is impossible to rinse the niter off the bottom of 30 or 40-gallon barrels, and no one wants to buy niter, not the customer who is buying a gallon nor the big distributor who pays by the pound. There is no easy way; filtering syrup is a chore. But my, how that clear syrup does glow in a glass flask by a sunny window!

ARCHIVAL JOURNAL ENTRY: *March 21, 2000*. Yesterday evening Lew sent 500 gallons of sap down the drain by inadvertently opening the sap tank gate valve in the RO room. Clyde and I heard an unusual clicking sound, plus the sap tank gauge wasn't reading, but we didn't figure it out until Lew woke up from his evening power nap.

Lew had to rebuild the pipe between the arch doors. A trip to Leo's Welding in Merville for me.

Major flue leak while cleaning flues. Pans drained, disassembled, flues reshaped, leak soldered. Tools – buckets of sweet – guys – filth, for a few hours.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: Sugar season is a cross between childbirth and a vacation.

March 22

WEATHER: Drizzly rain all day, steady rain this evening, high around 40. No sap run.

PROSPECTS FOR THIS WEEK: There is rampant speculation about when and if we will have another run.

NOTES FROM MARCH 22, 1999: Started boiling at 6 am. Wind beating at buildings, driving downward through the cupola into the pans. Waves in the front pan, hot ones.

Problems: 1) Too much sap. it ran all night, naughty, naughty.

2) Sap intake valve frozen (a pre-boiling dilemma)

3) Power went out. HELP!

4) No one checked the pump room after 3) and as a result the pump smoked away and the release pump did something bad which I don't understand and never will. Naughty release pump!

5) What? No vacuum? Must be a break in the main line – the wind wreaking its havoc.

6) Density problems mostly all day.

7) The pump on the filter press went. Lew was at a meeting so the crew filled nearly two drums with unfiltered syrup. It took him two hours to replace the pump. Then we had to run all that syrup through the front pan again. Beautiful syrup, though.

8) Flood in the RO room due to misdirected permeate water.

9) E. noticed that the hydrometer was bouncing and bubbling out of its cup. Cracked, useless.

10) Fitting blew off in sap shed. No one free to fetch Lew a wrench. He finally let the sap gush out while he ran down to find the wrench.

P.S. Pump room door had been closed during the night. Temp. in that room rose to 110 F. Tropical nightmare.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: " You LIKE hats."

March 23

WEATHER: Another drizzly day, in the 30's to 40. No sap run.

MACRO: A baking dish of maple syrup biscuits fresh out of the oven.

MICRO: Imperfectly round, brown biscuits swimming in hot maple syrup.

Ten minutes later, the syrup has sugared up. Spooning it onto your plate with your second helping.

Salty and sweet on the tongue, the taste of tradition.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: Everyone is saying how red the hills are, but they're not that red."

March 24

WEATHER: It snowed overnight and stayed in the high 20's until mid-afternoon, when the skies cleared and the temp. rose into the mid-thirties. This is the closest we've come to a freezing day in March.

Snow and cold today and predictions for a warmer day tomorrow – the recipe for a run. Less than an hour ago my plan was to get to bed. But I checked the thermometer, and it was hovering around 34. So I checked the sap shed and the lines were running. Quick, fetch a pail of hot water! Quick, connect the outdoor hose! Quick, run up to the sap shed and turn off the release pump, open vacuum tubs and scrub away! Away, sleepiness! Welcome, adrenaline rush!

Imagine a faucet in your house that you cannot control. It runs when it so desires; sometimes it trickles, other times it gushes.

Now the thermometer reads 36. And there is ice on the puddles and stars in the sky, and a moon. And the vacuum pump is now on, setting off a night of chores.

Every couple of years we have a run like this that starts in the night. This one could choke off later tonight, although I doubt it will.

And so our second season commences...

QUOTE OF THE DAY: It's such a tease.

March 25

WEATHER: It did finally freeze last night, and warmed up quickly to 50, bluebird until the afternoon. Evening drizzle, still 40 at 10 pm and raining hard. Predicted to turn radically colder overnight.

