

## Reynolds Sugar Bush: Putting Wisconsin on the Maple Syrup Map

By one measure of mid-century popular culture, greatness or notoriety was achieved when one appeared on one of the television shows, *What's My Line, I've Got a Secret*, or *To Tell The Truth*. On these shows celebrity judges attempted to guess the identity of a notable contestant placed among a group of imposters. In 1965, Adin Reynolds of Aniwa, Wisconsin had the honor of appearing on *To Tell The Truth* by virtue of his family business, Reynolds Sugar Bush, being the largest maple syrup making operation in the world. Reynolds's appearance on television was surprising to many since Wisconsin is not among the first states that come to mind when thinking about maple syrup production.

Since the Reynolds family arrived in Wisconsin from New York State in 1845, making maple sugar and syrup had always been one of many components of the family's diversified subsistence and commercial activities. However, like many of their Shawano County neighbors, it was logging, sawmill operations, and dairy farming, not maple syrup production, that formed the core of the family business during their first 70 years in the state.

Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century maple syrup production in the United States was in a state of gradual decline. While this decline was most pronounced in New England and New York, the core of the maple producing region, it was also true of Wisconsin maple syrup production. Maple syrup and

maple sugar making has been a spring time activity in the seasonal rural economy of Wisconsin starting with the resident Native American population to early Euro-American settlers, and on to the dairy and those harvesting forest-products in the far north.

In the years following World War II, maple syrup making reached an all-time low in the United States. At the same time, rural America was witnessing important shifts in attitudes and demographics along with the introduction of new agricultural technology and business models. For those that were able to recognize the opportunities and willing to take the risks, such change presented opportunities previously not possible. It was from such a place and a willingness to think and act independently that Reynolds Sugar Bush grew from making syrup as a small seasonal side pursuit to their sawmill and dairy operation, to a year-round, factory-scale business, becoming the industry leader far from the maple syrup heartland of the northeastern United States and adjacent Quebec.



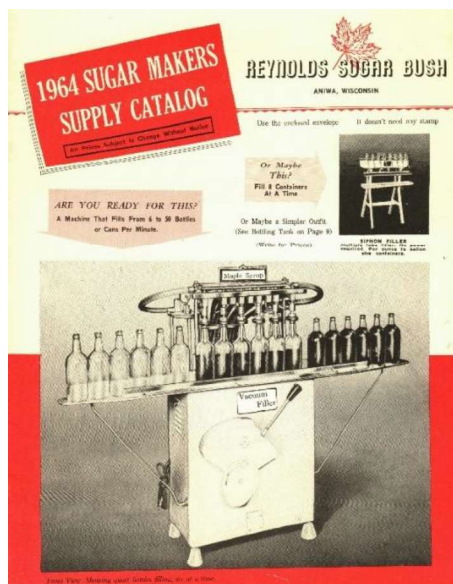
Image of the new Reynolds Sugar Bush building in 1954. Photo by Dean Tvedt. Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison archives

The ability for a syrup operation to grow so large was possible by building the right processing

facilities and infrastructure, having a market to sell the syrup, and literally tapping into the trees of their neighbors. But growth did not happen overnight. The Reynolds family had been tapping a few thousand trees in the mid-1940s but in 1947, things began to change when they built a new sugarhouse near their farm house, adjacent to a paved county road, and alongside the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad line. They also began a partnership that year as the midwestern dealer and distributor of maple syrup making equipment for the Vermont Evaporator Company. With the syrup plant now alongside the road and making syrup on two large evaporators, they began buying sap from around 4,000 of their neighbors' taps, augmenting more than 6,000 taps on their own land.

To provide some stability and supplement their farm and forest products business, years earlier Adin Reynolds had taken work as a part-time mail carrier, later becoming the postmaster of Aniwa in 1948. His new emphasis on maple syrup making and equipment sales were paying off, and in 1951 Adin retired from the post office and began focusing on maple full-time. Up until the late 1940s there were no maple equipment dealers in Wisconsin or adjacent Minnesota and maple producers had to buy their evaporators and other large supplies from dealers in Ohio, New York, or New England. There was a clear opportunity and eager group of customers in the Midwest. Around this same time, Reynolds also entered the syrup buying business, purchasing bulk syrup from other producers to be combined and resold to larger processors, syrup blenders, and bottlers. In 1948 the J.M.

Abraham Company of Bellefontaine, Ohio contracted with Reynolds to provide the Ohio syrup packing company with all the syrup Reynolds Sugar Bush was willing to spare from their own production and all the syrup Reynolds could acquire locally. Reynolds Sugar Bush began shipping truckloads of syrup to the Abraham Company, adding syrup buying and brokering to the growing portfolio of their maple syrup operation.



