



Maple syrup festivals signal the end of winter and the beginning of spring. Here, Mountsberg Conservation Area near Campbellville holds its Mapletowne maple syrup festival and people are heading for the Sugar Shack to see maple sap being boiled into syrup.

Sap to Sugar



*“But I must tell you now of our sugar-making, in which I take rather an active part. Our experiment was on a very limited scale, having but one kettle, besides two iron tripods; but it was sufficient to initiate us in the art and mystery of boiling the sap into molasses, and finally the molasses down into sugar.” – Catharine Parr Trail, *The Backwoods of Canada*, 1833*

Festivals

by Trudi Down Photos by Mike Davis

Today, the pioneer experience that Catharine Parr Trail wrote about, can be witnessed by visiting living museums where costumed volunteers demonstrate the many tasks that were needed for daily living and surviving, including the making of maple syrup. There are many maple festivals close to the Niagara Escarpment, and there may be one at a conservation area or rural museum

near you. Mountsberg Conservation Area near Campbellville and Westfield Heritage Village near Rockton are two locations for annual maple syrup festivals that provide an excellent outdoor adventure for the whole family.

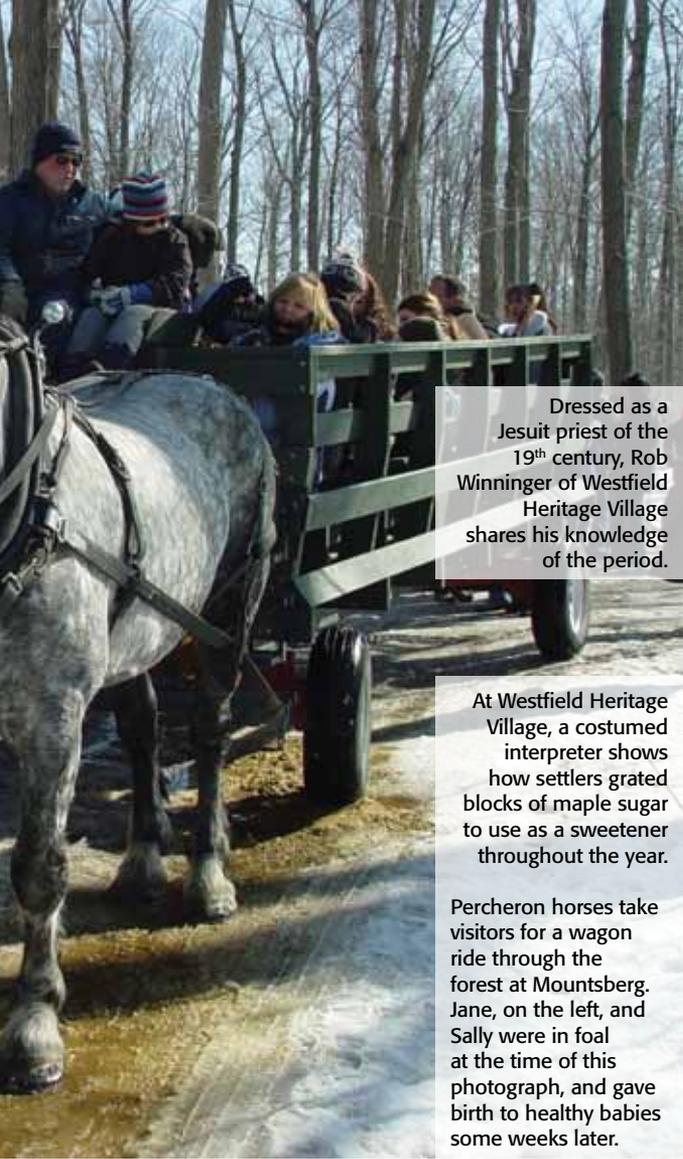


Visitors on the Sugar Bush Trail at Mountsberg check to see sap dripping into a maple bucket.



Huge iron cauldrons suspended over a constantly hot fire, shown here at Mountsberg, was a pioneer method of boiling off the sap.

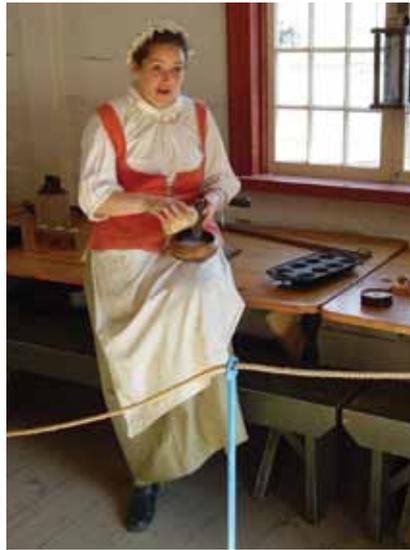




Dressed as a Jesuit priest of the 19th century, Rob Winner of Westfield Heritage Village shares his knowledge of the period.

