

When We Made Syrup on Grandpa Cox's Place

By Missy Cox Jones

My parents were William Cornelius "Will" Cox and Minnie 'Steward Cox. We lived on my grandfather's place, Cornelius Nicholas "Nick" Cox, between Comanche and Gustine Texas. Uncle Hill Cox, my daddy's brother and his family lived in the big family house, and my family lived north of that house in a smaller house.

My grandfather had a syrup mill, and it has been used many times by Grandpa Cox before we moved there in about 1937. My mother's brother, Rob Steward told Daddy that he would raise the sorghum cane and furnish it if we would make syrup at the syrup mill. I can't remember a lot about the early work on this, but the syrup mill was set up south of our house and north of Uncle Hill's house in some post oak trees. Uncle Rob brought wagon loads of the cane stalks, and he had already taken the long leaves from the cane stalk, and they were ready to put through the mill.

The cooking of the juice from the cane consisted of a long copper pan, about 10 or 12 feet long. The pan had divisions, little walls dividing the big pan and set up across the pan. Each little wall had a gate that could be raised up that allowed the syrup to move from one section to the next. The pan set up on rocks, and the back side was open to allow you to put wood under the pan where the syrup was as you cooked it. The pan was angled just a little, so the syrup would flow to the finished end of the pan. The syrup had to be heated and cooked for a certain length of time. And, as the syrup cooked, it would be moved from section to section to the right of the pan, until it was considered "done". Then it would be put in the syrup buckets.

The mill was turned and the gears moved by a horse hitched to a long pole. The horse was walking round and round, and that movement turned the gears on the mill. The mill part of the operation wasn't a mill at all, in that it didn't grind anything. It was cast iron, setting up on legs, and had large gears standing up, in which you would poke the long pieces of sugar cane in and as you did, the gears would squeeze the juice out of the cane. I remember my mother took a large piece of ducking and tied it over a tub, the syrup would be squeezed through the gears and the juice would drain out into the tub with the cloth on it, through the ducking cloth to strain any fibers or anything else that was in the juice.

Then the juice would be poured into the big pan. The fire had to be just right, not too hot, or the copper pan would melt and with a big hole in it, it would be ruined. My Daddy took a vegetable can, flattened it out and punched holes in it and attached it to a long broom handle. This was used to skim the foam off of the syrup as it was cooking. The foam was good to eat, but nobody wanted it in their syrup buckets. And, my Daddy had gone to town and bought new one gallon syrup cans, with a bail on the top and a flat lid. Lots of people would put their syrup in crock jars, but Daddy used cans.

My Daddy, my Mother, Uncle Rob, my brother and sister-in-law, Wilburn and Effie Mae and my sister Geneva and her husband, Alton Mercer would be working. The men were watching the fire and feeding more wood into it as it needed it. My Mother, Effie Mae and Geneva was taking long wooden broom handles that had a block of wood on the end, to use stirring the syrup as it was moving and cooking between the little troughs in the big pan. The little block of wood was just the right size to move down the little trough.

The syrup as it cooked was boiling and boiling, really rolling in the big pan. It was being moved to another section of the pan to the right, and when it was considered "done".

Daddy would use a long handled dipper and put the hot syrup in the cans.

This was during the depression years and there wasn't much money to buy sugar and things. My sister, Geneva, my sister-in-law Effie Mae and my Mother used this syrup to cook down pear preserves, "with very little added sugar. They said they were the best preserves they had ever eaten. Also, they learned to make syrup pies. Now, most people don't know what a syrup pie is, but it is a pecan pie without the pecans, just the goodie. Wonderful. No telling how many syrup pies my family has made over the years. Every child in the family loves them and asks for them again and again.

I remember coming home from school on the bus and hurrying to change my "good clothes" to old clothes and run up the hill from our house to watch the cooking of the syrup. Sometimes, my Daddy would let me ride the horse as he walked round and round turning the gears on the syrup mill. People still make syrup at lots of festivals in East Texas, in Missouri and other states.

There is nothing as good as home made syrup, with lots of cow butter and hot biscuits. You can "Sop" this up.