1964 Reynolds Sugar Bush equipment sales catalog. Source: Collections of the Author.

Although Adin was founder and leader of Reynolds Sugar Bush, his two sons, Juan and Lynn, always had roles in the syrup business, and as young men they were able to take on greater responsibility. The early half of the 1950s saw Juan and Lynn temporarily pulled away from the family business with Korean War era service in the Army and Marines followed by college education. However, in the late 1950s both sons had returned to Aniwa and began working full-time in the now flourishing family maple business. As Lynn Reynolds later described it, in the late 1950s and 1960s Adin oversaw everything and “created the

management, marketing, and financing; Juan managed the plant and the personnel; and Lynn was the public relations person, salesman for equipment, the syrup buyer, and managed the production plants.”

Through the 1950s, Adin continued to expand Reynolds Sugar Bush syrup making operation, using his quiet charisma to convince farmers and woodlot owners around Shawano, Langlade, and Marathon Counties to tap their maple trees and sell their raw sap to Reynolds. Reynolds also began renting additional trees to augment the maples on their own 800 acres as well as buying sap from their neighbors. In 1949 Reynolds added a third large (6' x 20') evaporator, and by 1956, they were making syrup from 25,000 of their own taps and buying sap from many thousands more. Another evaporator was added to the plant in 1958 and all four evaporators were converted from wood burning to oil burning. Adin Reynolds was said to have hated cutting a maple tree, comparing it to cutting off an arm, so the family never thinned their maple woods and burned waste slabs from a local sawmill prior to switching to oil.

Processing sap gathered from many independently owned sugarbushes at one large boiling facility became known as the Central Evaporator Plant (CEP) model, and Reynolds Sugar Bush became leaders in perfecting and promoting the CEP. The idea of only selling sap rather than taking on the whole task of making finished syrup was not invented by Adin Reynolds, although he took it to another level. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture had been promoting the idea and use of a central evaporation

plant for maple syrup producers since the 1930s. Locally, in the 1930s and 1940s, a group called the Antigo Maple Syrup Producers Association, in which Adin Reynolds was an early leader, attempted to pool their efforts in processing sap and marketing maple, without much success.



Left to right, Lynn Reynolds, Juan Reynolds, Adin Reynolds, and Bob Lamb in front of Reynolds Sugar Bush Aniwa syrup plant, circa 1960. Source: Adirondack Experience P071388.

For Wisconsinites, the CEP concept will look familiar, with its strong resemblance to the arrangement of local dairies, creameries, and milk cooperatives, where dozens of farmers sell or deliver their raw milk to a central processing facility. Like butterfat in milk, the value of and compensation for raw maple sap was based on its relative sugar content measured by a refractometer. Sap at 1.5% sugar might get three cents a gallon while sap at 6% sugar might earn six cents a gallon. As Juan Reynolds described it, “if they had a halfway decent season and a good sugar content, they could make at minimum a dollar a tap. One guy down the road had real sweet trees, he often averaged more than \$2 a tap, that is more than a guy making maple syrup could do after you have invested in all the boiling equipment and marketed it.” Juan further recalled that they had as many as 50-

60 families from within a 20-mile radius selling sap to them, with most of the sap sellers tapping 500-800 trees.

In 1959, the General Foods Corporation, the makers of Log Cabin Syrup, a blend of cane and maple syrup, contracted with Reynolds Sugar Bush to purchase 20,000 gallons of maple syrup. With scheduled deliveries of syrup from Reynolds' Aniwa plant to General Foods' Chicago bottling plant, Reynolds began serious entry into the syrup buying business. For General Foods, the Aniwa bottling plant was attractive because it was close enough to Chicago that Reynolds Sugar Bush could fill syrup orders quickly, if needed. This large of a syrup contract led Reynolds to start shipping syrup 4,000-gallons at a time via tanker truck. Wisconsin was not producing enough syrup to meet this need, so Reynolds began buying in the northeastern United States and Canada.

At its peak, the General Foods contract had Reynolds Sugar Bush shipping twenty-seven tanker loads (108,000 gallons) of syrup from Aniwa to Chicago. At that time in history, moving this volume of maple syrup out of a midwestern hub rather than New England or Quebec was a significant departure from how the maple industry had traditionally operated. Reynolds continued this contract with General Foods for 20 years until General Foods reduced the amount of maple syrup in their Log Cabin blend from 15% in 1959 to 2% by 1979. After the General Foods Corporation merged with Philip Morris in 1985 the previous contract arrangements were no longer honored and Reynolds Sugar Bush stopped supplying maple syrup to General Foods.

