

# Sugaring in Vermont

By the last week of February in Vermont, the warm sun is moving higher in the sky and has begun to thaw the grip that winter holds upon the land. With each clear day, the temperatures in our area will rise, at times to near forty degrees. And with this warm sunlight the sap begins to move up from deep in the roots, into the branches of the maple trees. For many folks in our rural state, this is the time of sugaring in Vermont. The term "sugaring" really means making maple syrup from the sap of the sugar maple trees.

Also stimulated by the warm, Spring sun, a group of us brothers prepare to tap our maple trees here at the Priory. With a cordless drill, a small 5/16 inch hole, or tap, is made in the tree about waist-high, and a metal spout is put into the hole. As the sap rises up the trunk of the tree, a small portion will flow out of the spout. Another brother will then hang a bucket and cover on the spout to catch the sap.

If the sun has been warm enough to start the flow of sap on the day of tapping, we will gradually hear throughout the woods, the "ping, ping" of drops of sap falling to the bottom of the buckets. The weather has to cooperate by giving us cold nights and warm days in the forties, to coax the flow of sap up the trees. With a good run of sap, the buckets will be nearly full in a few days, and then the gathering begins. A group of us, with friends, go into the woods, with the skidder-tractor and the large gathering tank on a cart, to collect the sap. We empty the sap bucket at each tree into five-gallon pails and then maneuver our way through the snow back to the gathering tank. At times, in the deep snow, it's quite a struggle to carry a pail full of sap through the woods-over hidden stumps and logs-and arrive at the gathering tank with all the sap still in the pail!

When all the buckets have been emptied, the sap is brought to the sugarhouse and fed into our oil-fired evaporator, to begin the boiling process. As the sap slowly flows through the pans of the evaporator, the water content of the sap is boiled off, rising in billows of steam. Our sugarhouse has large air vents in the roof to allow the clouds of steam to escape outdoors. The evaporator will actually boil away about forty gallons of water every hour, producing a lot of steam! Traveling around rural Vermont at this time of the year, you will witness large clouds of steam rising from scattered sugarhouses in the valleys.

Continuing its flow to the last pan, the sap gradually thickens into a heavy syrup. It takes about thirty-five to forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. So we will draw off about one gallon of syrup after each hour of boiling. When the syrup in the last pan reaches a temperature of 219 degrees, it is ready to draw off and to be filtered through a series of heavy cloths. These filtering cloths remove any impurities in the syrup and give it a clear, pure maple flavor. The syrup is then kept hot to be canned into special containers for safe keeping in the year ahead. In a good sugaring season we will be fortunate to make between seventy to eighty gallons of syrup.

But sugaring is not over yet. In the first weeks of April, as the taps in the trees begin to heal, the spouts and buckets are removed and brought to the sugarhouse for cleaning. A group of brothers will spend three or four days cleaning all the equipment and storing it away for the next year. By this time, the buds of the maple trees are swelling, ready to open with the nurturing of the warm sun and April rains-and we look forward to the season of greening in our land.

*Brother Augustine*