

# Nose Knew It Was Time for Sap

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By WAYNE GUTHRIE

Did you know box elder sap can be drunk? I didn't until Otto Creek, Marietta, Shelby County, told me. However, he added, it is not sweet.

My chief memory of the box elder is far from pleasant. It is of the myriad pestiferous red bugs that infested our backyard tree so badly we had to fell it and destroy what had offered copious shade.



Guthrie

Creek told me two other things that were new to me.

One was the ingenious but simple way his grandfather used to determine whether maple syrup time was at hand.

"In the latter part of February and in March Grandfather would smell the air and that would tell him it was sugar molasses time," he explained.

It would be interesting to know just what secret or singular odor served as the tipoff to grandfather. Apparently that was the older man's personal secret.

Another interesting thing was how Creek told when sugar molasses was done.

"You told when it was done by the way it would hang on your dipper. When it was done enough to keep it would hang in a string or was wavy."

He said the molasses would keep until it went to sugar and then one would have to break the jug container to empty the liquid.

"Our native woods contained three trees that would 'run' water (sap)," he continued. "They were the box elder and the soft and hard

of that stuff to make a gallon of molasses.

## HARD MAPLE TREE 'RUNS' SWEET WATER

"The hard maple is the one that 'runs' sweet water."

He recalled his grandfather's farm of 300 acres between Knightstown and Marietta, saying that a hill it embraced was full of heavy timber—oak, poplar and sugar maple. When aged 10, in 1894, he went to that place to live.

Later he worked each year in his grandfather's sugar camp.

After the grandfather had determined by his ingenious smelling method that maple syrup time was at hand he went into action, as Creek explained.

"He would grab a brace and bit and a sack full of spiles made from elders and 'pull' for the camp.

"We would follow him and hang a bucket on each spike he would drive. He'd bore two holes about 6 inches apart and 1½ inches deep into the tree and drive the elder spile into the hole so that it would 'run' the sap into the bucket.

"Next day we would take a sled with barrels laid on it and a big funnel large enough to hold a gallon of sugar water. We'd dump the liquid into a barrel by way of that funnel and hang the bucket back on the tree.

"When the barrels were full we took them to the furnace

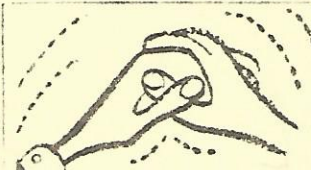
house where we dumped the sugar water into a big cistern which kept it cool until we could boil it down.

"If the sugar water stood too long in the warm open air it would become sour and 'ropey' and unfit for use.

"By using the cistern we did not have to operate our furnace at night or on Sundays."

He reverted to say that the sugar water had to be gathered as soon as a bucket became full. Likewise it could not be allowed to remain in the rain because, he explained, rain water would ruin that sweet liquid and make it necessary to throw it away. Rain not only made the molasses taste bad but gave it a bad color, he added.

He said that by the time he was 12 or 13 he could himself run the plant and make sugar molasses.



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