



Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association Celebrates 125 Years

by Bill Clark

The Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association (VMSMA) was created on January 12th, 1893 in Johnson, VT. It's the world's oldest maple organization. What a story it has to tell. How did it happen?

As the story goes, the Vermont maple industry heard about someone in Wisconsin who crated a new cheap version of maple syrup by blending in other cheaper sugars and he was selling it in Chicago at a low price. I've always wondered how Vermont found about it way back then.

However, producers around the state felt it was time to organize and so they did. At this same time the Carey Maple Sugar Company was operating in St. Johnsbury, VT. They were the world's largest, even tapping 20,000 to 30,000 trees of their own in St. Johnsbury and Danville. St. Johnsbury was truly then the maple center of the world.

In the early 1900's VMSMA usually held a single annual meeting once per year lasting two or three days.

Disasters hit maples

The 1920's and 1930's brought natural and man-made disasters to the Vermont maple industry—the 1927 Great Flood, the 1929 Stock Market crash and depression, and the 1938 Category four hurricane that destroyed 40 percent of all the maples in Vermont in one night.

1941 brought World War II. Sugar became scarce, and sugaring boomed. The government froze sugar prices (the price of syrup was \$3.39 a gallon from 1942-1946). After the war the price rose to \$5 a gallon.

In 1947, the UVM Extension Service started maple schools every January in Vermont's 12 counties. VMSMA became involved in that. Also, in 1947 S. Allen Soule created the first ever lithographed maple syrup can. In 1953, VMSMA came out with its own "State of Vermont" brand. Power tree tappers were invented. And the first tree-to-tree plastic tubing showed up along with the first oil-fired evaporators. In spite of all this the maple industry was in decline. The packer prices were bad and other types of agriculture looked more lucrative. In 1959 VMSMA became part of the effort to create a national Maple Syrup Council. Two years later the council created a publication, the National Maple Syrup Digest.

Maple research in Vermont

Back in 1947, UVM acquired a 150-acre sugarbush upon the slopes of Mt. Mansfield. A couple of rookie botany professors, Drs. Jim Marvin and Fred Taylor, convinced UVM to let them set up a maple research center there. Thus began the Proctor Maple Research Center—a world renowned maple lab today.

Around 1930, Vermont opened its new Vermont building at the "Big E" Expo in West Springfield, MA. VMSMA established a booth there to sell and teach folks about Vermont maple. Now, 85 years later, it's the only entity that has been there since the beginning.

In 1961, VMSMA elected Eric Nye of Georgia, VT, its president and soon after, Carolyn Perley, as secretary. She was also given the job of managing the "Big E" Vermont booth, a job she did for about 10 years.

In 1966, Rutland County Maple Producers created the first ever state maple tour. In 1967 VMSMA took over the continuing sponsorship of that. In 1967, Donna Smith of Shrewsbury created the world's first "Spun Maple Gold" (maple cotton candy). Eric Nye took this idea to the "Big E" where it became a great VMSMA money-maker.

Myself (Bill Clark) got involved with Rutland County Maple Producers when I was elected its president in 1961, a job I held for eight years. In 1967, I was elected to the VMSMA Board of Directors representing Rutland County. This was a whole new experience, a chance to see VMSMA firsthand and meet maple leaders from all over the state. At the Vermont Farm Show that met in late January in Barre, VT, there was always a "Maple Day" with their annual meeting and a great banquet.

Canada becomes maple leader

Around the time of World War II time the United States produced about 2/3 of the world's maple crop and Canada about 1/3. But in the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. crop continued to decline. Canada's production grew rapidly, especially in Quebec. By 1970 Canada was producing 2/3 of the world's crop at cheaper prices. Vermont packers were buying heavily in Canada, further hurting U.S. production. In 1971 Vermont produced its smallest crop in history of only 241,000 gals.

