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THIRD PLACE WINNER 2009-10

Maple Syrup: Not Just for Vermont Anymore!

By Owen Morgan

It's that time again, the time when the sap shall once again flow freely from the lofty sugar maple and the process of collection will begin. Tubes will run out of the maples and into a sugar house at the bottom of the hill. Here it will be painstakingly processed by an assortment of employees while the old men supervise and drink gin. That's how the pros do it. Needless to say, that's not how we do it here in Southwest Virginia.

My family has a longstanding dream. In Burkes Garden, located in Tazewell County, we have some 500 sugar maples. Someday we want to tap these, collect their sap, and sell it for profit. We, sadly, aren't at that point yet. I truly believe it will happen, eventually, but now is not the time. Now we will have to tap our trees at home, in Wytheville, Virginia. At the moment we are tapping a whopping three trees, and last time we cooked down our syrup we had enough for about eight pancakes, but man, was it good!

Three trees still produce a significant amount of work, especially for the clueless and unprepared. We found buckets without any trouble, but we had more trouble finding suitable taps. Not willing to spend money on the classic manufactured tap, we opted for the old timey method. Find a stick from a sumac bush, hollow out the pithy center, drill a hole in the tree, and hope for the best.

I was, I'll admit, a skeptic at first, but I came around. The taps were reasonably effective, after all, how hard is it really to make a tube to get water from one place to another?

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With one problem solved, we were, of course, confronted with another. How can we keep rainwater out of our buckets? With cardboard, that is if you're considerably more concerned with being economical than effective. And believe me, we are.

We only encountered a slight problem with this. Cardboard, being the paper-based substance that it is, can only hinder a small rainfall. Sadly, in a deluge, the cardboard becomes saturated and entirely unsuccessful at preventing the dilution of the sugar water. Fortunately, at this time, we have not encountered any major problems with rain in our sap. I have a feeling though, after the recent rains, this next batch is going to take a little longer to cook off.

For three trees, this maple syrup venture is taking a considerable amount of labor. It takes 40 parts sugar water just to make one part maple syrup. I really can't imagine what it must be like to do this sort of work all day long. Really, though, it's not too bad. It's just a little effort, and there are great rewards in the form of homemade pancakes.

I wouldn't be doing this except for the pancakes. Store-bought syrup pales in comparison when pitted against the homemade stuff. With all our work out in the cold, we just had enough syrup for eight delicious made-from-scratch pancakes. They were the best pancakes I've ever had. With my own maple syrup, the rewards were all that much sweeter. One day, after we've completed our syrup venture here, and in Burkes Garden, I'll look back fondly on those first pancakes with the homemade maple syrup.

Owen Morgan is a Freshman at George Wythe High School in Wytheville, where he participates in several sports including soccer, wrestling, and his favorite, cross country running. He has always enjoyed hunting and camping, and perhaps someday he'll gain the patience to enjoy fishing. Owen also recently won a national writing contest with the Ruffed Grouse Society entitled "To Kill a Grouse", and he plans to take part in future contests.