

# Short and Sweet

## Sherman Holbert's Mid-Century Mille Lacs Lake Maple Syrup Experiment

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**H**istorically, maple syrup production has been associated with New England and Canada. In the middle of the twentieth century, one Minnesotan challenged that association and, for a short while, put Minnesota on the maple syrup map. In seven short years, from 1946 to 1952, Sherman Holbert grew a multi-faceted maple syrup operation on the shores of Mille Lacs Lake from nothing to ranking as one of the single largest maple syrup producers in the world at that time. Despite this rapid rise, Holbert exited the business almost as fast as he entered, but not before his unconventional approach caught the maple world's attention and brought the western frontier of the maple syrup industry to the fore.<sup>1</sup>

Holbert (1916–2013) began making maple syrup as a child while growing up with his maternal grandparents on the western shore of Mille Lacs Lake on a peninsula of land known as Wigwam Point (also known as Sherman's Point or Shabashkung Point). Located on the reservation of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, his grandparents' property included a "sugar bush," the traditional term used to describe a stand of maple trees that were tapped for their maple sap. Each spring for the first 14 years of his life, Holbert and his grandparents, who were not Ojibwe, tapped maple trees and boiled sap into syrup and sugar alongside their Ojibwe neighbors, from whom Holbert learned to speak the Ojibwe language. He discovered after high school that he had a flair for sales. By age 23, Holbert had risen to the role of national sales manager for a stove



*Sherman Holbert pouring sap in a stand of maple trees, known as a sugarbush, 1946.*

company before he enlisted and served for five years in the Army Air Corps during World War II.<sup>2</sup>

In the months leading up to his 1945 discharge, Holbert began to plan what he would do upon his return to the Mille Lacs area. Maple trees were abundant around Mille Lacs Lake, and he knew that maple syrup making was, for most producers, a short-term seasonal activity that brought in a little cash from working in the woods during the sloppy mud season of March and April. Holbert envisioned making maple syrup on a scale not previously witnessed in Minnesota. No one could accuse Holbert of not thinking big. While he did not set out to be the largest maple syrup operation in North America, he did see the national potential for this market and recognized it as a largely untapped resource in Minnesota.<sup>3</sup>



*Workers at Holbert's 1946 sugaring camp on Mille Lacs Lake, 1946.*

**A**t the time of Holbert's foray into the maple business in 1946, maple syrup production in the United States had reached an all-time low. The mid-twentieth-century decline in syrup production has been attributed to several factors, including increased cutting of maple forests due to higher prices for maple lumber through the 1930s and 1940s. The World War II years limited the availability of farm laborers (along with increasing labor costs), followed by a disinterest among returning GIs in pursuing agricultural employment, including maple syrup production. By the late 1940s the United States was importing nearly as much maple syrup from a growing Canadian surplus as it was producing at home; 40 years earlier, the United States and Canada had been producing approximately the same volume of maple syrup. Although North America had thousands of maple syrup producers in the 1940s, commercial operations generally used fewer than 10,000 taps.<sup>4</sup>

Neighboring Wisconsin had a growing maple industry and was home to a few large producers, but most were well below these levels, an exception being Reynolds Sugar Bush, which in 1947 was making syrup from approximately 11,000 taps. Minnesota had no maple operations with more than 5,000 taps. Throughout the maple syrup-producing world, sap collection still was done largely by hand from pails hung at the taps on maple trees. Although tractors were beginning to replace the use of horses and oxen for hauling sap and for pulling gathering tanks through the woods, no significant technological innovations had been adopted by the industry in the first 50 years of the twentieth century. By and large, maple syrup

*Sherman Holbert's brother Pat Holbert at the evaporator, 1947.*

making in the late 1940s was still a simple forest and farm activity. But new ideas, new technology, and innovative thinkers like Sherman Holbert were bringing change to the maple industry.<sup>5</sup>

