

THE ECONOMICS OF A THREATENED TRADITION

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Writing a magazine article on thrips in November for an issue of *Country Journal* that would appear three months later was a considerable challenge, and I apologize now for any mistakes you may find in it. Yet in the process of researching it, I talked to dozens of farmers who count heavily on their annual maple syrup production to supplement their incomes. It is this research into the micro-economics of the small-scale sugarmaker, I think, that prompted Bruce Parker to ask me to speak here.

It's important to point out that I'm neither a scientist nor an economist. I'm a journalist and a writer of feature articles, which I suppose makes me a humanist. And as far as I'm concerned, the real front line of the thrips problem is the sugar house back in the woods and the people who work the land--people like Darwin Clark, my neighbor in Hawley, Massachusetts, who still gathers sap with a team of oxen and a sleigh and boils it in a lopsided sugar house that looks like it could topple over at any moment. Or Richard Chandler, of Ashfield, Massachusetts, who remembers when maple syrup sold for \$12 a gallon in 1976. Or Raymond Bisbee, who started sugaring 30 years ago when he was 10, with 50 buckets and a flat pan for boiling, and who now runs some 1,200 taps in the sugarbush where his house sits.

Darwin Clark is expecting a lower yield this year, but he's sugaring because he says he can't afford not to. Richard Chandler isn't sugaring, but he's buying maple syrup to supply customers who have been coming to his farm for years. Others are tapping, but reducing the

number of taps. One farmer had to cut his taps by more than half when the owner of the trees he rents said he didn't want to put his maples at risk. In one way or another, each of these people are facing losses they can ill afford.

And it is not a loss that can be compensated for by raising prices. Given the fact that nearly 75% of the world's maple syrup is boiled in Canada, and that some areas of New England have not yet been affected by thrips, any local declines in production will probably have small effect on the overall price of a gallon of syrup.

In the short term--which means the season that's almost upon us--the impact of local declines will be local. And the people who will be hit hardest will most likely be those who set a few thousand taps in the same sugarbush that was worked by their fathers and grandfathers. That's not to say syrup producers who have 600 acres of maples won't suffer--they certainly will--but a man trying to run his farm on a shoestring who loses 25 to 50% of his annual income in a succession of poor sugaring seasons may soon find himself talking to the land developers and real-estate agents instead of planning what crop to plant in the spring, or whether he can afford to increase the size of his dairy herd.

Some of these people are already feeling the pinch. A local survey in Franklin County, Massachusetts conducted by the newspaper where I'm an editor, determined that nearly 30% of local sugarmakers are not going to fire up their evaporators this season. Of the 70% who are sugaring, nearly all are reducing the number of taps they plan to set, or playing what one of them called "a waiting game" before they decide how much to cut back. A larger survey conducted last November in Vermont--by the same folks hosting this conference--shows more than half of the state's syrup producers were thinking about not tapping this season or reducing the number of taps.

The reasons they give are varied, but concern for the long-term health of trees and the prospects of a poor yield, weighed against time and money invested in a syrup harvest, predominate. Cynthia Cranston,

who sugars with her husband, Tom, in a small town in northwestern Massachusetts, says: "Sugaring has been in my family since the 1700s, and this is the first year we won't be tapping. We hope we can help the trees' healing process if we don't sugar this year. If we did sugar, we'd feel like we were jeopardizing the future."



Figure 1. Collection of maple sap for making syrup (photo from the Vt. Development Dept.).

Others aren't tapping because they anticipate low starch levels in the trees and feel that trying to strangle one gallon of syrup from 55 gallons of sap is just not economically sound. And those who are going ahead but cutting back will naturally produce less than in a normal year, whatever the sugar levels in the sap, or the vagaries in the weather.

