

REMEMBERING

'The sap's running good today'

Spring meant tree tapping time for long-time local resident

Word was received this week of the death of longtime resident George Lasley. His obituary appears on the opposite page. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Lasley one Spring day in 1990. He was kind enough to show me through the process of tapping Maple trees and making syrup from the sap he gathered. It was a craft Mr. Lasley learned from his father. They tapped trees on a parcel of family land near Cross Village where Mr. Lasley and his family resided. For no particular reason, that day has always stuck out in my mind. When people would ask me about working for a small-town weekly newspaper, I would think back to the smell of syrup coming from Mr. Lasley's boiling cauldrons. It was only one day, an hour at most, but it was an experience I'll always remember.

We republish the story here. Our long winter has caused much anticipation of Spring. Here is a little reminder that, delayed though it may be, the sap always runs.

-Charles O'Neill

By Charles O'Neill

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Searching for signs of spring? Look no further than your nearest Maple tree. The sap is running.

For long-time area resident George Lasley that means it's tree-tapping time. Strapped to about 50 maple trees on his property off State Road, near Cross Village, are tin cans and plastic jugs of all shapes and sizes. They are collecting clear liquid sap which will be boiled into the sweet maple syrup that Mr. Lasley and his family do so enjoy on their pancakes.

"The sap's running pretty good today," Mr. Lasley said when asked when it would be a good time to see the syrup-making process firsthand.

So, last Thursday, amid mild temperatures and partly cloudy skies, the 75-year-old Mr. Lasley

showed his visitor how he collects sap and creates about 10-15 gallons of maple syrup each year.

"Frosty nights and warm days" make for the best sap runs, Mr. Lasley explained. The sap will run usually for three weeks. The bigger trees will run longer than the smaller trees, he added.

Mr. Lasley crafts his own taps out of young maple saplings. The three-inch, round, wooden tubes look a lot like the old slotted, wood clothes pins, except they are solid with a small hole drilled through the heart of the sapling.

Mr. Lasley has a whole bucketful of the wooden taps. All crafted with his own hands.

A hole, a couple inches in depth, is drilled into the maple tree where the tap is inserted.

But how do you know where in the tree to put the tap?

"My dad always told me to find a good root and follow it up the tree. That's where you tap it," the congenial Mr. Lasley explained with a smile. "He also told me to tap it on the side where the tree leans," he chuckled.

"You know, when the sap stops running on the south side of a tree, you can sometimes tap the north side and get some more."

Pulling back the cover on one of the tin cans ("you don't want any rain water in there"), Mr. Lasley pointed out the clear liquid that had filled about half the can. A steady drip was coming from the wooden tap.

The sap has no smell and looks like water.

"That's mostly what it is...water," he said.

The water must be boiled out in order to get the syrup. Inside a little shed, with a couple windows and a hole in the roof for smoke, Mr. Lasley has his boiling pan.

A large, flat tin pan, much like a giant cookie sheet, sits atop a cinder-block oven. A fire burns inside the block oven while the sap steams away in the pan.

As soon as you step in the shed the sweet smell hits you. Maple syrup in the making.

"I do a lot of cooking," Mr. Lasley said of the syrup-making process. The sap must be boiled quite a while. He transfers the sap into a smaller pan when it has evaporated sufficiently in the big pan.

He has to keep a watchful eye on the fire, making sure it is stoked. He must also watch the syrup as it will foam up and overflow once most of the water has evaporated.

Mr. Lasley uses a thermometer-like gauge called a hydrometer to test the water content of the sap.

"It tells you when you've got maple syrup," he said, very matter-of-factly.

There is no need to add anything to the syrup. It is plenty sweet, he said. The sugar content, of course, varies with the trees.

He'll leave the syrup in a large container for a short while and let it settle before canning it in old fruit jars.