Holbert's first order of business upon his return from World War II was to purchase a parcel of land with a workable maple stand. He found one located between Onamia and the Mille Lacs Indian Reservation. Next, he discovered that almost no one in the state used modern maple syrup evaporators for boiling sap into syrup. As luck would have it, however, Holbert happened upon one large evaporator for sale nearby at White-

fish Lake, and he immediately bought it. Measuring 4 x 14 feet, this copper evaporator became the centerpiece of his first year of operation. Finding sap pails was Holbert's next mission. With most sheet metal having gone to the war effort, acquiring a sufficient supply of maple syrup pails proved to be impossible. Ever resourceful, Holbert found a way around this limitation. He discovered that 16-quart metal containers used to ship food for the military were now available in abundance and were being sold to wholesale food sellers for five cents a container. He purchased a generous supply of these makeshift pails and punched a hole in each to accommodate the maple sap spouts from which the pails were hung.<sup>6</sup>

The first production season, 1946, was modest. A simple open-sided, temporary shelter was built near the shore of Mille Lacs Lake to house the evaporator. Sherman



Holbert worked with his brother, Pat Holbert, and a small crew of men hired from the Mille Lacs Reservation to tap approximately 700 trees that season and gather the sap in tanks pulled on a wagon by a team of horses. They easily sold all the syrup they made. Holbert could see his future. Following his first season, Holbert traveled to Vermont, the maple syrup capitol of the United States, in the winter of 1946-47 and put his sales background to work, striking a deal with Everett Soule, president of the George H. Soule Company, manufacturer of the King brand evaporator. In addition to purchasing a trio of 6 x 16-foot King-brand evaporators, he convinced Soule to allow him to become the King evaporator and maple equipment sales agent for Minnesota and Wisconsin. To house his three new evaporators, Holbert built a large Quonset building along the road (now Highway 169) between Onamia and Vineland. His next challenge was figuring out how to haul the sap to fill the evaporators. He solved this problem by purchasing a pair of surplus army trucks that he fitted with never-used aircraft fuel tanks.<sup>7</sup>

In the lead-up to Holbert's second season, he hit on an innovative approach to supply additional sap to fill his increased capacity for hauling and processing. In the months before the sap started to run, he began asking landowners with maple stands around Mille Lacs Lake if they were open to having their trees tapped and selling the sap, which he would come and gather. Under the company name Holbert Brothers of Onamia, Minnesota, he bought and transported the sap and produced maple syrup, with his brother Pat assisting during the spring syrup-making

*BELOW, LEFT: Sherman Holbert gathering sap with horse team, ca. 1946-47. BELOW, RIGHT: Pat Holbert unloading Holbert Brothers gathering truck, 1947.*

# Holbert Brothers

Onamia, Minn.



**MODERN EQUIPMENT**

**For Making Pure Maple Syrup**

season for most of their years of operation. With more trees to tap, in the second year of production the Holbert brothers were able to hang between 8,000 and 9,000 pails on Holbert's own land plus that of a few neighbors. One of Holbert's best investments was purchasing a couple of Soule's new backpack-mounted power drills driven by small gasoline engines. With the portable power drills, the two brothers could hang as many as 3,500 buckets a day, compared with about 300 using the old hand-cranked brace-and-bit drills.<sup>8</sup>



# Holbert envisioned making maple syrup on a scale not previously witnessed in Minnesota.

The sap buying program was an immediate success. The expanded operation made a decent volume of syrup, which Holbert sold very quickly at a good price. He found one of the reasons the program worked was that land-owners were interested in getting value from their maple trees without the added responsibility, cost, and workload of being syrup makers themselves. Holbert made it easy for them by providing the labor and then buying the sap. Thus, Holbert benefitted from not being in New England—the heart of the maple syrup universe—where people were conditioned to think that the only way to participate in maple syrup production was with a start-to-finish commitment: from tapping to boiling to selling syrup.<sup>9</sup>

Holbert's system of buying sap from different woodlot owners and transporting it to a single central location for concentration was a novel idea at the time. It was similar in organization to the way dairy farmers produced milk that was then collected and centrally processed into milk or butter or cheese. In 1947 the Reynolds Sugar Bush in Aniwa, Wisconsin, also began experimenting with what became known as the central evaporator plant, albeit on a much smaller scale than Holbert. In the heartland of maple syrup making in Vermont, New York, and Quebec, this model of buying and transporting sap struck many as too industrial and was viewed as an affront to the traditions of the sugar house.<sup>10</sup>

