

Sugar season is about to begin, we hope, even in our cold, north-sloped woods. On Friday, Runo drove the tractor we use to haul sap to make a road through the woods. This is not an easy task, for often the snow is deep enough to completely cover the front wheels of the tractor. It was nearly a case of plowing snow with the front of the tractor rather than driving through it.

With weather forecasts indicating that our temperatures may reach into the forties this week, we tapped trees on Saturday. This is an annual ritual in our family, and, in spite of deep snow in the woods, we always have fun along with the work.

And it is work, to be sure. We use only covered pails, no tubing, so pails--with a cover and a metal spile for each--must be carried to each maple tree that is going to be asked to produce its liquid for the sap pan.

There has come to be a division of labor in this job. For the most part, the women in the family have the pail-carrying job--sometimes, with help from friends who enjoy the beginning of sugar season but who do not make syrup themselves. The men run the power drills, and, often supplement them with hand brace and bit.

Although sometimes the "tappers" are bold enough to move the pails from the trees the "carriers" indicate, usually, they are willing to tap those trees that have the pails standing beside them.

After trudging through knee-deep snow all afternoon, I think everybody is quite appreciative of having an extended family that is happy to work together to get a hard job done.

Like everybody else, I came home with legs and feet sopping wet. In fact, my lined jeans were wet through and my wool socks were frozen to the insides of my barn boots. I pulled them off and hung everything next to the wood stove in the basement. I hoped all would be dry by chore time.

That did not happen, though, but I wore the damp jeans anyway, put on clean, warm socks, and took out a pair of low boots that would suffice for the trip from the cabin to the barn.

I think all of us slept well after wading snow all afternoon, but it wasn't the most opportune weekend to change to Daylight Savings Time.

Six o'clock seemed early this morning.

Before we went to the sap woods yesterday afternoon, though, Runo and I had done a little tapping job here at home. A few years ago, I had been curious about the quality of syrup one could cook from the sap of silver maple trees. We have several in the yard by the cabin, and we tapped them. Only two of them seem to be very productive, but they give a lot of sap. We supplemented them with three sugar maples in the yard of the farm house and cooked that sap separately from the family project in the sugarbush. We discovered that the syrup was not inferior to that cooked of all sugar maple sap--even when we boiled only the silver maples' liquid at first to test its flavor. So, for the past few years we have had a little sugar project here by the cabin, too. We partially cook the sap down on a one-burner propane stove in the wood shed and finish it on the wood-burning kitchen stove.

One of the sugar maples we tap for this "yard syrup" has surprised us a great deal. It seems to be some kind of "super tree" with very high sugar content in its sap. One of our family members has tested it several times with the refractometer, and it shows nearly triple the amount of sugar that the average hard maple has. The sap is noticeably sweeter than usual.

We attribute this to the fact that this was our "swing tree," where my sister and I had our rope swing when we were children. We had such good times around that old tree that it surely must have become sweeter over the years!

Now, all we need is some lovely weather with temperatures in the forties and some crisp nights in the twenties. The below zero mornings that have been the norm for the last five or six weeks are too cold for the sap to run.

Before we know it, though, we will be cooking that last batch of syrup as the sound of geese and swans alert us to their passage north. On chilly, starry nights with wood smoke perfuming the air around the sap house, the calls of those flocks of birds heading for their summer homes in the far north is a harbinger of spring. The first bluebird is often sighted while we are at the sap house, and the sandhill cranes are not far

behind. Maple syrup season occupies only a short period of the year, but it is a time when both syrup and stories are produced in the sap house as winter gives way to spring.