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IN THE SAP BUSH
An Extraordinary Sugar Season at
North Family Shakers in 1881

All old sugar makers will remember the season of 1881 as the great sugar season. The winter had been an ordinary one, the ground was frozen only moderately, and the snow the first of March lay about knee deep in field and forest alike and was drifted but little. February had been a steady cold month with no let-up till about the 5th of March, when there came quite a change. The 7th was a frosty morning, but by nine o'clock the air began to have that peculiar mellow feeling known as sap weather, the wind westerly and mild.

A team was started in the morning distributing the buckets, and about nine o'clock three of us started in to tap the trees. The sap started very freely, often running a stream at first and then dropping just as fast as one drop could follow another. By night we had 600 buckets hung and many of them were two-thirds full and sap running fast. The next morning two teams were set to gathering the sap, as many of the buckets were full and some were running over. We also continued tapping so that by night of the 8th we had about 1500 trees tapped, had gathered 25 barrels of sap and had the boiling going on full head.

Before going farther with my story I will just give a description of the plant. We had just added to it and it now consisted of 1750 old pine sap buckets painted outside and in. Of these 300 were large size, holding fifteen quarts, the rest being ten or twelve quarts. We had added for this season's use 1500 bucket covers, also had adopted Cook's galvanized iron spiles, a great improvement over the old wooden style.

For gathering and hauling the sap we had three gathering tubs that held about 120 gallons each. We reckoned each tub full as three barrels, as it takes about forty gallons of sap to make a gallon of 11 pound syrup.

This sugar orchard is a hard one to carry on as the trees are scattered over a large territory, about half a mile, north, south and west from the sugar house and also in the pasture and by the side of the road clear to the Paddleford place and beyond. Rough roads run through the bush in different directions, so that the sap need not be carried very far by hand. Sleds and wheels were both used in hauling the sap, and on the best days three teams were used and about five men to gather the sap.

We had holders or storage tubs set so the sap would run into the evaporator and also so located that the sap could be drawn from the hauling tubs into the storage tubs or holder, thus avoiding all dipping and lifting of the sap at the camp. A man would come in with his tub of sap, drive up, put up the spout and in two or three minutes his tub would empty itself.

The boiling apparatus consisted of an improved evaporator, the largest size being 16 feet long, 4 feet wide. We also had a large tubular heater set in the arch at the end of the evaporator. All the sap passed through this heater and was at the boiling temperature

when it reached the evaporator. The capacity of this boiling plant was fifty 40-gallon barrels of sap or fifty gallons of syrup in twenty-four hours.

The personel (sic) consisted of Charles Miner, a member of the family, who attended to the boiling during the day. The gathering was done by hired men, Lewis P. Lovejoy being the boss farmer at this time. His men were Don C. Choate, Charles Bagley, John Cross and Will Savage. Some days these men were kept busy all day, other days part of the day, or only one or two teams would be needed.

We commenced boiling the 8th of March and for sixteen days the fire did not go out, but was run for all it was worth night and day. I attended it nights with one of the men, who took turns, with me. Several times at night all our store tubs were full (about 70 barrels.) The greatest amount gathered in one day was 75 barrels.

Up to the 24th of March we had gathered and boiled in about 700 barrels of sap. Then came a week of cold weather in which we got very little sap. About April 1st the weather came right again and we got about 160 barrels more, making 860 barrels of sap from which we made 900 gallons of syrup.

We sold our syrup that year to a Mr. Shepard of Cambridge, Mass. at 80 cents a gallon net. Mr. Shepard sent the barrels, new oak casks averaging fifty gallons each, and we filled for him that year sixty of these casks, as we took all the syrup the other two families made and also bought several hundred gallons of outside parties.

Two sisters were usually at the camp part or all day, and they got the dinners and often the supper. We often had sugar parties of brethren and sisters up to dinner, from the family or from the other families. Once or twice we had a party of friends from this village and they always had a good time eating "stick chops" and sugar and candy in various forms. Once incident I shall never forget, it was a select company of older people, three or four gentlemen with ladies. They were having a high old time when one of the gentlemen said something that one of the ladies did not like at all, and to get even with him she reached over his shoulder and plastered a big wad of "stick chops" into his whiskers, rubbing it well in and he had a fine time soaking it off with hot water.

We got our last sap about the 12th of April and were all done, buckets and tubs cleaned and put away by the 15th.

Henry Cumings