In preparation for the 1948 season, Holbert purchased another 20,000 of the surplus pails and an equal number of maple taps. He was now ready to collect maple sap from 28,000 taps spread across his and his sap sellers' property. In addition, he had tightened up the sap purchasing process and began testing the sugar content of the incoming sap with a hydrometer to make sure nobody was trying to sell him lake water. Meanwhile, as the western sales representative selling King evaporators for the Soule Company, Holbert was also expanding into another aspect of the maple industry in Minnesota and Wisconsin: equipment sales. For this line of business Holbert formed a second company named Holbert's Maple Orchard Supplies, specifically choosing the term "maple orchard" rather than "sugar bush" since many farmers in Minnesota and Wisconsin were unfamiliar with the latter term.<sup>11</sup>

In 1948 Holbert began renting an old vacant creamery building in Onamia where he began a third enterprise:



*Sherman (standing) and Pat Holbert adjust sap filters, 1947.*

Mille Lacs Maple Products, which purchased syrup to package for market. Most of the syrup was bottled for sale, with a significant portion devoted to filling small containers for holiday and corporate gifts. The rest of the syrup was reprocessed into products such as maple cream, maple sugar candies, and what became known as high-flavored syrup, which had been boiled at very high temperatures to intensify the caramelization process and maple flavor. High-flavored syrup was especially well suited for blending and use in flavoring other foods. A year after setting up shop in the creamery building, Mille Lacs Maple Products moved to the location of a former mercantile in downtown Onamia.<sup>12</sup>

By 1949 Holbert and Mille Lacs Maple Products were making approximately 5,000 gallons of syrup a season

and buying many times more than that from other syrup producers. A great deal of this syrup was shipped to a General Mills manufacturing facility in California, because Holbert had secured a contract to provide high-flavored syrup for the blending and bottling of Log Cabin brand syrup. At that time, Log Cabin syrup was a combination of cane sugar with about 15 percent maple syrup. To meet the demands of his syrup contracts, Holbert purchased a significant amount of syrup from New England, filling railroad cars with hundreds of metal barrels containing thousands of gallons of maple syrup. As an outsider from Minnesota, his arrival to buy syrup in Vermont did not sit well with the competing wholesale buyers who had traditionally controlled the transport of syrup from producer to packer. In the northeastern states and adjacent Quebec, it was standard practice for each packer to own a large supply of 50-gallon barrels or drums and distribute the empty barrels as a kind of quasi contract with producers. Holbert owned no barrels in 1948 and 1949 when he began buying syrup in Vermont. In his role as syrup packer, he would simply load the barrels he “borrowed” from other packers

in a freight car at a rail station and, after emptying them in Minnesota, ship them back to the producer.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of the 1950 syrup season the syrup packers in Vermont who owned their own shipping barrels were becoming upset with Holbert’s helping himself to their barrels and were ready to bring local law enforcement authorities into the situation. Holbert, however, was one step ahead. He dodged the conflict over barrels by coming up with a different way to pack syrup for rail shipment to Minnesota: pumping it into a tank car at a railroad station in Essex Junction, Vermont. Holbert took advantage of the internal compartments of the tanker, filling each with three different grades of syrup. In the following years Holbert filled rail tankers in New York and Quebec as well as in Vermont. The idea of moving syrup across the country in tank cars rather than in smaller barrels had not previously been tried, but, following Holbert’s lead, in the coming decades it became standard practice for buyers of large volumes of syrup.<sup>14</sup>

Taking a completely different approach to shipping syrup wasn’t the only place Holbert had modernized his

## Indigenous Maple Syrup Production

Maple syrup and maple sugar making has a long history in Minnesota that predates the commercial maple syrup industry discussed in “Short and Sweet.” The earliest maple sugar and maple syrup producers in the state were the Ojibwe and Dakota peoples who lived within the region’s woodlands.

