

Minnesota Maple News

Newsletter of the Minnesota Maple Syrup Producers Association

Second / Summer Quarter

<http://www.mnmaple.org>

June 2021



Holbert Brothers Maple Syrup at Mille Lacs Lake Matthew Thomas

In the history of maple syrup making in the United States, during the years following World War II the maple industry was going through a period of decline and experienced some of its lowest years of production on record. Farming traditions and rural demographics were going through significant changes across New England and tobacco companies, who for years consumed a large amount of maple sugar and syrup, were discontinuing its use. But in Minnesota, there were two brothers who ignored all of that and took a completely different approach to making maple syrup and brought national attention to Minnesota maple syrup production.

Following the end of the war and their discharges from the Air Force, Sherman Holbert and his brother Pat decided to start a commercial maple syrup operation in 1946 near their home on the west shore of Mille Lacs Lake. They started somewhat conservatively the first year with 600 to 700 taps, a pair of used evaporators, and a simple wooden shed literally feet from the shore of Lake Mille Lacs.

But the Holberts were just getting warmed up. By the start of the 1947 season, the Holberts had purchased three, large 6 x 16-foot King Evaporators from the G.H. Soule Company in Vermont, built a huge Quonset hut-style building for boiling, and were making syrup from the sap of over 20,000 trees. By 1950, with the help of men mostly hired from the nearby Mille Lacs Reservation, the Holberts were tapping around 28,000 trees and making 5,000 gallons of syrup in a season.



Sherman Holbert had bought land to get them started and had about 9,000 of their own taps, but the real secret to their growth and size was convincing neighbors with stands of maple trees around the lake to allow the Holberts to tap their trees for them and have the tree owners gather and sell their sap to the Holberts. Metal sap pails were difficult to come by after the war, especially in Minnesota, so the Holberts purchased thousands of unused 16-quart military surplus metal containers meant for food packing. Sherman had a tool maker build him a punch to put a hanging hole in each can and he distributed them along with taps to their sap providers. The Holberts also purchased a group of huge

copper tanks from a creamery that was closing near Hutchinson and two, never-used, surplus fuel trucks that he used to pick up sap each day. The Holberts benefitted from not being in New England where people were conditioned to think that the only way to participate in maple syrup production was

with a start-to-finish commitment to doing it all; tapping, gathering, boiling, and selling syrup. Almost overnight the Holberts had established the maple industry's first central evaporator plant and become the largest maple syrup makers in the world at that time. After a few years, brother Pat's involvement was limited to the tapping and boiling season, and Sherman carried the company forward on his own.

In making plans for an enormous single purchase of three large evaporators, the newest backpack mounted



gasoline-powered tappers, and more equipment than any one producer was buying in one year, Sherman convinced the G.H. Soule equipment company that he should become a representative and dealer for Soule, the first one west of Michigan. His success as a maple producer was getting noticed and he was approached by several food industry representatives, including General Foods, who contracted with him to provide tens of thousands of gallons of syrup for blending with cane sugar in their production of Log Cabin Syrup. Now Holbert was in the syrup buying and packing business too.

Never a shy individual or at a loss for words, Sherman soon became a spokesperson for the Minnesota maple

industry and represented the state at the first two national maple conferences in Pennsylvania in 1950 and 1953. Holbert was even one of the first people to propose the establishment of a national maple syrup council in 1951.

Sherman was an extremely entrepreneurial individual and expanded his activities beyond maple syrup production and packing to include a fast-growing business in buying and selling hand harvested wild rice and assembling holiday and corporate gift packaging. Gift sales led Holbert to think about new attractive ways to package and sell syrup. According to Holbert, he was a leader in the development of the miniature novelty syrup bottles, sometimes called nips, and came up with the idea for the still popular mini bottle label "A Nip of Northern Comfort" as play on the whiskey brand Southern Comfort.

In time Holbert's entrepreneurism got ahead of him and his investors directed him to scale back and let one of his enterprises go. Holbert opted to stick with wild rice since his rice business was unique with no other processors packing and selling rice on a national scale. At that same time, Highway 169 between Onamia and Vineland was under construction directly in front of their syrup plant. In 1952 Sherman and his wife decided to take advantage of that opportunity. They sold the evaporators and maple equipment and converted the syrup plant into a large gift shop, snack bar, and roadside attraction. They called it Fort Mille Lacs and built it to resemble a western fort complete with blacksmith shop and Indian village. After only eight sugaring seasons the Holbert's full-time year-round maple syrup operation and equipment sales business closed shop.

I was lucky enough to conduct two interviews with Sherman Holbert at his Mille Lacs Lake home in 2002 and one thing I will always remember from those interviews was that Sherman Holbert, at age 86, had the firmest and

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Originally from St. Cloud, Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a historian of the maple industry who shares his research and writing at the website www.maplesyruphistory.com. He is the author of the recent book "A Sugarbush Like None Other: Adirondack Maple Syrup and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company", available for sale on eBay and the book "Maple King: The Making of a Maple Syrup Empire," available on Amazon.com. He can be reached at maplesyruphistory@gmail.com.

strongest handshake I have ever experienced. He passed away in 2013.



Letter from the President – Chris Ransom

Hello fellow maple syrupers. I want to wish you all a great summer and to report on a couple of developments.

If you weren't able to attend, we had a good, online, membership meeting on May 15 via ZOOM. During the meeting we dispensed with some association business and held an online election for six Directors. We had approximately 40-45 attendees and we were assisted by Jesse Randall and his team at Michigan State University who ran the meeting behind the scenes – a big Thank You to them!

As for business, the meeting minutes from May 2019 (*yes – 2019 was the last time we met in person!!*) was approved, our financial situation was discussed, the Treasurer's report was approved, and the audit committee report was approved. Whew – it felt good to get that over with!

We had an election for board members – I'm not going to rehash the details, but it was necessary to elect three

people to a 2-year term and three people to a 3-year term. So, welcome back Shelly Carlson, Steve Saupe and myself for a 2-year term. And welcome back Mark Waletzko and Laurie Reddie for a 3-year term. I am pleased to welcome Greg Nichols from Sawtooth Mountain Maple to the board for a 3-year term. He has quite a pedigree in the maple world – working at perhaps the largest sugarbush in Minnesota. We think his knowledge, background, and connections will be a great benefit to the board and to the association.

I would also like to take the time once again to thank George Lemire and Butch Fidely for their service on the board – they decided to step down this time around. Butch, it seems like you've been on the board forever and the board will be a little less sparkly without you on it. Thanks for being our delegate to the NAMSC for those many years and for wearing a suitcoat and tie for us.

George, you signed up for the board to help organize the convention in Duluth in 2019. Your input was invaluable and helped make it a success. (*continued next page*)



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