

This article, written by Nancy Given-McConnell for the Gouverneur Tribune Press, appeared in the Wednesday, 31 March 1999 issue. It gives the readers an insight into how a family can work together, enjoy, and learn from both older and younger generations to continue a family tradition. She used an article from The St. Lawrence County Farm and Home Bureau News, March 1940 as a resource.

Sugaring With the Bullocks Through the Generations

On July 22, 1860 an Irish immigrant boy celebrated his sixth birthday on a transatlantic ship while en route to the United States. The youngster was accompanied by his entire family, who was in search of a new location where a larger farm and a greater variety of farm enterprises could be realized.

The family finally located on a farm near Edwards and the six year old boy, whose name was James Bullock, began what turned out to be a lifetime of farming in that location. One of his early interests was the native sugar maple tree and its product. Young Jimmy was destined to spend a long life closely associated with his early interest.

For an article published in the St. Lawrence County Farm and Home Bureau News, March 1940, Mr. Bullock looked back at 79 years of continuous work with his maple sugar bush. He recalled that the day his older brother returned from the Civil War, he was busy boiling sap in a five-gallon iron kettle. During those days as a small boy, he had his own favorite trees, which he tapped each spring.

James related how he used wooden spouts and wooden troughs to collect the sap. Throughout those years a cash market was hard to find, but he traded his syrup for broadcloth, which his mother made into clothing for the family.

After James acquired his own farm, he increased his acreage of sugar maple trees and taught his three sons, Fred, Glenn, and Royce the methods of making high quality syrup. Mr. Bullock's 1940 interview stated that he and the boys hung over 11,000 buckets each spring. At that time it was believed that their total sale of maple syrup was the largest made by any family in New York State.

At the age of 85, in 1940, James was still actively interested in the annual syrup making process. He said that one of his greatest pleasures in the spring was watching his grandsons, Arland ("Sonny"), age 6, and Leland, age 4, scatter buckets and do other odd jobs around the sugar bush. Of course, at that time, six year old Arland fancied himself a veteran like his grandfather, as that was his third year assisting with the syrup making.

In 1940 Mr. Bullock said that even though he had spent more seasons making maple syrup than any other man in the United States, he still welcomed a chance to attend meetings where the subject was discussed. In fact, he had attended one just prior to the interview at the Fred Bullock farm, and related many interesting experiences of the early days of the industry.



Sugaring at Bullocks March 1982 with the team of horses, "Chummy" in the foreground and "Dandy" on her left, and a gathering tub on a sleigh. At left is Kathryn Hurley Fletcher (a cousin), Arland "Sonny" Bullock, Eleanor Bullock (sister), Leland Bullock (brother).

With the passing of the Bullock family patriarch, James Bullock, Sr., in August 1945, the sugaring tradition in the original bush was carried on by the next generation. Fred and his sons, Sonny and Leland, tapped part of the bush and boiled in his sugar shanty, while his brother, Royce, tapped the other part and boiled in a separate shanty. Some said Royce's separation into his own operation could have been partially attributed to the fact that Royce and his wife, Rachel, were childless. Royce was not child oriented, as was Fred, and he lacked the enthusiasm for, and the patience with, the hoards of school kids who flocked to the Bullock sugar bush each spring when the entire school was given a half day off to visit sugaring operations.



The Bullock family's sugar shanty deep in snow ca. 1990 - '92.

Since the school was then located in the village of Edwards and transportation was not readily available, it was not an uncommon sight to see most of the Edwards older students hiking toward Scotland District, across the "Bullock Flat", on the way to Fred's shanty, which seemed to be the main gathering point for "Sugar Day".

Fred was a good host and invited his guests to drink as much fresh, warm syrup as they wanted. He also invited any of the young people, so inclined, to grab a bucket and gather sap, but it was thought there were more syrup drinkers than sap gatherers. Fred hired some of the schoolboys each year to help with the gathering, which was done by the horse and sled method, as opposed to the current tractor and rubber tired wagon, or even the latest pipeline system.

Fred's last year of making syrup was 1959, and upon his passing, sons, Sonny and Leland, having mastered the art from Grandpa Bullock and their father, carried on the tradition. Sonny and Leland's generation produced sons, David, Arlee, and Ricky who learned the operation from their fathers.

Sonny, Leland and families now tap 2,300 trees, as opposed to the 11,000 by Grandpa Bullock back in 1940. Of course, with a great many of the maples very old and the devastation from the January 1998 ice storm, there has been a considerable change in the yield. Leland feels that some of the remaining trees are not producing the normal yield due to broken limbs and the lack of leaves. He figures the syrup business was set back 50 years due to that devastation. The spring of 1998 saw production way down because it was impossible to get through the downed trees to tap and gather.

Then spring 1999 saw a fifth generation of Bullocks learning the operation, even though some are still pre-schoolers. Davey and Jesse, sons of David, and Dustin, son of Arlee, and Cameron, son of daughter, Kathy and her husband, Bob Hance, appear to be the future syrup makers of the clan in the old original bush. Sonny's daughter, Tammy's three boys - Joey, Trevor, and Andrew, plus Chrissy's boys, Sammy and Nick, from the Syracuse area, make frequent visits during sugaring, grab a bucket and pitch right in. While the boys living out of the immediate area will probably play a lesser role in carrying on the tradition, it is certain the parents will make sure they are involved.



The combined families of Sonny and Leland Bullock gathered in the sugar bush in Spring 1999.

On any given day throughout sugaring season it is a common occurrence to have adults of every generation gathered around in the shanty tasting syrup, trying their hand at boiling sap, roasting hot dogs, and boiling eggs in the hot sap. Weekends get really crowded! At times the family get-togethers almost set records, with the gathering wagon so full of youngsters that Leland has to set limits on the number of passengers at one time.

Grandfather James, of the earlier generation, could never have envisioned a generator supplying power to a TV, or CB radios in operation, to say nothing of tractors pulling rubber-tired gathering wagons and visitors roaring in on four wheelers and snowmobiles. However, he would be pleased to note that both Sonny and Leland enjoy explaining the

syrup making process to the visitors not familiar with the method of producing this delicious, and versatile, product of the maple trees, just as their grandfather enjoyed it in his day.

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