In spring, when warming temperatures bring melting days and freezing nights, the sap of the maple tree flows strongest. It was then that Native families traveled to maple sugaring camps and maple woods, known as sugar bushes. Hundreds of gallons of sap from many maple trees were gathered in birch bark containers and carried by hand to the camps. In large metal kettles suspended over open fires, forty gallons of sap were reduced by boiling to make one gallon of maple syrup. For much of the history of



*Sherman Holbert's mother, Georgia Sherman (far left), at Indian sugar camp on Wigwam Point, Mille Lacs Indian Reservation, about 1916.*

Native American maple production, the primary focus was to make maple sugar, either in granulated or cake form. It took about one quart of syrup to make two pounds of maple sugar. Maple sugar was used to flavor foods, eat as a sweet treat, and trade for other goods and food items.

Maple sugaring season has always been a special time in the Mille Lacs

Ojibwe community, with sugaring camps scattered throughout the maple forests all around the lake. Wigwam Point, where Sherman Holbert grew up as a boy and first learned how to make maple syrup from his Ojibwe neighbors, was and still is an important place in the Mille Lacs Ojibwe community to gather maple sap and make maple syrup.

operation. In addition to the backpack-mounted, gasoline-powered portable drills mentioned earlier for tapping maple trees, Holbert also was quick to adopt other helpful new technologies, such as using ultraviolet lamps above his storage tanks to discourage the growth of microorganisms in the sugary maple sap waiting to be boiled. Holbert was among the very first maple producers to employ the King brand sap bag, a plastic sap collection bag invented and marketed by the Soule Equipment Company that was designed to replace metal pails for sap collection.<sup>15</sup>

The entrepreneurial Holbert was always thinking ahead. Despite having a rapidly growing and very successful syrup business, he could see that things might not continue to work out for much longer. Changes in weight limits for truck transit would lead Holbert to make a difficult decision for his maple syrup companies. According to Holbert, in the 1940s Minnesota imposed weight limits on trucks traveling on unpaved roads during the soft muddy months of spring following the winter thaw. Fortunately for him, vehicles that were moving perishable foods, such as milk trucks, were given an exemption; Holbert's maple sap met those criteria. In 1950, however, the Minnesota Legislature decided to end the exemptions beginning in the summer of 1952. For the first few years of Holbert's operation, in the late 1940s, his sap collection trucks did most of their collecting at night when temperatures had cooled and the roads were firmer, which made it easier to pass through the soft and muddy patches. "Inevitably, we tore the hell out of some roads," Holbert laughingly recalled in a 2002 interview, "but I tell ya, with winches on those rigs and four-wheel drive and the tread on them, we got the sap out, but nobody else drove on the roads until the Fourth of July." Seeing how difficult it was going to be to continue to pick up and transport sap in the coming years, Holbert decided to look ahead and beyond maple syrup.<sup>16</sup>

**H**olbert's decision to get out of the maple syrup business was precipitated not only by changes in truck regulations but also by advice from investors after he began to operate a second business focused on processing and marketing wild rice. A challenge in growing two businesses at the same time was the never-ending need for capital. Holbert had lined up a small group of wealthy investors and creditors who supported his businesses, but they saw that Holbert was starting to be pulled in too many directions and did not have enough time to give sufficient attention to all of his enterprises. Eventually they told him that one of the businesses had to go. Facing both pressure from his creditors and the upcoming challenges



*Sherman Holbert and Minnesota's chief forester hang sap can, 1947.*

to transporting sap on unpaved roads, Holbert made the decision in 1952 to stick with just the wild rice business, since he was the only one selling wild rice aimed at a national market in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

That same year, Holbert sold the Mille Lacs Maple Products bottling plant to the Wisconsin Cheeseman, which continued to package syrup in Onamia until the mid-1970s. At that point, the company moved operations to its headquarters in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, to avoid the cost of transporting products from Onamia to Sun Prairie. In 1952 Holbert also dissolved Holbert's Maple Orchard Supplies by relinquishing his equipment dealership contract with the Soule Company, and he liquidated his Holbert Brothers central boiling plant by selling the three large evaporators to syrup producers in Wisconsin who were looking to expand their operations.<sup>18</sup>

