



Photos courtesy of Gordy Lekies

Common Family Operations

by Jim Lundstrom

Medford, Wisconsin-based logger Gordie Lekies looks forward to the annual maple syrup-making ritual at his hunting cabin in Catawba as a rite of spring. “Winter’s over and springs coming. It’s a good way to celebrate spring,” he said.

Lekies describes it as “a very common family type maple syrup operation.” Lekies has been making maple syrup for about 20 years, missing only a few years along the way. He began with 100 taps, then 150, but now has cut back to 60 to 70 taps. “I’ve always contended its worth about a nickel an hour for all your labor and that may be a little high,” he said.

“My neighbor says if he sold the firewood he has to use to make the syrup and bought a gallon of syrup, he’d be ahead. But that’s just making firewood. That’s not making syrup. It’s a labor of love, there’s no doubt about it.”

Under a hot wood fire, he boils down the sap – 80 gallons at a time. “I made a nice rack to hold the pan, a stainless steel pan that holds about 80 gallons of sap,” he said. “You take 80 gallons of cold sap and try to heat it up to boiling, it takes a wheelbarrow or two of wood.”

You have to collect the sap when it’s running in mid to late March. That can get in the way of an independent logger’s schedule. “The day you’d like to finish up a logging job, it’s running,” he said. “It does interfere with my work, so I had to retool the operation to the point where I can inventory sap in a 250-gallon tank, and then Friday, Saturday, Sunday, whatever it takes, we cook down. You have to find a balance for the most efficient use of your time.”

Some of the finished syrup goes to friends and neighbors. Lekies’ church gets a gallon. He and his wife keep some for their own use and to give away as

presents, and the rest is wholesaled.

Lekies estimates he has spent \$500 on his equipment over the years, but he says it doesn’t have to be costly to begin. “I bought some pails used from a guy who bought them used. They’re probably 30, 40 years old,” he said. “You can find stuff at auction during off season. Nobody thinks of maple syrup in the summer. If you think your way through this stuff, you can find some very inexpensive used stuff.”

Lekies also gets a kick out of the camaraderie created among fellow maple syrup-makers during the season. “Everybody who does it, they start talking, ‘Tapped yet?’ There’s always one neighbor to tap first. There’s a lot of neighborhood talk. Everyone has their little quirks about doing it, what types of wood, how hot. No two operations are alike. They’re doing the same thing but going about it differently. It really gives you an excuse to pop in on the neighbor and say hi. It’s a lot friendlier than deer camp even because everyone’s on the same mission.” ▲

