



IT'S SUGARING TIME

If you asked people across this great nation what one thing they know about Vermont, the chances are pretty good that they'd say, "That's where maple syrup comes from." Of course, maple syrup is made in some other states and parts of Canada, but Vermont is especially known for its pure maple products.

That has been true for hundreds of years, even before white people settled the state and gave it a name. Indians collected maple sugar for many, many years before that. In fact, they preferred to flavor their food with maple sugar rather than salt.

There is an old Iroquois legend about how the Indians discovered maple syrup. It seems that the Indian chief Woksis was going hunting one spring day. He yanked his **tomahawk** from the tree where he had thrown it the night before. The day grew warm and from the gash in the maple tree sap dripped into a birchbark box that lay near the tree. Woksis's wife, toward evening, needed water in which to boil their dinner. She saw the box full of sap and thought that would save her a trip to get water. Anyway, she was a careful woman and didn't like to waste anything. She tasted it and found it good—a little sweet, but not bad. So she used it for

cooking water. Woksis, when he came home from hunting, scented the wonderful maple aroma, and from far off knew that something especially good was stewing. The water had boiled down to syrup, which sweetened their meal with maple. So, says the legend, was the happy practice **inaugurated**.

Early Vermont settlers followed the Indian's example. They would cut a V-shaped gash in the tree with their axes, then insert a chip at the point of the V. The sap would drip off the chip into the birch-bark container on the ground below.

It was not long before the settlers found that they could collect more sap by drilling a hole in the tree and inserting a birch-bark or alder spout. They began to use wooden sap buckets to collect their sap and later discovered ways to attach the bucket to the spout.



In time the spouts came to be made of metal as did the buckets and the covers which were attached to the buckets to keep out the rain and twigs.

In the early days the sap was collected in huge barrels drawn on sleds by a pair of oxen or horses. It was then taken to the sugar camp to be boiled down.

In those days the sap was boiled down to syrup in huge iron kettles hung over bonfires. These were out in the open air and not in a building. Often the farmer would use the same kettle for boiling sap that he used for making soap or scalding hogs during butchering season.

Old time sugarhouses didn't look much like the ones we see today. Often the "house" was simply a lean-to made of brush and birch bark where the sugarmakers could have some protection from the wind, snow, and rain.

Later farmers found they could make better syrup and sugar by boiling the sap in flat pans over a fire built in a brick or stone **arch**. Even more improvement came in the 1850's when the **evaporator** was invented. This circulated the boiling sap in the pan and again improved the quality of the maple sugar. In the past century many additional improvements have been made.



Today many people enjoy maple in the form of syrup, but for most of our history, people preferred maple sugar. One reason for this was that sugar could be transported or stored more easily in boxes, tubs, or barrels. Very few farmers had tin cans or glass bottles enough to store syrup. Maple sugar heated with a little water would turn into syrup, so they knew they could make syrup when they wanted it.

Most Vermont farm families depended upon maple sugar for sweetening in their cooking. Sometimes on very special occasions white sugar would be used, but that was very expensive and a **luxury**, especially when nearly every family had a good supply of maple sugar on hand.



Although Vermont is not a large state, it still produces more maple products than any other, making "pure Vermont syrup" known throughout our country.

tomahawk — a light ax used by the North American Indians

inaugurate — to begin

arch — a fireplace, usually made of brick or stone, on which flat pans of sap were placed for boiling.

evaporator — a metal device through which sap flows while being boiled.

luxury — something not absolutely necessary