As Holbert wound down his syrup business, he wondered what to do with the soon-to-be-empty boiling plant. It was then that he and his wife, Maxine, came up with the idea of taking advantage of the growing tourist trade by opening a gift shop. The old highway from Onamia had just been rebuilt into the modern Highway 169, running immediately adjacent to the boiling plant. The question then became how to turn the large concrete block of the former maple syrup plant into an attractive roadside stop. Holbert came up with the idea of adding a new façade with blockhouse-like turrets on the corners and calling it Fort Mille Lacs. The Holberts later added a blacksmith shop and an Indian village to expand on the idealized frontier and Native American themes. Opening in 1953, Fort Mille Lacs went on to become a well-known and popular roadside tourist attraction for nearly 50 years, although some have viewed it as exploitative of Native people. In 1998 the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe purchased the property and demolished the buildings to make room for construction of a multiunit residential complex.<sup>19</sup>

**S**herman Holbert opened the maple syrup industry's eyes to the idea that making maple syrup was just as viable in the western Great Lakes region as it was in the northeastern states and adjacent provinces and that it could be done on a much larger scale than previously imagined. Through diversification to embrace syrup production, bulk syrup purchasing, evaporator and equipment sales, and packaging for gift sales, Holbert showed that it was possible to have a full-time, year-round maple syrup business even on the western frontier of the maple syrup world.

As an outsider to the New England maple heartland's conventional thinking about syrup making, Holbert was not afraid to employ new production models and

at grander scales than previously witnessed. Convincing Mille Lacs area woodlot owners to be sap sellers as opposed to syrup makers, Holbert was able to expand his syrup production exponentially overnight. By combining and concentrating sap from dozens of privately owned maple stands at one central location (similar to a cheese-making factory in the early and mid-twentieth century), Holbert introduced the maple industry to the central evaporator plant and a new way of thinking. That Holbert quickly became the largest single producer of syrup was in part lucky timing in the post-World War II years. More significantly, though, Holbert's success was the result of one fearless man having the vision, energy, and salesmanship to seize an opportunity and put his ideas to work. □

## Sherman Holbert and the Mille Lacs Ojibwe Community

The relationship between Sherman Holbert and the Mille Lacs Ojibwe community ran deep and was what some might describe as complicated. He grew up among the Ojibwe and learned the Ojibwe language as a boy. Without question, Holbert was an energetic entrepreneur who developed a variety of industries and economic opportunities in the Mille Lacs region. In so doing, Holbert took advantage of an available local labor pool, providing many people in the reservation community with income and employment at a time and place when economic opportunity was much more limited than it is today.

Holbert's idea to begin a maple syrup enterprise stemmed from his cultural connection to the Mille Lacs Ojibwe and the syrup-making

knowledge he gained from them as a youth. Although he employed several men from the Mille Lacs community, especially in the early years of his maple business, most of the employees were non-Ojibwe and his business model was to buy and process bulk maple sap from mostly non-Ojibwe residents around Mille Lacs Lake. Holbert never used Native American themes or connections to promote the sales and marketing of his maple products.

Holbert's later enterprises followed a different model that leaned more heavily on Ojibwe labor. His wild rice business encouraged members of Ojibwe communities around the state to gather as much wild rice as they could, which he in turn purchased. Holbert's Fort Mille Lacs was a roadside tourist attraction that sold a wide range of crafts made by hand in the Mille Lacs community. Fort Mille Lacs also featured an Indian Village that displayed

Mille Lacs Ojibwe as an Indian sideshow.

On one hand, Holbert's businesses promoted cultural preservation, provid-

ing active encouragement and an outlet for the production and sale of traditional arts and crafts such as Ojibwe beadwork. Similarly, as a broker and processor of wild rice, Holbert's paying rice gatherers for their labors on the lakes and rivers of the state provided an added financial incentive for Native American families as they pursued this tradition, passing along the knowledge and skills to younger generations in the process. One could argue that in these ways Holbert exhibited a deep care for the history and preservation of Ojibwe culture.