SAP STATUS: All the bustle and bluster last evening were for only a few inches of sap in the tanks. The run petered out, and by 5 pm the lines froze. By 9 am the ice began to belch out of the main lines into the vacuum tub. We stayed by the tub to ensure that the pump could keep up with this alarming torrent of loose sap ice.

The new lines ran well today, Keystone and Maresan, partly due to being cold taps – higher on the hill or with a northern exposure.

NOTES FROM THE SUGARBUSH, from our interns who walked lines with the crew:

MACRO: I thought it was really beautiful. It was great to be there.

MICRO: How easy it is for R to get up the hill!

Lots of deer poop.

Drinking sap directly from the tree.

Intricate network of tubing.

That tool – the red tool – is so cool.

Watching the bubbles – they're like little passengers.

Got some cinnamon fern.

The brook.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: I found a lot of *Huperziceae* [common name: fur moss] with intact spores that look like yellow moons.

March 26

WEATHER: High today 20, sunny and nippy. No sap run.

VERMONT OPEN HOUSE WEEKEND: We'll be boiling tomorrow, Saturday, after 11 am, and serving sugar-on-snow from 10 til 4.

FIRSTS: First time this March that we've had a freeze-up.

First time this March that I have seen and heard a tree full of birds.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: What would you rather be: a flame, a gust of wind, a brook, or soil?

March 28

WEATHER: Yesterday sparkled – the sun was warm and the air chilly, starting the day at 5 degrees, climbing to 34. No sap run, just too cold.

Last night's low was 26 and today was overcast, high 38. The sap ran poorly this afternoon but the run is picking up this evening. It is raining.

VERMONT MAPLE OPEN HOUSE WEEKEND: Nine years ago the state maple organization initiated this event, copying what Maine has been doing for years. Some visitors hop from sugarhouse to sugarhouse; some stop in at just one, for sugar-on-snow or to soak up the steam. Momentum for this event grows each year. I met a few families who now plan their Vermont vacations around open house weekend.

MACRO: A steady flow of visitors all weekend.

MICRO: A three-year old picking up a long dangly wad of sugar-on-snow with his fingers and not being able to cram it into his mouth.

March 30

WEATHER: Low in the 30's, high today 41, rainy.

SAP STATUS: The sap has been running since Monday morning, in particular the Keystone and Maresan taps.

BOILING STATUS: Today is Day 17. We started around noon and at this posting are still boiling. Since it's a cool rainy day, the sugarhouse seems especially cozy. The rain pushes the steam down. From the main road one-third mile away, tufts of white steam accent the somber hillside. On warmer days the steam dissipates more readily.

PRACTICAL LESSON OF THE DAY: Remember to wear a thick shirt or a Johnson wool jacket with long sleeves when you are drawing syrup from the pans or stoking. I stripped down to a thin cotton shirt with long sleeves and spilled boiling hot sap onto my arm while scooping from the back pan. Better to perspire than to risk a burn. (Mine was not serious.)

SUPPER IN THE SUGARHOUSE: Meatloaf, sweet potatoes and salad brought up by the mother of the crew, biscuits baked in maple syrup for dessert. Some of us sat on the back bench, dangling our legs and feeling hidden away from the whole world.

ARCHIVAL JOURNAL ENTRY, *March 30, 2005*: W McG, a first-grader, ate copious amounts of foam rising off the sap in the float box, exclaiming, "This tastes like regular foam!"

March 31

WEATHER: Low in the 30's, high today 46, overcast, breezy.

SAP STATUS: The sap keeps running day and night, tapering off during the night. Today it ran less than yesterday, a predictable result of no freezing nights. The sap is very weak, like most end-of-season sap.

BOILING STATUS: Day 18. The syrup is a bit darker than yesterday's, no surprise.

THE FAT LADY has been warming up for a few days; we expect to hear her break into her aria tomorrow. She is not the only fat one - the maple buds are fat and swollen. And the rhubarb is coming up, the red-winged blackbirds are back, and the woodsy section of the driveway is past mud season. Old-timers speak of the frog run, when the last sap run coincides with the sound of the first peepers. I only recall a few frog runs in the thirty years we've been sugaring here, occurring in mid to late April.