With a growing contract for bulk syrup and more markets opening up, Reynolds Sugar Bush went through a period of expansion, buying three equally large syrup making operations, beginning in 1960 with the purchase of George Klement's Maple Orchard in nearby Polar, Wisconsin. For much of the 1950s, the Klement sugarhouse was also operating with a central evaporator plant model similar to Reynolds, buying sap from 50,000 taps and making syrup on four large 6' x 20' King brand evaporators. Other than converting the evaporators from wood fired to oil fired, the Reynolds changed little, continuing to work with Klement's sap sellers and expanded the number of taps coming in to 65,000. In 1963, Reynolds acquired the CEP operation of Sidney Maas at Tilleda, Wisconsin where syrup was made on two 6' x 16' Vermont Evaporator Company boiling rigs.



Left to Right, Adin Reynolds, Lynn Reynolds, Bob Lamb, and Juan Reynolds in front of a large oil-fired evaporator at Reynolds Sugar Bush, circa 1960. Source: Adirondack Experience P071388.

Reynolds converted these from wood to oil and now all the CEPs under Reynolds control were fired with fuel oil. Since those plants relied on sap from the forests of sap providers, Reynolds did not have a ready supply of wood to burn. The

sap input was further increased at these plants and by 1964, Reynolds Sugar Bush was making syrup from sap coming in from over 100,000 taps. The Reynolds' confidence was clearly very high by this time, so much so that in 1961 Adin made the claim that the output from sugarbushes in the Aniwa area could outproduce any comparable area in Vermont!

The third maple syrup operation purchased by Reynolds Sugar Bush in the 1960s was in Kingsley, Michigan a short distance south of Traverse City. The Kingsley plant was opened in 1962 by General Foods who wanted to improve their access to maple syrup in an area relatively close to their Chicago bottling facility. Identifying Kingsley as an area with an abundance of maple trees and a local agricultural population that was largely without work in the spring months, General Foods leased an old pickle factory in town, engineered a sap boiling facility, installed four 6' x 18' oil fired, stainless steel evaporators, and operated it as a CEP from purchased sap. To assist and encourage the new sap producers to acquire tapping equipment, General Foods purchased large quantities of spiles and buckets to supplement the limited local supply and arranged a loan program with a local bank to finance producers. By 1964, the Kingsley plant was making syrup from 65,000 taps. Despite the size of the operation, its engineering was more complicated than it needed to be, and it was not running as smoothly as General Foods had envisioned. Having an existing relationship with Reynolds Sugar Bush and a familiarity with their other successful plants, in 1966, General Foods sold the plant to Reynolds Sugar Bush for next to

nothing with the condition that all the syrup produced by the plant be sold to General Foods. Reynolds operated the Kingsley plant as one of their satellite CEPs until the 1970s when interest in sap selling in the area fell to unmanageably low numbers and the plant was closed.

Always looking for new ways to expand and promote the maple syrup industry and Reynolds Sugar Bush, Adin and family often hit the road in the summer, setting up sales and display booths at state fairs and festivals, and giving industry talks around the Midwest. Before the Wisconsin State Maple Syrup Producers' Association (WMSPA) took over the responsibility in the 1990s, the Reynolds' 100-foot by 40-foot display was the primary promotional booth for maple syrup at the Wisconsin State Fair.



Reynolds' sales booth at Wisconsin State Fair, early 1960s. Left to Right, Geraldine Reynolds, Juan Reynolds, unnamed Alice in Dairyland, Adin Reynolds. Source: Wisconsin Maple Syrup Producers Association.

One of Adin Reynolds most popular ideas for promoting the maple industry was an annual pancake breakfast and maple festival. Starting in 1950 with around 1000 visitors, every spring for over forty years, thousands of people descended on the Reynolds farm to

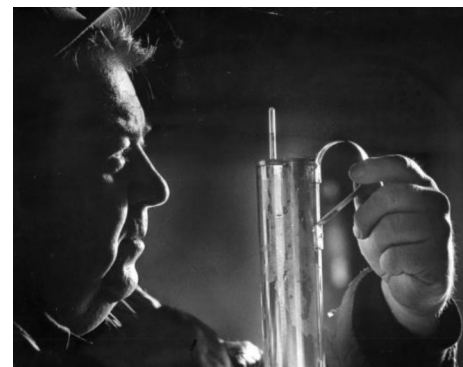
celebrate the state's maple syrup industry while enjoying a pancake breakfast, seeing what was new in maple syrup production, and finding out who made the state's best maple syrup that year. In 1956 the WMSPA came on board to help and the festival grew to as many as 5000 attendees. The Reynolds even erected "The Sugar House" a roadside gift shop along Highway 45 targeted at tourist traffic travelling between Milwaukee and Chicago and the woods and lake country of northern Wisconsin.

