



SUGARBUSH COUNTRY CLUB

By Monroe S. Miller

This time of year, especially on a day like this one in late February when the temperature reaches 50 degrees F. and the sun is bright in a blue sky, I think about Mac McGregor and his golf course, the Sugarbush CC. I will never forget the trip I made up there in central Wisconsin, at his invitation, a few years ago.

It came about, actually, while Mac and I were shooting the breeze at the Wisconsin reception during the GCSAA conference. The discussion centered on what we were looking at with particular attention on the equipment show floor. I don't remember exactly, but it seems that year I was shopping greensmowers pretty hard since we needed a bunch of new ones. "How about you, Mac? What do you have your eyes on?" I asked.

"They don't have the piece of equipment I need most on display here," he said with all seriousness.

I sort of laughed. Any equipment with even a remote connection to golf turf can be found at the show, and there seems always to be too many exhibitors with machinery or equipment that has no connection at all that we can see to golf course maintenance. They clutter the exhibition hall.

"You've got to be kidding," I said. "If it isn't here, it isn't manufactured or else it is something you don't really need. What is it you are looking for, Mac?"

"A new snowmobile. The one I have now is old, worn and underpowered."

"What makes you think you would find a winter recreational vehicle at a golf course equipment show deep in the south?"

"Because I use it on my golf course," came Mac's rather tart reply.

I didn't want to either insult him or expose my ignorance (which was more likely), so I carefully asked him if he meant he used a snowmobile to groom cross country skiing trails on the golf course.

"That, and to tow the stainless steel tank on a sled frame I use to haul maple sap from our golf course sugarbush back to our sugar house," Mac said. "But I didn't really expect to see snowmobiles here," he admitted with a smile.

Like most people, I know a little bit about maple syrup making and how it is a big business in New England, New York and Canada. I also know there were some maple syrup and maple sugar manufacturers in Wisconsin; I didn't know that Mac was one of them. I told him that.

"You should get out of your office in Madison next month and come up to God's Country to see my maple syrup operation," he offered.

"Is that an invitation?" I asked, hoping that it was.

"Yep," came the reply. "I will give you a call in a month or so, or maybe even sooner, when the sap starts to flow

and you can come up and watch what we do. It is a little more relaxed that getting the golf course ready for play each day in the summer, but it is hard work and the days can get to be rather long.

Sure enough, he did call. I took a vacation day, left home early and drove up to the Sugarbush CC. It was a pleasant day in Wisconsin; the sun was made brighter by the two feet of snow that covered most of the state. It was one of those days we ache for in the cold, cloudy, dark weather most typical from Thanksgiving until now. The temperature that day was predicted to rise from the low 20s to the mid-40s — "perfect maple sap weather" Mac said as I got out of my pickup in the clubhouse parking lot. "The sap is filling the pails almost as fast as I can empty them into my collector tank."

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The sap in maple trees flows not by the calendar but by the weather — great runs can happen from mid-February to late April or even early May. "It's a little like when you open a golf course," Mac added. "You open when the weather says you can."

Good sap running days are like that one — cold at night and much warmer (up to about 50 degrees F) during the day. These wild swings in temperature get the sap moving. "Most often," Mac explained as we walked over to the old snowmobile he wanted to replace at the national, "the best and strongest flows are short, lasting only for a few hours to a day in length. You could have only one good run a year or you might have a dozen good ones. And in some years you do not get even one, instead having to collect sap from piddling little drizzles."

We roared through the snow onto the perimeter of the golf course. It was easy to see why it was named Sugarbush Country Club — maples were everywhere. Big, old sugar maples defined the holes of play, the boundaries of the golf course and they filled the wooded rough areas. Others rose like giant dark gray sentries next to greens and tees. They were majestic. I could only guess at how beautiful this place must be in the autumn color days.

"I'm kind of an old fashioned, amateur maple syrup maker," Mac said to me as we slowed to a stop near a group of sugars that all had one or two 16-quart pails hanging from each, at about 30 inches from the base. As soon as Mac turned off the snowmobile, you could hear a steady drip, drip, drip, of sap into the pails. "I still use the pails to collect sap from the trees. I travel a route around the course, pour the sap into the tank I pull with this old snowmobile and haul it to a storage tank next to the sugar house when it's almost full."

"Serious syrup makers run Tyron or plastic tubing from tree to tree. They are connected to larger plastic pipe that eventually runs down to the storage tank at the sugar house. It eliminates the hundreds and hundreds of pails they otherwise would have to have. But I only tap about a hundred trees and can get by with 150 or so pails; it all works fine for me."

"In fact, I bought most of these pails from a farmer a couple of miles west of here who plumbed his sugarbush and didn't need the pails any longer," Mac said.

It appeared to me that the pails were either stainless steel or galvanized metal; none were plastic. All did have lids on them "to keep out rain and snow, twigs and bark, and even small wildlife," according to Mac.

"When do you dump these pails, Mac?" I asked.

"When they are full," he responded with a look of 'how dumb are you?' Then he laughed. "What you want to know is how far and how fast do they fill up. The answer varies all over the place. Some trees drip sap, some run small trickles into the pail, and heavy producers actually push a small sap stream out the spile."

"Over time a syrup maker gets to know his trees in a way like a farmer gets to know his herd of dairy cows. I've had a sugar maple tree — in fact, that one up there to the right of the 17th green — that once produced 30 quarts of sap in one 24 hour period from one taphole. The average yield of the sugar maples here on the golf course that I tap averages a little better than 10 gallons per tree."

But big maples in New England have been recorded producing 250 to 300 gallons in a season and not suffering from it even a bit. A farmer from Vermont once had a single taphole in a maple in his sugarbush push out 80 gallons of sap!