At Westfield Heritage Village, a costumed interpreter shows how settlers grated blocks of maple sugar to use as a sweetener throughout the year.

Percheron horses take visitors for a wagon ride through the forest at Mountsberg. Jane, on the left, and Sally were in foal at the time of this photograph, and gave birth to healthy babies some weeks later.



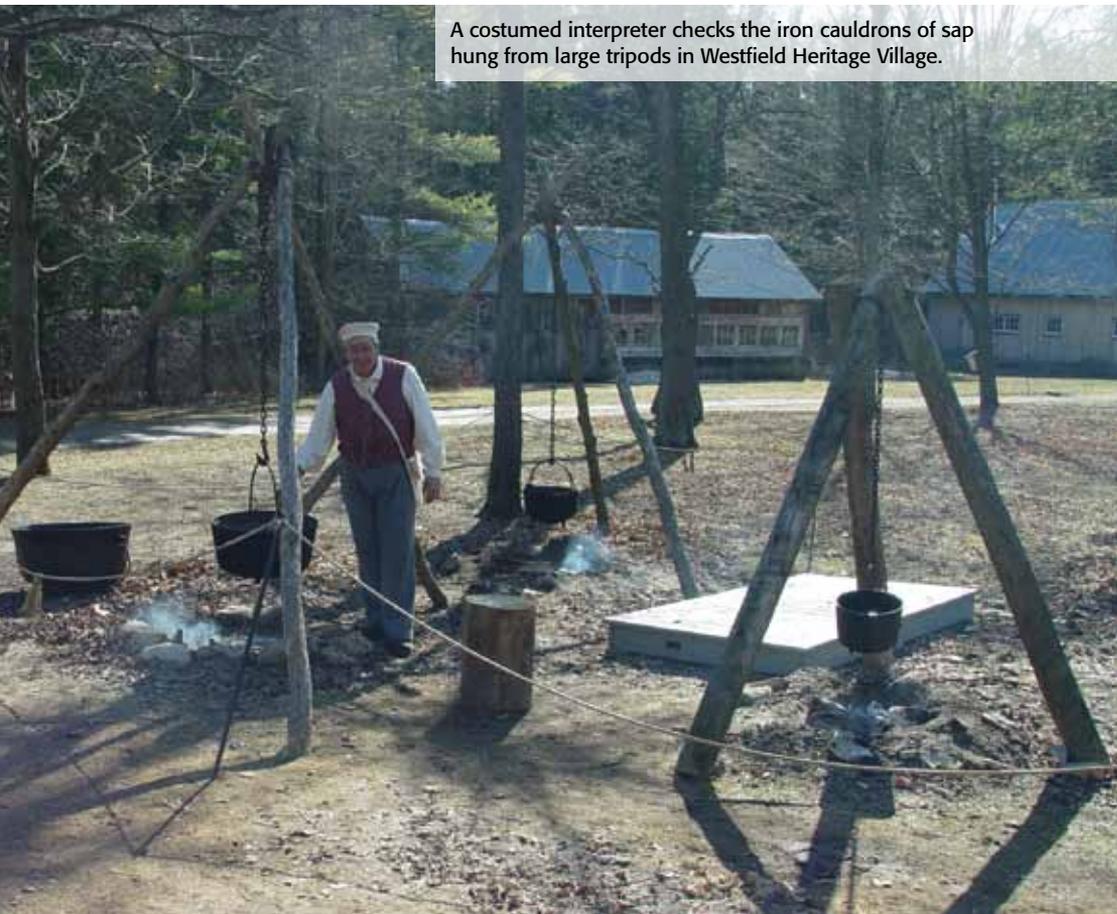
“Mapletowne,” as the Mountsberg festival is called, is crowded on a sunny, warm spring day in March. Weather is an important factor in the making of maple syrup. Too cold, and the sap won’t run; too hot and the trees bud, making the sap bitter. Sap runs best during warm, sunny days (+5°C) followed by cold nights (-5°C).

Costumed volunteers watch the water being boiled off sap that bubbles in huge iron cauldrons hanging over blazing fires. Part of their job is to ensure the fires underneath are kept burning constantly. They pose good-naturedly for photos and expertly answer all questions.

Pioneer Methods

During early spring, pressure inside the tree forces sap up from the roots so that it can nourish the new leaf buds. Early pioneers drilled a hole into the tree and inserted a notched twig (spile), forming the “tap” from which the sap flows. The dripping sap was collected in hand-made wooden buckets hung underneath the spile hole. The clear liquid, known as sweet water (because it really does taste sweet) has to be collected every day. This might be done in buckets slung from a yoke placed over the shoulders of the farmer and the sturdiest larger children. However, if the sugar bush area was large, the farmer would hitch horses to a wagon loaded with wooden barrels into which the sap would be poured. Then the boiling would begin. Sap collected from a large stand of maple trees would be boiled in a clearing directly adjacent to the bush. If the bush was small, the farmer was more likely to transport the sap closer to the homestead where it was easier for family members to tend the fires.