On the other hand, Holbert's acts of selling, commodifying, and profiting from images, products, and traditional activities of Ojibwe culture have led to questions of cultural appropriation. Clearly, his relationship with the Mille Lacs Band was a complex give-and-take. How should history view Holbert's place in the context of the Mille Lacs community?<sup>1</sup>

1. For a discussion of these issues, see Brett Larson, "Fort Mille Lacs Indian Village: In the 1950s and 1960s, Mille Lacs Band members helped preserve culture and history," *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Nov. 10, 1999, 23–24.

*Fort Mille Lacs souvenir card with feather.*



THIS PLUMED FEATHER IS A MEMENTO OF MY MEETING WITH THE DANCE CHIEF AND OF THE COLORFUL DANCES IN THE INDIAN VILLAGE AT FORT MILLE LACS.

Their colorful costumes and intricate dances bring the Fort Mille Lacs Indian dancers national renown.

## Notes

This article could not have been written without the generosity of Sherman Holbert, who took the time to sit with the author for a series of interviews at his Mille Lacs Lake home in the summer of 2002 at the age of 86. A few years after these interviews, Holbert donated his personal and business papers to the Minnesota Historical Society, where they are now on file at the Minnesota History Center. Holbert died in 2013.

1. Sherman Holbert and Family Papers, MNHS, locations I47.I.13.4F, box 2; I47.I.17.4F, box 3; I47.H.13.5B, box 4 (hereafter, Holbert Papers); Matthew M. Thomas, "Where the Forest Meets the Farm: A Comparison of the Spatial and Historical Change in the Euro-American and American Indian Maple Production Landscape," PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2004; "Mille Lacs Area Reaps Sweet Harvest—Maple Syrup Firm Sees Big Year," *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press*, 1951, 4, clipping in Holbert Papers, I47.I.17.4F, box 3.

2. Sherman Holbert interviews with the author, June 17 and July 25, 2002 (hereafter, Holbert interviews); Holbert Papers.

3. Peter Dale Weber, "Wisconsin Maple Products: Production and Marketing," *Wisconsin Department of Agriculture Bulletin 335* (1956); S. A. Holbert, "The Future of the Maple Industry in Minnesota and Wisconsin," in *Report of Proceedings, Second Conference on Maple Products* (Philadelphia: Eastern Utilization Research Branch, Agricultural Research Service, USDA, 1953), 14–15.

4. In 1910, the United States produced 4,106,000 gallons of syrup and 14,060,000 pounds of maple sugar. Converting one gallon of syrup to its equivalent of eight pounds of sugar, the United States produced a total of nearly 47 million pounds of maple sugar in 1910. In comparison, in 1910 Canada produced 1,800,000 gallons of syrup and 10,488,000 pounds of sugar for a total equivalent amount of 24,888,000 pounds. By 1950, Canada's 2,800,000 gallons of syrup and 1,824,000 pounds of sugar with an equivalent value of 24,224,000 pounds were outproducing the United States' 2,000,000 gallons of syrup and 257,000 pounds of sugar at an equivalent of 16,449,000 pounds. In 1950, Canadian imports of maple syrup and sugar converted to the equivalent amount totaled 11,068,000 pounds. "Production of Maple Syrup and Sugar," USDA, *Farmers Bulletin 1366* (1924); C. O. Willits, "Maple Syrup Producers Manual," USDA, *Agricultural Handbook 134* (1958); Statistics Canada website, [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca).

5. For example, one of the largest single producers in the 1930s and 1940s was the George H. Soule family in Vermont, operating approximately 20,000 taps. "Everett I. Soule Takes New Post," *Burlington Free Press*, Jan. 4, 1938, 8; Lynn Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History: Fit for Kings* (Hortonville, WI: Reynolds Family Trust, 1999), 359; Weber, "Wisconsin Maple Products";

Holbert, "Future of the Maple Industry," 14–15.

