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Syrup Festival well attended

by Lindsay Eaglesham

The women of Purple Valley who worked the grills at the 21st Annual Maple Syrup Festival last Saturday are probably still trying to get the grease out of their hair and the smoke out of their lungs after six solid hours of flapjack frying, flipping and flogging.

"I never cook them again all year," said Edna Cook, one of the chief hands on the grill. "It takes me about three days to get the smoke out of my lungs," said Elsie McKone."

Though the work was hard, Elsie was somewhat in her element because the Festival's temporary kitchen facility was in the old one-room school house that Elsie attended as a child. With a smile she thought of the curious irony which had her standing over a hotcake grill just a few feet from where she sat at her desk so many years ago.

"It was just over there," she indicated, and explained that in the one-room school house system the older you got the further to the rear you sat. "That was my last desk there, at the back."

A couple more older women said they too shared the same memories with Elsie. But right then there was no time to be interviewed; no time for reflection as they scurried to serve hundreds of people clamoring at the windows for a breakfast of pancakes, farmer's sausage and lovely and pure maple syrup.

Festival committee member Audrey Hepburn was exuberant despite the fact she had almost been run off her feet. Aproned and splattered from head to toe with pancake mix, she had been up until 2 a.m. baking pies, jellies and the like. Then awake at 7 a.m. to attend to the organizing of the breakfast.

The pancakes were especially tasty I discovered, or was it just that they were deliciously soaked in that smoky maple syrup from Bill Glassford's sugarbush.

"What's the secret? I asked Audrey. She refused to divulge the recipe. "I think you could say it was magic," was all she would allow. "You can eat it and you can wear it," referring to her spotted appearance.

Seems there was a small problem with the big commercial batter mixing machine. It seemed to batter everyone around it. Then it broke down altogether, but it was soon fixed.

There were amazingly few calamities at this year's pancake pig out. It's running smoother every year. "This year we didn't have to run back to town for supplies," said Audrey.

The only real damper was some grumbings among the hungry crowds; some people having to wait almost an hour in line during the peak lunch hour period.

But amazingly few grumbings at that. People were in a festive mood, and the weather and the spirit were both just right.

A hundred and fifty kilograms of pancake mix; a hundred kg of lard; two hundred kg of sausage; a hundred pies; fifty cases of pop. And, Oh yes, about 50 gallons of that liquid gold called Maple Syrup.

By the end of the festivities, the wonderful sticky stuff was not just in people's stomachs but it was everywhere. It was sticky underfoot on discarded paper plates; it was sticky on picnic tables under the marquees; it was sticky on countertops and sticky on the faces and hands of tired and cranky toddlers.

But it was all the stuff that memories are made of. And, in fact that was the very theme of this year's Maple Syrup Festival — "Memories Make History."

And speaking of memories, one warm and wise-looking native Indian lady was invited to relate her memories of the old — if not ancient — Ojibway method of tapping, collecting and reducing maple sap to make maple sugar and toffee.

As goes the song: "Long before the white man and long before the wheel" native wisdom used rudimentary materials of nature to fashion the necessities of life and

to extract goodness from a harsh land that somehow yielded to an ingenuity that is all but lost.

Sitting serenely at a table on the edge of the Festival grounds, seventy-nine year old Verna Johnston spoke quietly over the din of the fair, explaining the age-old Indian method of making maple sugar to anyone who cared to listen.

"We would gather birchbark to make baskets for the sap collecting. This was done during the first hot days of June.

"The baskets were fashioned and stored outside, upside down, until the following March. They were then dug out of the snow and placed into a bark chip in the maple

tree.

"Sap boats were made out of dug-out maple logs, and the sap was boiled down in those vessels by using red hot stones. It was generally reduced to sugar form and eaten on dry pumpkin and squash sections."

Later, Verna spoke somewhat wistfully of the loss of much of native culture, and the sadness and loss of identity that this has caused in the young.

Memories do indeed make history. But for Verna Johnston and many others like her, what is more important than keeping memories alive is keeping alive the way of life that produces them.



Elsie McKone was one of the hard working women volunteers who survived kitchen duties at Saturday's Maple Syrup Festival.

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