

# Marketing Maple in the 1930s: The Pierce County Maple Syrup Producers Association

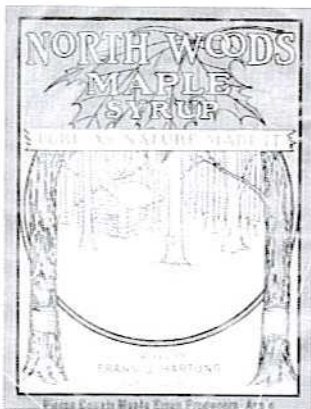
- by Matthew Thomas

For some the origins of the Wisconsin Maple Syrup Producers Association can be traced back to the formation of the Northwoods Maple Cooperative in Antigo in the early part of the twentieth century. But the Antigo Co-op was not the state's only maple syrup association in the 1930s. Other maple producers were organizing in the western side of the state. With the help of county extension agent H.G. Seyforth, a group of Pierce County maple syrup makers formed a cooperative known as the Pierce County Maple Syrup Producers Association.

Due to the distance from large urban markets, Pierce County maple producers in the early part of the twentieth century tended to produce only as much maple syrup and sugar as they could sell or trade to local merchants and businesses for goods and services. With the belt tightening following the Great Depression, maple producers in the area found it increasingly difficult to sell this specialty food and were admittedly poorly equipped and not very interested in knocking on doors to sell their syrup. As they would freely admit, they were farmers not salesmen. Extension agent Seyforth had a solution - develop a maple syrup cooperative. During the 1920s and 1930s, the state Department of Agriculture and Markets routinely promoted the formation of agricultural cooperatives as a means to obtain greater selling power for their products and greater buying power for necessary supplies and equipment.

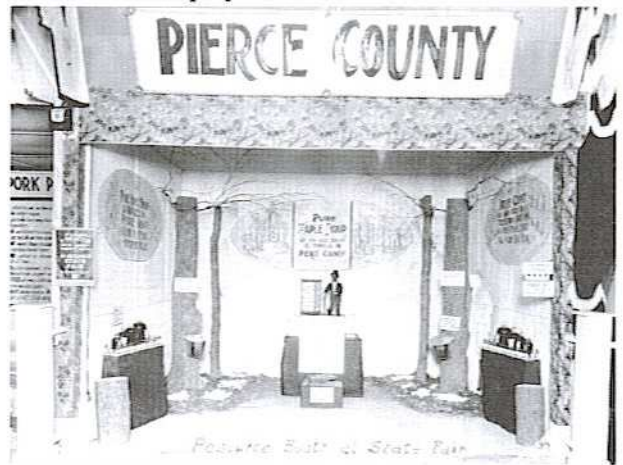
According to his annual reports, Seyforth promoted the cooperative idea in the winter of 1931 and 1932 when local maple producers gathered for a series of meetings held by state officials to present new state syrup grading guidelines. On February 17, 1932, the county association formally came into being at a meeting in the village of Rock Elm. One of their first marketing challenges was the production of syrup of uniform quality and appearance. The members quickly realized that individually they were each producing a range of syrup grades. In order to establish sufficient stock and more consistent grades, they began blending some of their syrups. They also realized that the boiling set-up of most association members was insufficient to consistently produce high quality uniform grades of syrup. Through the buying power of the cooperative, some producers were able to better afford to buy new and improved equipment, with some replacing their old flat pans with new commercial evaporators. The cooperative also starting making large orders of maple syrup equipment, buying glass and tin containers in bulk directly from the manufacturers at much reduced prices.

One of the Co-ops significant marketing strategies was the establishment of a display and sales booth at the state fair in Milwaukee, complete with examples of the various syrup grades and models of a modern evaporator and sugarhouse. In addition to selling syrup in bottles and tins of sizes ranging from one ounce to one gallon, the association sold sugar wrapped in wax paper, candies and a soft sugar called maple spread. In its first year at the fair, the Pierce County booth took the first place award in its class while selling forty gallons of maple syrup and thirty-five pounds of maple sugar.



Example of the North Woods Maple Syrup label from 1933. Original in 3 colors.

In its second year, the Pierce County Maple Producers Association developed and printed its own labels, one each for the three different syrup grades recognized in Wisconsin at that time, namely Fancy, No. 1, or No.2. Each multi color label displayed a scene of a log cabin in a snow covered woods with sap pails on each tree under the name North Woods Maple Syrup and banner reading "Pure as Nature Made it". The specific grade was printed in the middle of each label above the name and town of the syrup maker. By the mid 1930s, the marketing program was a working and the association was becoming more widely known and respected including sending a group of representatives to Marshfield to participate in early, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to establish a statewide maple producer's association.



Pierce County Maple Producers Association 1932 State Fair Booth

Encouraged by the success of the association as a way to sell their surplus syrup, cooperative members had the incentive to maintain and increase production. Through the 1930s and 1940s, Pierce County continued to be one of the largest syrup producing counties in the state, consistently ranked fifth in maple syrup production in Wisconsin, after Marathon, Shawano, Langlade, and Clark Counties. However, interest in the association began to slip, and for most of the 1940s Pierce County maple producers were largely on their own until state extension forester Fred Trenk brought the maple institutes to the area in the 1950s and assisted with the successful formation of a statewide maple producers council in 1954. ♦♦♦

(Photos courtesy of the University of Wisconsin, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Archives.)