6. Purchased from T. H. Croswell, this same evaporator had been used by Harry Ayer in a small maple syrup operation Ayer ran for about 10 years on the Mille Lacs Reservation in the 1930s as part of the Mille Lacs Products Company. Ayer, along with John Martin and T. H. Croswell, incorporated the Mille Lacs Products Company to manufacture and sell maple syrup and sugar, sorghum, boats, and toys. See Harry D. Ayer and Family Papers, 1787–1982, P612, box 3 and 6, MNHS; Holbert interviews.

7. Holbert interviews. In the 1930s to the 1950s, the George H. Soule Company of St. Albans, Vermont, was one of the world's largest manufacturers of evaporators and equipment for maple syrup. Despite their share of the maple equipment market, by the 1940s the Soule Company had yet to establish a dealership west of Michigan, a fact Holbert took great advantage of.

8. Holbert interviews. Everett Soule and his brother George had invented and patented one of the first backpack-mounted, gasoline-powered portable drills for tapping maple trees (US patent 2563195).

9. Ed Crane, "Yum! It's Maple Sugar Season," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1948, 1–2; Holbert interviews.

10. Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History*; Matthew M. Thomas, "The Central Evaporator Plant in Wisconsin Maple History," *Wisconsin Maple News* 21, no. 2 (2005): 10. Reynolds Sugar Bush continued to gradually expand its central evaporator plant, adding multiple facilities. By the late 1960s it was making syrup from nearly 200,000 taps on 13 evaporators at four different plants in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

11. Crane, "Yum! It's Maple Sugar Season"; Holbert interviews; large-format broadside advertisement for Holbert's Maple Orchard Supplies, postmarked Onamia, MN, 1950, MNHS.

By comparison, the largest maple syrup producers in Minnesota in 2016 and 2017 were making syrup from 20,000 to 25,000 taps and with the aid of modern equipment, including plastic tubing on a vacuum system to gather maple sap, reverse osmosis to concentrate sap, and high-efficiency evaporators.

12. "New Quarters," *Minneapolis Star*, Nov. 13, 1951, 32; Frank Murray, "Syrup Trade Booms:

Onamia Dreams of Sweet Christmas," *Minneapolis Star*, Dec. 5, 1949, 25.

13. "Maple Sugar Plan Pays Brothers 'Sweet Dividends,'" *Star Tribune*, Jan. 29, 1949, 9. The Towle's Log Cabin Syrup Company was started in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1888: see James Trager, *The Food Chronology: A Food Lover's Compendium of Events and Anecdotes, from Prehistory to Present* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 326.

14. Holbert interviews.

15. "Speaking of Spring," *Minneapolis Star*, Feb. 27, 1952, 44; "Mille Lacs Area Reaps Sweet Harvest"; "Firm Introduces Pouring Bag," *Minneapolis Star*, July 9, 1953; Holbert, "Future of the Maple Industry," 14–15. The King sap bag was an invention of Everett I. Soule of the George H. Soule Company. Like most industries in the post-war era, maple producers were looking for ways to take advantage of the new lightweight and flexible properties of plastics. The sap bag never really took off at that time as a viable sap-gathering method, but it did help set the stage for the introduction of plastic tubing for sap gathering, which revolutionized the maple industry in the following decades.

16. Brett Larson, "End of an era: After nearly 50 years, Sherman Holbert's Fort Mille Lacs has closed its doors," *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Nov. 3, 1999, 18–19; Holbert interviews.

17. Holbert interviews; Holbert Papers. Holbert would not name the investors when asked during the interviews.

18. Tom Seagren and Jim Birkenstadt of the Wisconsin Cheeseman in discussion with author, May 1, 2003.

19. Larson, "End of an era," 18–19; Brett Larson, "Fort Mille Lacs Indian Village: In the 1950s and 1960s, Mille Lacs Band members helped preserve culture and history," *Mille Lacs Messenger*, Nov. 10, 1999, 23–24.

Photos on p. 66, 70, 72, 73, MNHS Collections; p. 67, 68, 69, 71, Sherman Holbert and Family Papers, I47. I. 17.2F, MNHS.



*Sherman Holbert's  
Fort Mille Lacs  
name tag.*





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