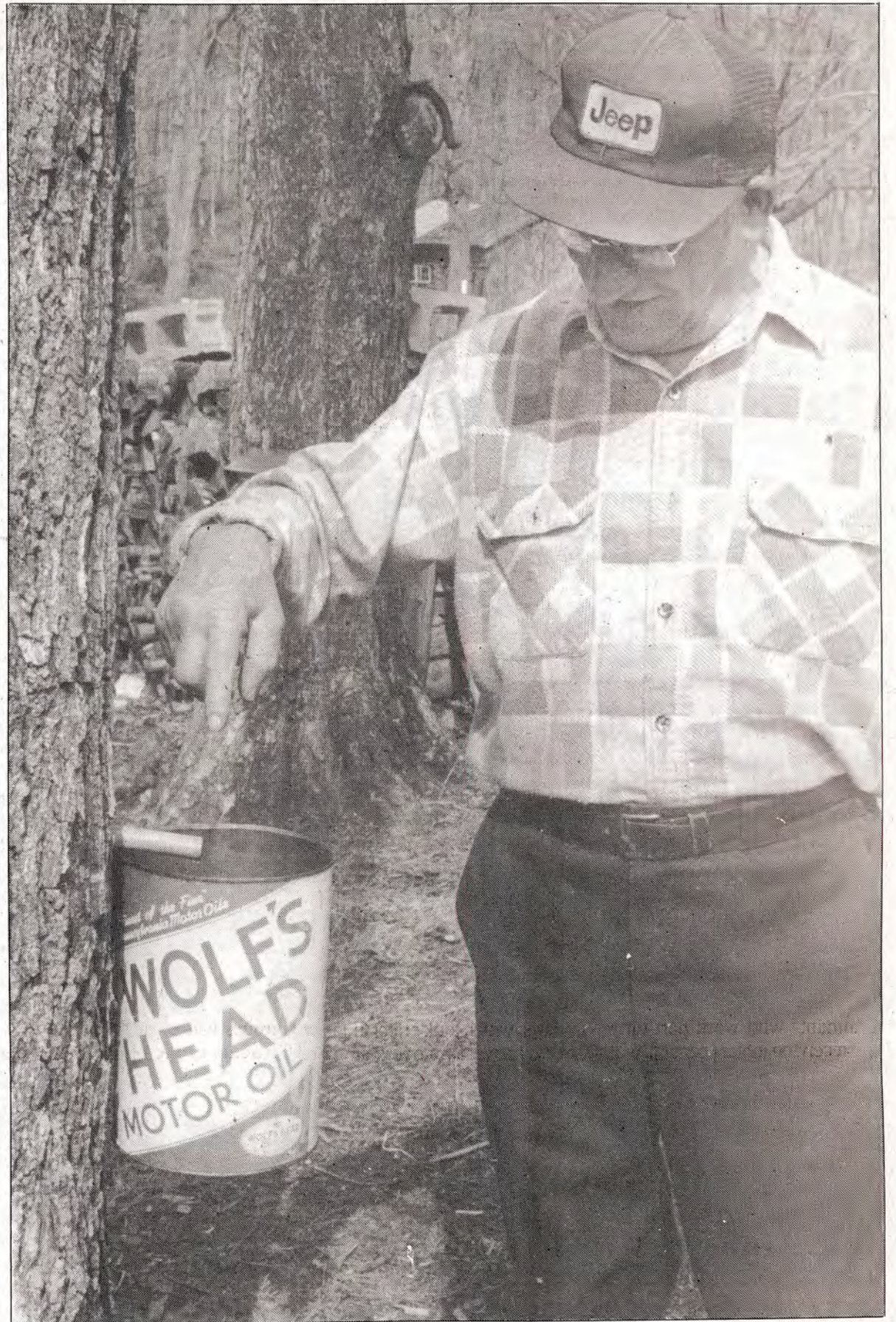
Occasionally, with especially thick syrup, Mr. Lasley and his family will make maple syrup cakes, he said with a smile. But mostly they stick with the traditional syrup.

He gives it out to family and friends. Yes, his family does enjoy pancakes.

Mr. Lasley has been tapping trees and making maple syrup for quite a few years now. His father also made syrup, probably from some of the same trees, on the same family land. "Of course he boiled it in big old kettles," the son said.

Mr. Lasley used to tap trees with "a fellow down on Shore Drive. We had over a thousand taps and make probably 300 gallons of syrup back then. Of course we had some help."

Whether stoking the fire to keep the sap boiling, or preparing his hand-made tree taps, George Lasley found simple pleasure in his Spring ritual.



The modern, commercial syrup makers use plastic tubing and large storage containers to draw as much sap as possible. Shaking his head, Mr. Lasley wonders how they clean those plastic tubes, or remember where to put them up every year.

"Of course it takes some work," he reflected. "But there is nothing else to do this time of year. "And when you're done with this, it's time to start your garden."

As his visitor left, Mr. Lasley turned back toward his trees. Got to check those cans. The sap is running pretty good today.

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