Visitors were treated to maple syrup themed exhibits and speakers, live entertainment, and served an all you can eat pancake breakfast. Pancakes were cranked out on an assembly line with a pancake making machine designed by Adin called the "pancake depositor" that poured the batter for 24 pancakes at a time onto a griddle. Maple producers entered their best syrup from the year for judging, competing for the honor of receiving the golden sap pail or golden sap spout. For 45 years the Wisconsin maple syrup festival continued to be held at Reynolds Sugar Bush through 1995 when it moved to Merrill and became the responsibility of the WMSPA.

By the mid to late 1960s, all four plants operated by Reynolds Sugar Bush combined were processing over 1200 gallons of sap an hour on a dozen large evaporators from sap gathered from over 200,000 taps. Adin had even earned a patent for his invention of a simple and economical hanger for disposable plastic sap bags, called the Sap Sak. Without question, as emphasized with Adin's 1965 television appearance on *To Tell the Truth*, Reynolds Sugar Bush had become

the largest maple syrup making operation in the world.

Although he was operating far from the maple syrup heartland, industry leaders in the North American Maple Syrup Council (NAMSC), recognizing the significance of Adin Reynolds' influence and leadership, electing him Council Vice President in 1963 and President in 1965. Reynolds were strong proponents for research and bringing together the US and Canadian sides of the industry in addressing maple issues important to both countries. Putting those views to action, Adin was instrumental in helping form the International Maple Syrup Institute (IMSI), a group focused on developing markets for the maple industry. Adin Reynolds served as the IMSI's second president from 1976 to 1977 and on its Board of Directors from 1980 to 1984.



Juan Reynolds testing sugar content of maple syrup. Source: *Milwaukee Journal* – April 11, 1977.

Sons Juan Reynolds and Lynn Reynolds were as equally engaged as their father and continued his legacy of leadership with Juan an IMSI Board member from 1985 to 1997 and President in 1990 and Lynn an IMSI President from 1993 to 1995 and Executive Director from 1995 until his death in 1998. Lynn also served in a series of roles as NAMSC

secretary, then Vice President and President from 1989 to 1993. The IMSI established a Lynn Reynolds Memorial Leadership Award in 1999 to recognize the outstanding leadership of individuals in support of the international maple syrup industry.

Adin retired from running Reynolds Sugar Bush in 1979 and turned over the leadership of the company to his son Juan. With retirement, Adin was given the highest honor by the maple syrup industry when he was chosen as the fifth inductee for the North American Maple Syrup Producers Hall of Fame. In 1982 he was one of five men recognized by the University of Wisconsin for his contribution to agriculture and quality of life in Wisconsin by the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Adin passed away in 1987 as the age of 82. Following in his father's footsteps, Lynn Reynolds was inducted into the Maple Syrup Producers Hall of Fame in 1995 as the forty-second inductee.

In the 1980s, changing markets and difficulty in finding seasonal labor pushed Reynolds Sugar Bush to scale back its sap buying and syrup production to only making syrup at their original location on the farm north of Aniwa. Rapid growth in syrup production out of Quebec and lowering syrup prices became too difficult to compete with, leading to the loss of two of their biggest clients on the west coast. Eventually the losses became too great for Reynolds Sugar Bush and in 1991 they were forced to liquidate many of their assets, including their sugarbush, and resize and restructure the company as part of bankruptcy proceedings. Around this time, two of their largest sap

providers decided to make their own syrup leaving Reynolds Sugar Bush with too little sap coming in to effectively make syrup in a plant of their size. With reorganization and a limited sap supply, syrup production came to an end for Reynolds Sugar Bush, although equipment sales continued.

Operation of the company was put in the hands of Juan's and Lynn's children, the next generation of Reynolds, and Juan and Lynn Reynolds moved into retirement, although neither was especially idle when it came to helping with the family business or the involvement in industry associations. Lynn Reynolds carried on as a representative and advocate for the maple industry in North America until his death in 1998, and Juan remained a hands-on advisor to the family business until his passing in 2008.

With the Reynolds' leadership and the foundation they helped lay, Wisconsin maple syrup producers went from being a minor contributor in the maple syrup industry to one of the leading states. Reynolds own production numbers were undeniably significant, as was their influence as sap buyers, equipment sellers, and syrup brokers. During the height of Reynolds Sugar Bush, Wisconsin moved from being the eighth ranked maple syrup producing state in 1930 to fifth in 1940 and 1950, to third in 1960, behind Vermont and New York where it more or less hovered for the next three decades. Unfortunately for the Reynolds, the industry and markets shifted more rapidly than they were able to adjust and they could not maintain the same operation as they had in the past. Change came, as it always does, and it cost them but not before the

Reynolds family and Reynolds Sugar Bush left their mark and put Wisconsin maple syrup making on the map.

A slightly longer version of this article with full notations and references can be found on the website  
[www.maplesyruphsitory.com](http://www.maplesyruphsitory.com)

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