DINNER IN THE SUGARHOUSE, *post script*: At the same time we're hidden away from the whole world, we are firmly at the center of the whole world – the sugarhouse during a night boil.

THE CREW: The neighborhood boys who ran up after school day after day to fill their Dixie cups with hot syrup and then tear around our place – climbing on the woodpile, making forts up near the cupola, pushing each other on the barrel dollie – are now in their twenties: strong, alert and keen on sugaring. This year we have two main guys who live across the way. We'll call them at 9:30 am and say we need help starting at 2:30 pm, or we may not know until 2:30 pm that we need help at 6 pm. It's impossible to plan ahead. When they get here, we can't even tell them when the work day will end – it could be 8 pm or 2 am.

Many other younger Nebraska Valley kids, girls and boys, help out part-time serving sugar-on-snow, stacking wood, scrubbing, cleaning tubing, canning syrup, making maple cream and sugar and working in the woods.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "Yuhhhhh," spoken musically and with finality.

April 1

MORNING QUOTE: "You think you've seen every imaginable thing that could go wrong until something's thrown at you that's devastating."

FIVE MINUTES LATER: "I can't believe I did that! If that doesn't ever take the cake! [*expletives deleted*]"

A NEW MISTAKE! We stopped collecting sap at 2:30 a.m. since it had turned milky, and in the morning Lew ran the reverse osmosis machine as usual. But he directed the concentrated sap into a tank already three-quarters filled with pure water (permeate). That perm water was supposed to be for the final RO rinse of the year. Tap water is not pure enough, and rinsing the RO is one of those extremely important, behind-the-scenes chores.

WHAT TO DO? Drain and rinse the contaminated tank, and start over in hopes that enough raw sap remains to create a sufficient volume of permeate water.

WEATHER: Downright hot, I but forgot to look at the thermometer.

BOILING STATUS: Day 19 I think. The last day in 2010 of firing up the arch.

SYRUP STATUS: Total gallon count: 2752, or .41 gallons of syrup per tap. We have done better only twice in the past. We ended on Grade A Dark. Our neighbor who does backyard sugaring took away the sweet (a noun) remaining in the front pan. She will boil it down in a homestyle rig in her family's garage.

ARCHIVAL END-OF-SEASON NOTES: ...am feeling end-of-the-year symptoms. My mind feels unsteady – I must remind myself that when sugaring is over I will be able to think clearly again. Perspective on problems becomes distorted several weeks into sugaring....Absent-minded. Thought I could fill the wash tank for the RO in my sleep – not so.....The weepy part of sugar season. all seems unfortunate, impossible.....Will I one day feel nostalgic for this day of sitting in the corner of the sugarhouse, on Day Twenty-Two, feeling incredibly sleepy and aching as I hear the Mama's and Papa's harmonize?I cannot cope with the English language...

MACRO: Snowmelt from Mt. Bend is still feeding Falls Brook.

MICRO: Walking down the driveway toward the valley, warm air against the cheek. Walking up the driveway, cold mountain air against the cheek.

MUSIC TO BOIL BY: Hank Williams, honky-tonk country.

April 2

WEATHER: Paralyzingly hot.

THE CROP IS IN. Syrup is the first agricultural crop of the year.

SOME DATA: 87% of the crop was made by March 19.

In 1988 we also finished up on April 1. In 2000 the last day was March 23.

March 26 was the only frozen day in March – this is new, and newsworthy.

PHASE I: Tapping, Feb. 16-25

PHASE II: Boiling, Feb. 28-April 1

PHASE III: Cleanup, April 1- ? There is no resting until all the taps have been knocked out of the trees and rinsed. With all this hot weather it is especially imperative that we finish this task quickly.

Cleanup began yesterday evening when Lew hiked into the sugarbush to set up the water stations with sections of plastic pipe. The station near the Podium uses a spring; the two stations over on Morningside plug into a small brook.

We carry backpack fruit sprayers that hold four gallons each and walk up one line and down the next. At each tree we pull out the spout with a special tool, fit the nozzle of the sprayer over the spout and give it a little squirt. Then we twist the spout onto its fitting where it stays until next February.