A costumed interpreter checks the iron cauldrons of sap hung from large tripods in Westfield Heritage Village.



Mountsberg’s meandering Sugar Bush Trail is a wonderful adventure. Be sure to take the time to read the short information placards

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Sap to Sugar Festivals

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scattered along the path, for they contain a wealth of facts and statistics.

Sap Run

Brenna Bartley, coordinator of education programs at Mountsberg, says the conservation area's

sugar bush has about 400 taps. (For comparison, a large commercial sugar bush will have 20,000 taps.) The sap runs for about five weeks. "When the frogs start to sing, that indicates the end of the run," she says. Hence, the last collection of sap is called "the frog run."

The lineup for pancakes is



Helpers in Mountsberg's Candy Cabin turn syrup into maple sugar for visitors to sample.

- ◆ There are seven species of maples trees in North America; however, sap for maple sugar and syrup is collected only from the Sugar Maple and the Black Maple.
- ◆ How do you know if the sugar bush is healthy? Look for the Maiden-hair Ferns.
- ◆ The spile hole must be inserted 2.5 to three inches deep into the tree to reach the sapwood layer.
- ◆ A tree must have a diameter of 10 inches to support one bucket; another bucket may be added for each additional five inches.
- ◆ The Northern Saw-whet Owl, the smallest Canadian owl, frequents sugar bushes and is known as the "sugar bird."
- ◆ One tree produces about 50 litres (11 gallons) of sap during the run; it takes 40 buckets of sap to make one bucket of syrup.
- ◆ The syrup has to contain 67% sugar to be called "maple syrup."

long but the wait is well worth it. What could be better than pancakes and sausages doused in maple syrup and eaten at a picnic table surrounded by woods on a beautiful spring morning!

At the Sweet Taste of Spring Maple Syrup Festival at Westfield Heritage Village, re-enactor Bill stands next to a cleared area con-

baked over the open fire, visitors are invited to dip them in maple syrup before popping them into their mouths. Mmmmm.

Canadian and Delicious

Both Mountsberg and Westfield make a limited amount of maple syrup for tasting but not for sale. Neither has the number of trees



Outside of Mountsberg's Pancake House, maple buckets show the amazing amount of sap needed to make maple syrup: it takes 40 litres of sap to make one litre of syrup!

taining three tripods, each holding an iron kettle. Dressed in outdoor pioneer attire representative of the 1800s, Bill explains what's happening.

The first kettle is the largest and holds about 25 gallons of sap. The water is boiled off over a period of about 10 hours and the resulting liquid is transferred to the second smaller kettle. After another eight hours of boiling, the mixture turns to maple syrup. Pioneers didn't keep much of the syrup, Bill notes, because there were no preservatives or refrigerators. What the pioneers really wanted was sugar. Another six to eight hours of boiling in kettle number three, produced maple butter. The final fourth boil, lasting about eight hours, would result in the desired sugar consistency. All during his talk, Bill is busy adding wood to the fires, to keep them flaming under the kettles.

At D'Aubigny Inn a volunteer is making biscuits. After they are

needed for a large commercial operation, nor do they have the resources to ensure the product would pass health and safety requirements. All maple products offered for sale in the on-site stores are from Ontario producers.

Rob Winninger, program officer at Westfield, says the Village taps about 150 trees each season. The festival attracted over 3,500 visitors in 2010. "It's a very Canadian event," he says. "I've noticed that more new Canadians are coming to experience the festival."

Westfield Heritage Village holds its Maple Syrup Festival on Sundays in March and on selected days during March Break. The 472-hectare Mountsberg Conservation Area's maple syrup festival takes place during March and April. **EV**

Trudi Down is a Hamilton freelance writer and editor specializing in corporate communications materials.

Some Sources for Pure Maple Syrup

- ◆ Downtown Georgetown Farmers' Market, Georgetown
- ◆ Dutchman's Gold, Carlisle
- ◆ Foodstuffs, Georgetown
- ◆ Hamilton Farmers' Market, Hamilton
- ◆ Heatherlea Farm Market, Caledon
- ◆ Ottawa Street Farmers' Market, Hamilton
- ◆ White Meadows Farms, Pelham

Maple Syrup Festivals

- ◆ Mapletowne, **Mountsberg Conservation Area**
Feb. 26-April 3 weekends & March 14-18 conservationhalton.ca
- ◆ Sugar Bush Adventure, **White Meadows Farms**
Feb. 12-April 3 & March 14-18 whitemeadowsfarms.com
- ◆ Maple Syrup Festival at Westfield, **Westfield Heritage Village**
March Sundays & March 16 & 17 westfieldheritage.ca
- ◆ The Old-Tyme Maple Syrup Festival,
Saugeen Bluffs Conservation Area Bruce Co. Rd. #3, March 26 & 27
saugeenconservation.com/maplesyrup.php

Let us know your favourite maple syrup festival or other good places to buy maple syrup! Email editor@EscarpmentViews.ca.