At VMSMA's annual meeting in 1969, Eric Nye decided to step down as president. Vice President Claire Lovell didn't want the job either. I had made a few comments at the meeting on several matters I thought VMSMA could do to help the industry to move forward. At the business meeting that followed, I was really surprised at being nominated and elected VMSMA's new president. This was going to be quite a challenge. It was about that time that Everett Willard became market's director for the VT. Dept. of Agriculture. Everett had a lot of good marketing ideas. It was now my job to represent VMSMA at the annual National Maple Council meeting each fall, that year to be in Burton, OH. Everett went with me. This was great experience to meet "Maple's Best"

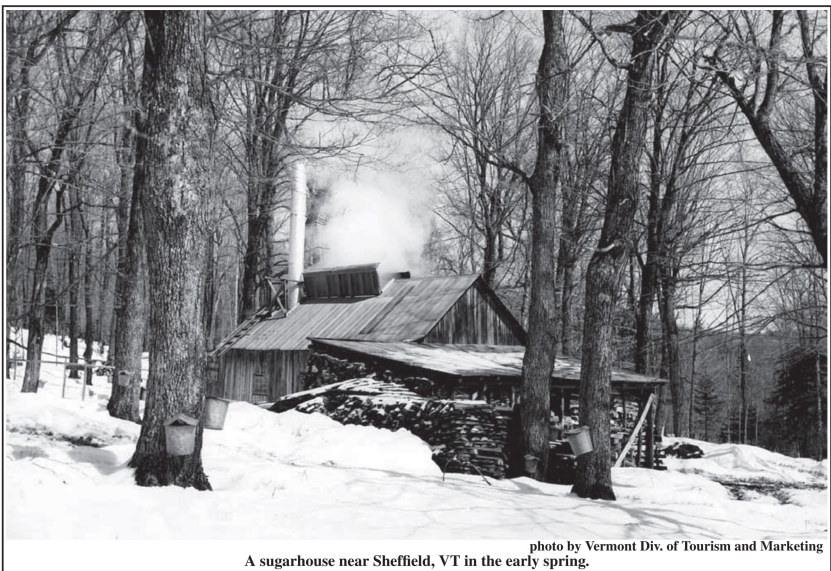


photo by Vermont Div. of Tourism and Marketing
A sugarhouse near Sheffield, VT in the early spring.

from every maple state. Among them, we met Adin Reynolds, owner of Reynolds Sugarbush in Wisconsin, the world's largest at that time with 125,000 gaps. The Vermont packers weren't telling us about the pros and cons of syrup buying.

Drum prices .70/lb.!

Three years later after two short crops, Reynolds Sugarbush came East looking for syrup in the spring of 1972. We rounded up two tractor-trailer loads of syrup, one in Rutland County, and two in Orleans County for a total of 120,000 lbs. Reynolds paid the highest prices ever heard of at 70¢/lb. Lesson learned: It was time producers owned their own drums and not use packers' drums. Hence by 1974, VMSMA found a drum maker in New Jersey, who produced light weight, epoxy-lined, lead-free drums for about \$8 per drum. Over the next three years VMSMA had produced and sold to its members 5,000 of these drums.

In the meantime back in 1972, with Everett Willard leading the way VMSMA and the Vermont Maple Industry Council (VMIC) came up with money to produce a new maple film, "The Flavor of Vermont." Also in 1972, the Vermont building at the "Big E" got turned over to the VT Dept. of Agriculture which established a new group to manage the Vermont building. VMSMA and other commodity groups put up some money and "Vermont Ag Enterprises" was formed. I was elected its first president. Ag Enterprises was a great success and ran the building for the next 20 years, most of the time directed by Everett Willard. The building needed major renovations.

The Shorty Danforth family of Tunbridge would be taking over management of our new expanded maple booth (Shorty was a wizened up little fellow who stood 6' 6" tall). Shorty and I worked on the booth till 11 p.m. a couple of nights.

International Maple Syrup Institute

Even though after 1972, some good things seemed to be happening in the maple industry, the prices in the world maple industry continued to decline. Major corporations that used pure maple in their blend syrups continued to use a smaller percentage of pure maple causing prices to drop.

In 1967 Vermont's U.S. Senator George Aiken had acquired money to build a new maple research lab in South Burlington. Its new director was Dr. David Garrett. By 1974, he became concerned over the plight of the maple industry, and convened a conference on Aug. 14, 1974 at the Aiken lab of all interested parties. VMSMA, Vermont packers, Canadian packers, both English and French-speaking. Canada even had language interpreters there. Some 30 folks showed up. After an hour of discussion, no solutions.

Dr. Garrett made a crazy suggestion to create a new international maple marketing organization. The room fell silent, then everyone was talking at once. How could it possibly work? Producers and packers never worked together. We're dealing with two different countries, two different languages. OK, Dr. Garrett said then let's hear "Plan B." Again silence. OK, then let's give "Plan A" a try. That day the concept was born for the world's largest and maple organization.

