

Students make maple syrup with retired school principal

By MAGGIE HANNAH
Herald Special

Sunny skies and soggy snow bring hopes of spring to most people, but for others however, it is a sign of the first harvest of the new season.

When the sap starts running, maple syrup makers like Eldon Comfort of R.R.4, Acton gear up for their job. Mr. Comfort has been in the business since he retired and bought his 30-acre property on 17 Sideroad west of Highway 25.

He says he made syrup as a boy on his parents' farm near Smithville in the Niagara peninsula, but things have changed since then and he learned a lot the hard way in the past five or six years. He also joined the Maple Syrup Producers' Association and "picked the brains" of those who had been at it for a while.

His operation today is vastly different from the one he first started out with. The first year, he had 400 sap pails and an arrangement with neighborhood youngsters to come in after school and help carry sap to the sugar house.

Today he has a pipeline system connecting the 500 trees he taps to a small shack in the bush, which houses two pumps. The first uses a small engine to pump the sap out of the lines into a holding tank outside the shack. The second pumps sap from the tank to a storage tank above the sugar shack where the boiling down is done.

PLASTIC TUBING

Plastic tubing feeds sap from the tank to the sap pans. The sap runs through copper tubing above the pans so the steam preheats it and saves boiling time. An added feature of the system is a pan under the pipes which catches the condensation from the cold pipes and converts it into hot water so that Mr. Comfort always has a supply of hot water available for cleaning up sticky hands or equipment.

Sap moves slowly through the three portions of the sap pan, then into a three portion syrup pan before it is filtered and drained into a container for transfer to a finishing pan.

Commercial syrup must have a 66 per cent sugar content and Mr. Comfort

drains it off for finishing when it is boiled down to about 60 per cent sugar. This usually takes three to four hours, depending on the sap.

The finishing pan is fired by an old propane stove and the last bit of water usually boils down in half an hour.

Finished syrup is filtered again and stored in an old commercial coffee maker which can be heated so that the syrup remains at 180 degrees, just right for vacuum packaging at the end of a day.

Since syrup has such a high sugar content, about the same as blood, Mr. Comfort points out, it spoils very quickly and can't be stored for long unless it is properly sealed in sterilized containers.

GRADES SAP

Mr. Comfort grades his sap according to the color. The lighter the color, the better it is, he says. Sap taken early in the season has a lighter color and a better flavor than that drawn off later in the season, and some of his customers insist on syrup from the first run.

Later in the season the sap develops a "buddy" flavor and is less sweet as the sugar changes to starch in preparation for nourishing the tree's buds. Since the sugar content is lower, the sap requires more boiling time to reach the 66 per cent sugar content, and is therefore darker than that collected earlier in the season.

Mr. Comfort heats his sap and syrup pans over a wood fire and one side of his sugar house is lined with wood piles. He cuts all his own woods from his own bush, following a plan laid down for him several years ago by the department of lands and forests when he sought their advice on which trees to harvest to improve his sugar.

One of his first daily tasks is to check the lines from the bush to the storage tank for air. If there is a leak in the lines, air gets in and he loses vacuum in the system. He often finds a squirrel nibbling on a line or spile is responsible for the trouble if air is leaking into the lines.

Mr. Comfort doesn't remove his lines at the end of the season. He flushes them thoroughly, then pumps chlorine back through them and caps them until they are needed for the following year.

He usually goes out and taps the trees in preparation for the beginning of the syrup season in late February, about two weeks before the sap begins to run. Then when sap starts rising he is all ready to put his harvesting system to work.

GLAMOROUS JOB

"Making maple syrup was a very glamorous enterprise," he says, "and I guess it still is. You seem to be getting something from nature free with no additives. And I like the outdoor life. The combination makes it quite gratifying."

When Mr. Comfort retired in 1972 after 10 years as the principal of Yorkdale Secondary School in North York, he and his wife, Betty, went looking for a suitable location for a retirement home in the country. They spent their first year building their own home and having a pond dug out beside the house. It wasn't until later that he decided to take advantage of the quantity of maples growing on his property.

This is the third year the 20 students from the Total Immersion Program at Acton High School will work with Mr. Comfort to learn something of the art of making syrup. The students have also test-

ed all the trees in his sugar bush for their sugar content and stapled the results of the test on the trees.