However you figure it--good year or bad--it is reasonable to suppose that in the areas of New England affected last spring by thrips, the total production of syrup could be reduced by as much as 50% or more. In Massachusetts, where some sugarbushes were hit very hard, that could mean a state-wide loss as high as \$800,000 in the syrup crop. In Vermont, that figure may be even higher - 2 - 4 million dollars or more, which is significant when subtracted from the annual 12.5 million dollar production that is customary.

That's certainly a lot of money, but it is still the local farmer who will feel it the most. With no syrup at all--or reduced amounts--he either buys syrup from his neighbors or loses the customers he's acquired over the years. Or he takes the blow directly and sells nothing at all, in which case he's poorer this year by amounts ranging from a few thousand dollars up to \$25,000 or more.

There may be farms in New England capable of absorbing such losses, but if those declines come again next year, that number will be reduced. The fact is, most farmers count on syrup to put money in the bank, money that keeps some farms alive and well. Most people who boil syrup also raise cattle, mow hay and plant cash crops. But some of them also drive school buses, maintain strawberry patches, or hire out in the winter to flesh out incomes that are marginal at best. To lose a significant portion of the income provided by boiling syrup, especially if that loss persists over several seasons, will mean farms barely hanging on could go under. How many is impossible to say, but anyone who reads the newspapers knows that farmers are already in trouble and another blow to their pocketbooks is the last thing they need.

What is being faced this year by nearly everyone in the thrips affected areas is how to manage damaged trees. On the one hand, not tapping or cutting back means an immediate dollar loss; on the other, crashing ahead as if nothing is wrong could mean long-term damage to the overall health of trees--an option which will exact its toll one or two years down the line, especially if thrips return with a vengeance this spring.

I certainly don't mean to sound like an alarmist. As I mentioned before, I'm not an economist, and therefore not qualified to frighten people. At this point, from everything I understand, there are just too many variables in the thrips situation to even begin suggesting an imminent economic crisis. Besides, it's probably fair to say that unless this year turns out to be a mega-disaster over widespread areas of New England, most farmers will weather a shortfall in production. After all, the planned decreases in production this year are voluntary, a matter of choice. It is the unpredictability that is worrisome. For if thrips damage continues and spreads, if general maple decline gets worse, if there is serious die-back on trees, if tapping damaged trees really does deplete them, then next year will mean trouble for some and hardship for many. And after that..?

Prediction is an unprofitable occupation, likely to be fraught with embarrassment; certainly in the course of researching this story, I found few who were willing to go on record about what might happen tomorrow. Yet there are people who are beginning to worry that one of New England's most characteristic traditions is being threatened. Imagine a New England spring with no steam rising from the sugar houses. Visualize a season of disappointed leaf peepers. For what is at stake in the maple industry is more than a mere formula of production figures and prices.

Or, to make the scenario more personal, imagine the family that took out a mortgage to build a new sugar house, or the farmer who last year invested in several miles of tubing and a new evaporator. There are those, too, who lease maples from people beginning to feel a tenderness for their trees--some non-sugaring tree owners are already beginning to call the state's maple phone numbers seeking advice about what to do. Selectmen in one town in western Massachusetts, the township of Leverett, have even asked farmers to cut back on taps this year--a trend, if it continues, that could limit the numbers of trees available to farmers.

If those farmers are already living on the edge--and many New England farmers are--their concern will justifiably increase if this season turns out to be a bust. And if the thrips continue to spread, and reach Canada, say, that may drive up prices in a market already beginning to show resistance to the cost of a gallon of syrup, which in some gift and specialty shops is already selling for \$45 to \$50 a gallon.

With the thrips diagnosis uncertain, and the prognosis even more so, trying to guess what the long-term economic impact of thrips will be is not easy. Yet some balance books are already hurting and a thin year will increase that pain. Figuring everything into the complex equation that is the maple syrup industry--thrips, acid rain, road salt, over-tapping, general maple decline, sugarbush management, cost of equipment--it is easy to see that somebody stands a chance of losing a lot of money.



Syrup Making in Vermont
(photo from the Vt. Extension Service)