



# Family Tradition

*photos courtesy of Phil Thompson*

by Jim Lundstrom

A number of Native American tribes had stories about how maple syrup was discovered. One such story claims after an Indian threw a tomahawk into a maple tree, his wife collected the seeping sap in a pot, cooked meat in the pot, and discovered the secret sweetness roasted into the meat.

That sounds pretty good, but Phil Thompson has his own theory. His theory involves Indians observing their natural world. "You can see the squirrels in the spring," he said. "In fact, that's when I know it's time to tap. You see the gray squirrels running up and down the tree and they're going crazy. They're licking at the syrup that's leaking out of little cracks in the bark. The sun hits it just right and it sweetens up somewhat. The squirrels go crazy over it. If I would have been growing up with the Indians and saw that, I'd have tried it too. It's good stuff."

Thompson is a logger in Ladysmith who is about to turn 73 in March. "I've been a logger all my life. I'm still hauling logs, yet. I've been trying to sell my truck but you can't sell anything right now. I'm kind of thinking about retirement. I've been thinking about it for a while."

He's also been making maple syrup most of his life. "That goes back a long ways," he said. "When I was a boy, it was a large family, six boys and five girls. My dad had a syrup camp. We had to walk two miles to get out of it. We had horses. We'd take them once in a while, but we usually walked in and out." When Thompson's father died in 1962, his children had had enough of walking into the sugar camp every year. "I went back and gathered pails and stuff I could use and started making syrup in a little hardwood clump just north of my house," he said.

Thompson usually taps 130 to 140 trees on about a five-acre plot on his 40 acres. Out of that, he usually gets 20 to 30 gallons of syrup, although he once had a high of 40 gallons.

"The yield depends on a combination of things, mainly the type of weather you have during the season," he said. "You have to have cool nights and warm days and not too windy. I live on the highway and the wind does bother me. Any wind picks up and those trees stop running. You get

the nice still days and up to 50, 55 degrees with sunshine and no wind, they'll really run, but it has to freeze at night. Not terribly cold, but enough to make ice. It'll run like crazy."

Just as nature tells him when to tap the trees, Thompson says nature also calls for the end of the season. "When you can hear the crickets or frogs (somewhere around the 14th of April, generally), you're done," he said. "After that you get gnats and mosquitoes and bugs and stuff like that. I'm done then. I see some guys sit there and cook that sap until the end of April. They're cooking junk. It doesn't make good syrup."

Thompson never got into the commercial side of maple syrup production. "We give it away. Somebody comes and you give them some maple syrup. My wife wanted me to get licensed. But I never did." Thompson's wife, Sharon, died in October 2006. He said, "She used to like to can a bunch of little jelly jars. They were handy to give-a-ways for little presents."

But the maple syrup season remains a family affair at Thompson's. "The grandkids have fun doing it," he said. "They get to see it go from the tree to their pancakes, and they all like pancakes." Thompson has two daughters, one in Minneapolis with children aged 16, 18 and 24, and one in Grand Rapids, Mich., with children 5, 7 and 9.

"The younger kids in Grand Rapids, last season was their first year and they were just tickled," he said. "They're right at the age where it's exciting to take the stuff to school and show-and-tell, and take their friends little packets of syrup. They're really proud to say they helped make it. They have fun out there and they're good little helpers."

And that family tradition is really what it's all about.

"I don't have much money invested," Thompson said. "I have a little tractor that I bought, but the rest of the equipment I just gathered over the years. It has no value. But to my kids when I'm gone, they'll know how to do it and when they start to retire, which won't be too long down the road, they might want to come up and take over the place and make syrup in the spring." ▲