For the next six months some of us met every two weeks alternating between South Burlington and Montreal. Canada was willing to put up some investment money, but what about the United States? That required trips to Washington, D.C. and Detroit, MI. It was decided to name this new organization The International Maple Syrup Institute (IMSI). There were three charterers: Gilles Crotoue, manager of the 4,600 member Quebec Maple Co-Op, Adin Reynolds of Reynolds Sugarbush, WI, and Bill Clark, president of the VMSMA. At a final meeting in Plattsburg, NY, on Feb 25, 1975, IMSI was born and is an outstanding maple organization today.

Producing maple syrup cans

In the 1950s VMSMA hired Empire Can of Brooklyn, NY to produce their maple syrup cans until they went out of business in 1974. For the next 30 years three different companies produced cans for VMSMA. In the 1960s plastic jugs were developed. In the late 1970s VMSMA bought Vermont jugs from Charlie Bacon Jug Co. of New Hampshire. A few years later the Hass family developed their Sugarhill brand of jugs.

and they designed a VMSMA jug. These were special and millions of them were made over the next 25 years.

In 1981, Everett Willard came up with the idea that it would be good to organize a special promotional group. The maple industry liked the idea and so the Maple Promotion Board was born with four members of VMSMA, four members of Vermont Maple Industry Council, one from UVM Extension Service and one from the VT Dept. of Agriculture.

Governor's tree tapping day

One of their first ideas was to develop a governor's tree tapping event to take place in early March. The first two were at the Proctor Research Center with Gov. Snelling. It became a two-day event with press attending and traveled around the state county to county.

About 1984 a couple of retired teachers Don and Betty Ann Lockhart, who were in the video business, worked with the Promotion Board to produce Vermont's first maple video *The Proud Tradition*. It was a big success. In 1989 they produced a 30-minute *Maple Sugaring Story*. They also produced print information that could be used in schools. In the early 2000's they produced *Voices from the Sugar Woods*. Over the past 50 years Franklin County Maple Sugarmakers Association has created the "Vermont Maple Festival" one of the world's largest with over 30,000 folks attending.

VMSMA's 100th Anniversary

Then came 1993—VMSMA's 100th anniversary. We planned a gala celebration to take place at the Vermont Farm Show in Barre. Tuesday was always Maple Day. There were 24 folks just at the head table alone including Gov. Howard Dean and the Lieutenant Governor plus 200 members.

In 1994 the maple industry was struck with a lead crisis. Someone had used maple pan to boil cider in. Cider drew out lead and a child became very sick. For awhile it looked like it might take the industry down. A massive effort was launched to eliminate lead solder and other lead from equipment. The VT Dept. of Agriculture began running lead tests on syrup. VMSMA set up "Project Maple" and did private product sampling for several years. This brought Vermont maple into a lead free zone.

In 1997 VMSMA did a complete booth overhaul at the Big E. In 1999 VMSMA made a deal with a Montreal producer to create 1,000 stainless steel drums and we sold them to members for about \$70 each. In 1999 The VT Dept. of Agriculture helped VMSMA create its first web site, vermontmaple.org.

In 2000 VMSMA hosted the combined international meetings of IMSI and NAMSC at the Sheraton Hotel in Burlington with much help from Extension. It was the largest meeting ever held with over 500 attendees from 12 maple states and four Canadian provinces.

At the January Farm Show in 2001 I retired as president of VMSMA after serving 32 years. At that time I represented VMSMA at 381 UVM Extension maple schools, presided over 150 board and community meetings and probably drove 200,000 miles on behalf of VMSMA. Bill Clark Day turned out to be quiet a celebration.

Now here we are in 2018 and it's time for the VMSMA to celebrate its grand 125th! Since 2001 it has undergone many changes. They have had three presidents since 2001. In 2012 VMSMA, the Vermont Maple Industry Council and the Maple Promotion Board have become one organization. They no longer have Maple Day, annual meetings or banquets at the Vermont Farm Show. I like to believe that some time this year there will be a gala 125th anniversary celebration. There certainly should be. Their 53rd Maple Rama should be coming up in late July. That would be a great time to have it.

The Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association has done a lot for the Vermont maple industry. It has much to be proud of. A celebration is much deserved.

Editor's Note: From 1972 until 2001, Bill Clark, of Wells, VT, served as president of the Vermont Maple Sugar Makers Association (VMSMA). He has compiled here a series of that organization's highlights and maple sugaring history since its founding, along with personal comments.