Mac carefully removed a pail from a tree, opened the lid to his sap tank on runners, tipped open the hinged lid to the sap bucket, and poured the nearly 16 quarts of sap into the tank. He hung the pail back up and continued to capture the sweet harvest.

I stuck my finger under the spile to catch a few drops of the sap. It was cold but only slightly sweet in flavor. I expected a more distinct taste. "Well," Mac said, "that is why the sap goes to the sugar house — it needs to be concentrated. The water gets boiled off in the next step."

We carefully drove up the rough from tree to tree, pouring the sap into the collector tank. His old snowmobile was grunting with its heavy load and extra passenger.

Trees on the clubhouse lawn were tapped, as were those lining the road to the clubhouse from the county highway. It was an old-fashioned scene. "You should have a team of horses and a bobsled for this job, Mac," I offered.

"I wish I did," came the reply.

I wondered what he did if there was no snow. "I set the tank on a trailer and hitch the trailer to one of our 8N Ford tractors and hope there isn't much mud. Sometimes I walk substantial distances when wet soil keeps the tractor from some places on the course."

The collector tank wasn't quite full, but Mac headed to the sugar house. It could be seen from a distance — the vents in the center of the peak of the roof were letting out a lot of steam. Wood smoke was coming out of the chimney from the fire in the evaporator. He tiptoed the snowmobile along a fairway, crossed in front of a tee and ran tangential to a slope inching ever closer to the strong uphill side of the sugar house and the storage tank. Gravity was used to empty the collector tank into the storage tank, and it also moved sap from the storage tank into the evaporator inside the sugar house.

Mac ran the first five gallons of sap into a pail "to have handy in case the storage tank ran out of sap while the



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fire was too strong." He set the pail inside, next to the evaporator.

"Sometimes, if it gets cold while we are still boiling down the sap, the sap will freeze in the plastic pipe running from the storage tank into the sugar house. We need those five gallons of sap to keep things going while we open the line," he explained.

We unloaded the collector tank, went inside the sugar house where one of his guys on the golf course crew was tending the fire and watching the sap boil down. Mac opened the draft on the evaporator, filled the firebox with slab wood and wood from storm damage on the golf course. In no time the fire was roaring and the sap in the flat but slightly tipped pans was up to a rolling boil.

I had a thousand questions as we stood in the moist, humid air that filled the sugar house. It was very fragrant and sweet smelling.

"How much wood do you use?" I asked as I looked outside at the substantial pile of sawmill slab wood and limb wood.

"Depends on how much syrup we get," Mac replied. "It takes four or five cords of wood for 100 gallons of syrup."

"Do all sugar maples have the same amount of sugar in the sap?" I wondered. "Nope," came the reply. "Most have sap that runs about 3% sugar, but some have given up say analyzed to have more than 10% sugar. And it varies with maples side by side, indicating that sugar content probably results more from genetics than soil or climate conditions."

One thing I had noticed as we were moving around the golf course was that the pails were not always on the same place on a tree. Same approximate height — yes. But some pails were on the south (sunny) side of a tree. Others were on the lower side of a tree on a slope, regardless of the orientation. Others were drilled where most of the branches were or where the bark appeared thickest. "Does it matter, Mac?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maple syrup makers discuss this all the time, but nothing has been quantified. I have often thought about writing the University of Vermont Extension Service to see if there has been any research done on these matters. I simply go on my instinct."

The sap boils at about 220 degrees F. As it boils, the inclination allows gravity to move the syrup slowly from one pan to another. As it moves down, it gets darker, going from clear sap to amber to brown. At the end it is drawn off as syrup.

We visited for a couple more hours. They were always busy, feeding the fire, watching the boiling sap to insure nothing was burned, skimming and tending to any number of other details involved in getting the sap to syrup. One of the guys took the snowmobile and headed out to the golf course sugarbush to continue collection sap from the trees.

Mac did an "apron" test on syrup in the last pan. He poured the warm syrup from a ladle. If it formed an apron along the edge of the ladle instead of dripping back into the pan, it was ready to draw off into the cans.

He also used a hydrometer to check the density. Maple syrup is graded according to color — Fancy, A, B and C. Mac had a series of vials to compare with to grade it properly.

Most maple syrup containers, whether tin cans with a small cap on the top or a plastic jug with a narrow throat, have a quaint scene on them reminiscent of years gone by. You know, that Currier and Ives-like scene of a team

of horses pulling a sled loaded with milk cans full of sap through the sugarbush. Usually you can see the old and weathered sugar house in the background. Not Mac.

The cans he used had a golf course scene — flagstick in a golf green, big maples everywhere. Stamped near the top on each side was Wisconsin Maple Syrup from SUGARBUSH COUNTRY CLUB. He had 1/2 pint, pint, quart, half gallon and gallon cans. As they drew the maple syrup from the evaporator, it was filtered through an inner filter of paper and an outer filter of felt. They canned it hot, which insured against fermentation. Also, as it cooled down it created a vacuum which in turn allowed for expansion during the warmer months.

I spent some more time with him on the course, collecting sap from his sugar maples and hauling it back to the sugar house. When the sap was running, they had little choice but to boil until the weather shut the run down.

Late winter in Wisconsin won't be the same for me ever again. Usually by now I am thinking about the spring business meeting, of the first days outdoors on the golf course since late the previous fall, and of opening day.

Now when the bright days of February and March come, I think of maple syrup, the sweet and fragrant steam in the sugar house, and the delicious maple syrup I use on ice cream and French toast and cereal and pancakes.

Mac gave me a quart of Grade A Dark Amber boiled down and canned while I was there. It was a good investment for him — I order a gallon or two from him every year. He brings it with him to the meeting in Fond du Lac.

But none has ever been quite as good or quite as sweet as that first quart from the Sugarbush Country Club. Treat yourself to some, someday. ♣

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