*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Maple season brings back sweet memory**

Moving back to the country 16 years ago brought me back to many tasks and chores I experienced as a farm kid, but it also gave us the chance to try some new activities.

One of them was raising pigs – which we never had on the farm when I was young – and one of the others was making maple syrup. Most of the maples on our farm aren’t sugar, but you can make syrup from any maple tree. We have lots of silver maples, which means you need to collect a little more sap because it’s not as high in sugar content.

We started with a few spiles and pails and then graduated to sap bags, which are a little more efficient when you’re having to cover a lot of territory. One weekend we collected more than 50 gallons of sap from trees up and down our creek bed and yard. After it was cooked down we had about a gallon and three cups of syrup that were filtered and stored in canning jars.

The first year we made syrup was probably 2008 or 2009. I set up an old wood stove outside – it has a flat surface that can hold two roasting pans. I put a canopy over the top of the stove in front of the barn, started a fire, and poured the sap into the pan.

Dad came out to observe and we settled into a couple of lawn chairs. It was a cool March day, but it was cozy next to the stove. I fetched a couple of beers and some peanuts. Dad and I sat and shot the breeze.

My wife Sherry came out and asked what we were doing. “Watching the sap boil,” I told her, which was sort of the truth. “I don’t want it to burn.”

I was informed that it would be hours before the sap was in any danger of burning and like in nearly all things, she was right. But at that moment it was a chance to kick back and enjoy some Dad time.

Those were the years before Dad’s dementia set in. I don’t remember what we talked about, baseball, the weather … it doesn’t matter. It’s just one of those memories that come rushing back every time I think about making syrup. Just a father and son sharing time without thinking about how precious it was.

The next year I moved the stove into our old garage and we got serious about making syrup. The sap would cook off outside and we’d bring it in the house to finish it off on the stove and filter it before bottling.

The way the weather has been so far this spring – cold nights and even below-normal days – this could be a sap season like 2013 which was when Wisconsin produced 265,000 gallons of syrup, a record that stood until 2019. That was a sharp contrast from 2012 when we had 80 degrees in the middle of March that ended the sap run.

Last year Wisconsin’s maple syrup production was 300,000 gallons from 850,000 taps.

It’s been quite a few years since we’ve made syrup, but we still have a few pints left from our last batch. Pure maple syrup-like honey – will last indefinitely because of the high sugar content.

Maybe when I retire – if that day ever happens – we’ll start making syrup again. I’ll be sure to fire up the old wood stove, grab a couple of beers and invite the kids and grandkids. *Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor, and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*

***Photo cutlines:***

Buckets: Buckets capture the maple sap along a road in Jackson County.

Drilling: Chris Hardie drills into a maple tree before setting the spile.

Pouring: Chris Hardie collects the sap in buckets.

Sap bags: Special bags and holders collect the sap.

Cooking down: Two pans of sap cook down atop an old wood stove.