

We had a family gathering yesterday. Not a wedding and happily not a funeral and not even a birthday or graduation. Yet, there were thirteen of us together enjoying a lovely sunny day.

There were no suits and ties, no dresses and shoes with heels, no visible jewelry. Instead, there were snow boots and jeans, winter jackets and stocking caps, Carhart coveralls and work clothes. We were tapping maple trees.

Through the sugarbush came the sounds and sights of the season. The power tapper made its noise, Gordy and Jimmy manning it, and the battery powered drills were making their holes, too, Steve going through two batteries before we finished. And, on the far sides of the woods were Runo and Tim, each with a brace and bit, hand boring holes for sap spiles.

Then, there were the sharp sounds of hammers gently striking the metal spiles to drive them firmly into place, put in by Laura and others with pockets full of spiles. And, if one were close by, one could hear a metallic cling or clang as the covered pail was hung on the spile. It was cold yet in the woods when we started, and the holes in the sugar maples were dry as bone. By the last few trees, though, as the sun warmed the tops and the temperature rose a few degrees, there was a little dribble of sap coming from some of the spiles. Then came that unique, musical "ping" of a drop of maple sap hitting the bottoms of an empty pail.

Some of the workers spent all morning boring holes. Others traded with each other, taking turns with tapping and with putting in spiles and hanging pails. And, Nancy and I and others carried pails, covers, spiles, and other supplies to those who were rapidly moving through the woods, turning the quiet maple grove into a sugarbush once again.

Back at the sap house Nancy's thermoses of coffee were welcome, and Laura and Steve had picked up a good supply of doughnuts from Yoders' store. Sam got the sugarbush sign down from its off season resting place and hung it on the signpost outside the sap house. He also consented to stand in the doorway to see how much he had grown this past year. Those doorways carry a record of the growth of several of

the youngsters in the family. There are pencil marks with names close to the floor, gradually ascending over the years, and Sam--if he grows any more--will be too tall for the doorway.

The sisters were together--not unusual, but not an everyday occurrence either. Melissa had her camera and took lots of pictures in the maple woods. Shelly carried pails and covers, working fast and efficiently, as is her manner. Julie's laugh could be heard through the woods as she moved equipment from one area to the other and supplied the tappers with whatever they needed.

Mitchell tapped and carried pails, and we pointed out the marks on the doorpost where his years in growth were recorded. This season, his own little Jaxon is old enough to walk, so he will have the his first mark on the post.

There were three generations of our family who spent the morning at Einar's Sugarbush, on the site where he--father, grandfather, and great-grandfather to those of us there yesterday--made syrup with help from us and our mother for decades.

When we were small, the sap house was higher up on the hill west of where the present building is located. Outside that simple building we sat and played when we were too little to help. The snow went off early on that south sidehill, and soon, the mosses, lichens, and old grass began to be visible. Then, we constructed our farms--little patches of green moss for fields, little sticks for fences, stones for paths, and the tiny "British soldiers" with their red tops, for flowers. Meanwhile, the aroma of boiling sap and wood smoke perfumed the air. There could not have been a more pleasant place to spend the days of late winter / early spring.

Now, too, days and evenings in the maple woods or in the sap house are times of conversation, story telling, and coffee drinking, activities that accompany tending the fire and watching over the flat pan where we cook the crystal clear sap into amber syrup.

Tapping day this year was unusually pleasant. The wind was not so cold, and, unlike some years, we did not have to wade snow way above our knees from tree to tree. In fact, in the early part of the

morning, we walked on top of the snow. With our big crew, nobody was exhausted after a morning in the woods. It was a nice way to start the maple syrup season.