This tubing cleanup is good work. It offers an opportunity to thank each tree and to wish it well for the summer. And the woods feel alive and hopeful.

MACRO and MICRO: Peepers.

NEWS FROM THE VILLAGE: A 93 year-old friend exclaims over goldfinches drinking from a melting icicle.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "The horses are looking a little rough." (so said a Hinesburg farmer and sugarmaker at the tail end of sugar season. When I worked for him in the '70's he gathered the sap buckets with his team of horses pulling a sled.)

April 3 and 4

THE MAPLE TREE

The following is a small piece of the Iroquois Creation Story, as told to me by Sylvia, Mohawk Nation, August, 2004. Here is her telling:

Sky Woman (Grandmother Moon) came to this world pregnant. She gave birth to Original Woman (Mother Earth). Original Woman ended up sacrificing herself in childbirth so that life on earth could begin.

After her death, Original Woman was placed in the ground:

1. From her head grew tobacco that it might be burned and be the visible representation of our thought and prayers to the Spirit World (helpers) and the Great Mystery.
2. From her heart grew the heart berry (strawberry) that we would have blood, family connections, seeds and a connection to the earth (natural world).
3. From her body grew the Three Sisters (corn, beans and squash), the main sustenance of the Iroquois.
4. From her lower body grew the Maple Tree. The Maple Tree provides us with sweet cleansing water.

The Maple Tree is the leader of all trees. It leads by example and shows the trees how to work with Mother Earth and the seasons – when the sap will flow, when to bud, when to unfurl, when to seed, when to color, when to fall and when to begin again. The only element that all life needs is water. The Maple stands to teach us to respect and care for our water, as it is a sacred gift. The Iroquois believe that each stand of maples has a head female and a head male tree. These two are often the oldest amongst the stand of trees.

To this day, the Iroquois recognize and honor the Maple as a leader and hold a ceremony at tapping/syrup time to remember how important the Maple is to our life, how it came as a gift to the People from Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon, Sky World, and the Great Mystery.

April 5

WEATHER: Returned to the 30's Sunday night, high today 60, and that felt cool after a torrid weekend.

THE FAR CORNER OF THE SUGARHOUSE: As you enter the sugarhouse, to the left is the smokestack ascending from the end of the arch. The arch is 12' by 4', so walk the 12 feet to the other end of the arch and you are at the firebox. Turn to your left and walk 2 feet: the thick black firebox door will be on your left, a pile of wood for stoking the arch will be on your right. Behind the wood are doors to the woodshed. All of this you will notice readily. The sugarhouse is built into the bank, so the wall facing you is cement up to about 6 feet, and above that are a row of high windows.

In the dark corner behind the wood are the medieval tools, black and silent. There is the heavy black iron rake used for scraping the ashes off the grates; it is a right-angled piece of iron with an 8-foot pole. There is the heavy black flue brush, much longer and with a doughnut-shaped brush at the end. There is a crowbar and a black square shovel.

To clean the ashes, you will want to put on the sooty Johnson wool jacket, the sooty wool hat to match, ratty old gloves and a face mask. Grab a flashlight and drag the ashes bucket around to the firebox. Reach for the long heavy rake in the corner, then open the bulky door to the firebox. It will creak and groan. Drag the rake across the thick grates, slowly, rhythmically, clankily, feeling your way, scraping across centuries of fireboxes and ashes.

CLEANUP will go on for longer than anyone would wish. After the woods work comes the scrubbing down of every square inch of equipment and the sugarhouse.

IN THE WOODS the spring beauties are blooming on the forest floor. Their blossoms are dainty and white, with pink stripes. Next will emerge the yellow violets.

It is time to pick wild leeks, also called ramps. They grow in patches only in certain spots. We have only one leek patch in our sugarbush, up on Keystone. Their flavor is more intense than that of other leeks. I usually saute them in butter and add them to whatever I am preparing. As the first fresh green vegetable of the year they taste like pure vitality.

AND SO ENDETH this blog titled *SUGAR SEASON 2010*.

THE QUEBECOIS say it best: "C'est la maladie du printemps."