A third project used to keep the students working in the outdoors, in case it happens to be a cold day and the sap isn't running, is an experiment to determine the usefulness of fertilizing trees. Mr. Comfort says the students annually measure the girth of the 150 trees in a two acre plot and mark them accordingly. Four of every five trees have been fertilized to determine if this stimulates growth. The experiment will continue until such time as some valid assessment

can be made, he says.

As well as enjoying the outdoor life, Mr. Comfort plays tennis two or three times a week and is very active in his church. He also volunteered his services to the Alternatives for Youth Program as a counsellor with inmates at Maplehurst Detention Centre.

Eldon Comfort advises grade 12 student Glen Renton on the correct procedure for adjusting the piping used in maple sugar production.

(Herald photo)



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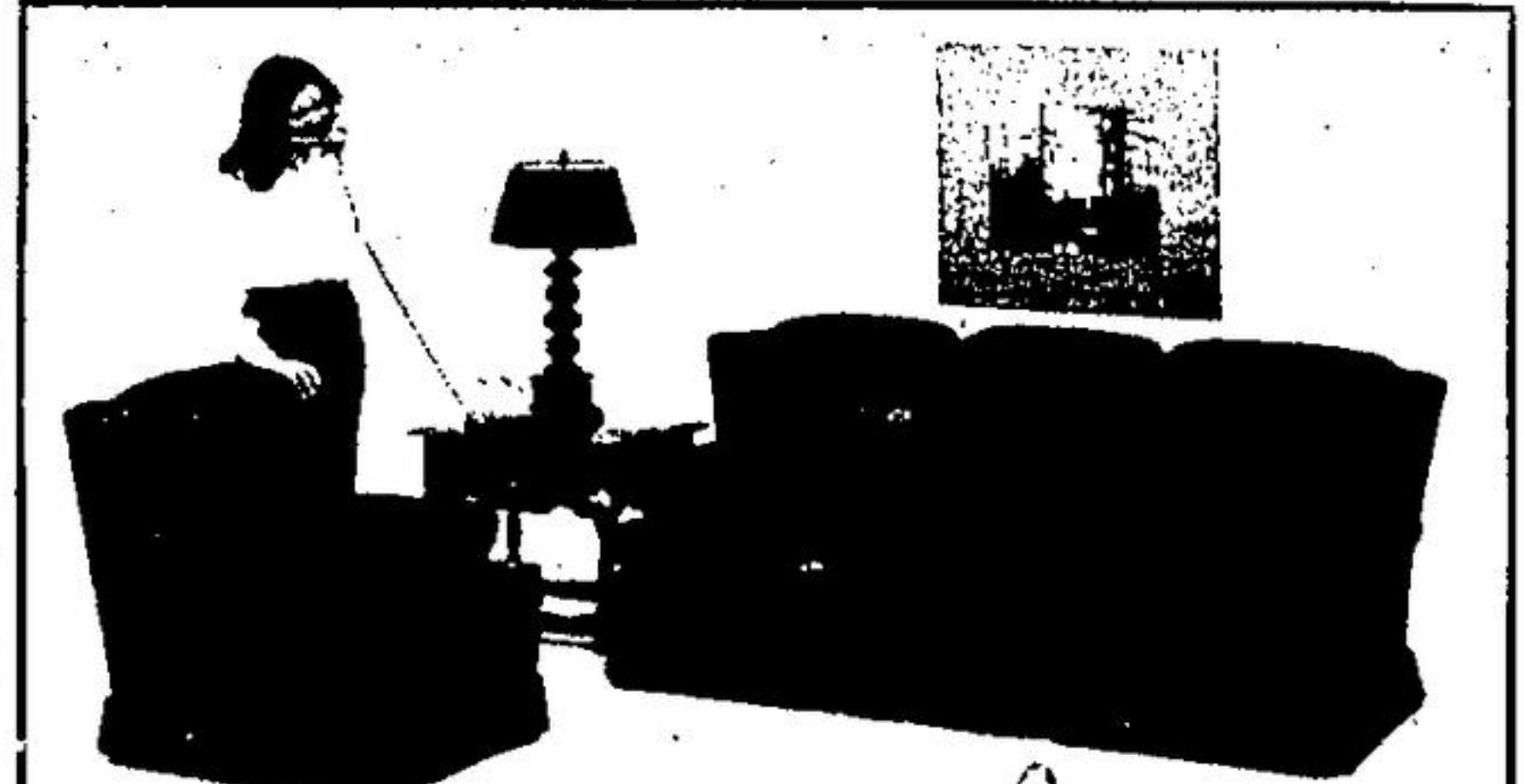
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