

The early History of the Plastic Maple Syrup Jug: Part One – The 1960s

Matthew M. Thomas

Packaging maple syrup in plastic jugs is now commonplace and jugs are the primary container for retail sales. However, sixty years ago there were no plastic jugs and syrup was packaged in either metal or glass containers. This is the first of a three-part article that traces the early history, development, and manufacturing of plastic containers for the maple syrup industry. Each part will cover a decade of history with the first scanning the 1960s.

When first introduced to the maple industry, plastic was modern and novel, but it was also an untried and unproven material. In time, the industry found what types of plastic worked best and settled on the familiar shape of a jug with a handle for its plastic containers. In getting to that point there were a few earlier, less well-known attempts at bottling syrup in plastic containers. Prior to the introduction of the jug shape there were a few other examples of plastic maple syrup containers.

Harry Chapman

The earliest example of bottling with plastic containers was the efforts of sugarmaker Harry Chapman of South Wallingford, Vermont. In 1959,

while still an engineering student at the University of Vermont, Harry began experimenting with different available plastic containers and settled on a polypropylene tubular squeeze bottle used for condiments and by the honey industry. In an interview with Harry, he shared that starting in 1962 he purchased bottles from an Albany, NY

wholesaler in half pint, full pint, and quart sizes, and added a yellow and dark green label on the clear containers using a silkscreen set-up he built himself. Beside bottling syrup from the Chapman family sugarbush in the squeeze bottles, for a couple of years Harry drove around Vermont selling the bottles to other syrup makers with roadside syrup stands and made numerous presentations promoting the use of this new technology and container.



Plastic squeeze bottle for maple syrup introduced by Harry Chapman in 1962 (From the Collections of Matthew M. Thomas)

Vermont Maple Orchards – Frank Rees

Beginning in the spring of 1962, Vermont Maple Orchards of Essex Junction, Vermont began selling syrup packaged in a miniature plastic sugarhouse. This container was about a half pint in size and made from clear plastic with a pour spout fashioned to look like the smoke-

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stack of the sugarhouse. The company promoted the benefits of plastic as being unbreakable and free from the threat of rusting. Frank Rees, General Manager of Vermont Maple Orchards at that time, was a chemist by training and was a part of the research in the 1930s to identify the sources of lead in maple syrup. As a result, he was sensitive to potential risks of solder leaching from metal cans into syrup and quickly embraced the potential of plastic as a packaging material. Tom Rees, Frank's son, recalls that the plastic sugarhouse was not a successful item and only sold for a couple of years, in part because the plastic used at that time, probably polypropylene, was not suited to the hot packing of syrup and became brittle and hard.

Little is known about these plastic sugarhouses, such as where and how they were manufactured or who designed them. Their novelty at the time and short lifespan has made them a rarity and essentially unknown among collectors of vintage maple syrup containers.

Robert Bramhall and Robert M. Lamb

A third early plastic container was introduced in 1965 by Robert "Bob" Bramhall, Sr., the woodlands manager for the J.P. Lewis Company (JPL) in Beaver Falls, NY. Bramhall, who su-

pervised JPL's maple sugaring operation began experimenting in 1963 with the idea of bottling in plastic before settling on a square-shaped container with a maple leaf design embossed on the side. Bramhall worked with the American Plastics Corporation in nearby Bainbridge, NY to manufacture the opaque cream- and peach-colored containers. In the first year he had 50,000 pint-sized containers made with a quart size added the following year. According to Butch Bramhall, Bob Bramhall's son, one of the reasons Bob looked at plastic was the shortage in the availability of metal syrup cans in the early 1960s. Bob's daughter-in-law Pat



Pint sized plastic container for maple syrup introduced by Robert Bramhall in 1965 (From the Collections of Tom McCrumm).

Bramhall added that Bob wanted to have a container that was smaller and easier for housewives to handle and use than the large half and full gallon tins that were most common at that time. After offering the containers for sale for about one year, in 1966 Bramhall transferred the sales of the containers to Robert M. Lamb's growing plastic tubing and sugaring supplies company in Baldwinsville, NY. Lamb continued to

advertise the container for sale through the end of 1969 when they were replaced by the new plastic syrup jugs coming out on the market.

Part Two of this article will focus on the first plastic jugs introduced in the 1970s by Elmer Kress, Charlie Bacon, Bob Lamb, and S. Allen Soule.