

# The early History of the Plastic Maple Syrup Jug: Part Three – The 1980s

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Following the introduction of plastic jugs and increasing popularity of using plastic containers for packaging maple syrup in the 1970s, a group of new manufacturers entered the picture to meet the growing demand. It was during the following decade that the plastic syrup jugs most commonly used by syrup makers today got their start, as well as some other manufacturers that operated on a smaller scale or for a limited duration.

## P.H.S. Syrup Jugs – Peter Stransky

Peter Stransky entered the maple business in the 1960s, selling maple syrup equipment out of Collingwood, Ontario, later adding syrup buying, packing, and sales to the company activities. Between 1967 and 1979 Stransky saw early success as the

primary distributor of the Ontario Maple Syrup Producers Association orange, white, and green metal cans. Stransky realized that if he made his own plastic containers, he could cut out the middleman for container purchases and have better control over quality and availability.

In 1978, Stransky had molds designed for five smaller sizes of jugs, ranging from 3.4 ounces to a quart. His jugs were made by Olympus Plastics, a blow-molding company in Richmond Hill, Ontario. The containers were a round jug shape with a loop handle, a pronounced shoulder break, a reinforced ridge near the lip, and were painted with one-color screen printing of a traditional maple sugaring scene. Stransky's primary intent was making containers for his own packaging, but he also offered

the containers for sale, primarily to Ontario and U.S. syrup producers. Manufacture and sale of the Stransky jugs continued until 1998 when Stransky retired and closed his equipment and syrup sales business without selling or transferring the



Examples of Stransky jugs in 375, 250, and 100 ml sizes. Image Source: Photo by author.

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molds for his containers. Stransky passed away in 2020.

### **Sugarhill Maple Containers – Dick Haas**

Hillside Plastics got its start in 1967 as a small family-owned plastics company operating out of a horse barn in Sunderland, Massachusetts, blow molding containers for apple cider and milk. As a young man in his twenties, Richard Haas began working as an employee at Hillside Plastics in 1969. In the early years, the company struggled and was not always able to cover Dick's salary. Instead, Dick was occasionally paid in company shares, which ultimately led Dick and his wife Janet to purchase

the company in the mid-1970s.

Hillside Plastics first made plastic jugs for maple syrup in 1970 when Charlie Bacon contracted with Hillside to do the blow molding of his new Bacon Jug (see Part II of this article in December 2021 issue of the Digest). When the Bacon Jug company decided to take their business elsewhere in 1980, Hillside Plastics, having learned a great deal about the plastic syrup jug business, formed Sugarhill Containers to manufacture and sell a high-density polyethylene (HDPE) maple syrup jug of its own design.

According to Peter Haas, Dick's son, demand for plastic jugs really increased in the 1980s when the large



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wholesale club stores on the west coast began to shift to shipping and selling syrup packed in plastic. The company grew to a workforce of over fifty employees producing 60,000 jugs a day, necessitating a move in 1993 to a larger and new 47,000 square foot building up the road in Turners Falls. In addition to maple syrup jugs and even a plastic cabin-shaped container in 1995, Hillside Plastics expanded their catalog to manufacture blow-molded containers for a variety of other industrial, automotive, and food products; however, maple syrup jugs were always the centerpiece of their business.

Sugarhill Containers grew so popular over time that Dick Haas noted in 1997 that they were making more containers in one day than they made in an entire year in the early 1970s. The Sugarhill Containers are noted for being the leaders in developing and patenting the Extended Life (XL) exterior coating as a measure to re-

duce the air and moisture permeability of the plastic and better preserve the color grade of the syrup inside. Hillside has come up with other materials and design innovations, like developing a material for labels that would not wrinkle and could expand and shrink with the hot filling and cooling of plastic syrup jugs.

In addition to producing Sugarhill Containers, Hillside Plastics does contract molding for other brands of maple syrup jugs, such as the Bacon Jug in the 1970s and again in the 2000s. Following the death of Dick Haas in 2010, the company continued to operate under the leadership of his wife Janet, and three children Peter Haas, Greg Haas, and Kate (Haas) Colby. The Haas family sold the business in 2015 to its current owner, Plastic Industries, Inc. and its parent company Carr Management, Inc.

#### **T.A.P. Farm, Inc. – Chris Audley**

Chris Audley, a Quebec syrup maker, became the Bacon Jug distributor for Canada in 1979. In 1980, at roughly the same time the Bacon Jug company made a shift in manufacturers away from Hillside Plastics to Hussey Plastics, Charlie Bacon and Chris Audley realized that importing American-made jugs into Canada was



Examples of Sugarhill containers in five sizes. Image Source: Brookfield Maple Products website.

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too expensive. Instead, Bacon had a set of molds sent to Audley to begin manufacturing Bacon jugs in Quebec. Audley found a blow-molder near Montreal, Quebec and ensured jugs were printed in French and English as required for sale in Canada. Audley formalized his container business in 1982 when he formed company called T.A.P. Farm, Inc. with the T.A.P. name an acronym for Ton Acériculteur Provincial, meaning "your provincial sugarmaker." Audley's T.A.P. Farm, Inc. unfortunately went bankrupt in 1983 when it unsuccessfully tried to launch 250 ml and 500ml foil-lined, cardboard containers for packaging maple syrup. Later that year, Audley sold the plastic jug portion of the business to Gerard Filion, a hardware store owner in St. An-

draws East, Quebec who carried maple syrup making supplies and sold a good amount of Audley's Canadian Bacon jugs.

### **Les Cruchons J.U.G.S. – Gerard Filion**

In the late 1970s, Gerard Filion and his wife Lise were running St. Andrews Hardware store in St. Andrews Est, Quebec. Their store specialized in the sale of maple sugaring supplies, including the Bacon Jug supplied to Filion by Chris Audley, the Canadian distributor for Bacon Jugs. In 1983, Filion purchased Audley's T.A.P. Farm, Inc. syrup container company and entered the plastic jug manufacturing business, calling his new company Les Cruchons J.U.G.S. Since he did not assume Audley's Bacon Jug distributorship, one of the first things Filion did was develop his own jug design and molds. His first jugs featured a step on the shoulder of the jug and a looping handle and were made under contract by a Montreal blow molding firm. In 1992 Filion purchased his own silk-screening machine and was doing the printing on the jugs in the back of the hardware store. Around 1994, Filion introduced a new jug design featuring a more angled shoulder and a squared loop handle. By 1996, this design replaced the stepped shoulder jugs and became the Les Cruchons jug shape that is still in use today.



Chris Audley seated with Bacon Jugs printed in French for Canadian market. Image Source: Maple Syrup Journal, issue 1, 1981.

The popularity of Les Cruchons syrup jugs grew fast, and in 2000 Filion made the move to go into the jug manufacturing business full-time and compete with the American man-

ufacturers for a piece of the syrup jug market. That year he purchased a large warehouse production facility just across the border in nearby Hawkesbury, Ontario where corporate taxes were lower than in Quebec. He also began to do his own blow-molding of HDPE syrup jugs, as well as a variety of other food, pharmaceutical, and detergent containers. By 2005 sales had grown to include around five million syrup jugs a year produced in eleven shapes and sizes. Wishing to see the company grow, Filion made the decision in 2005 to sell Les Cruchons J.U.G.S. to Salvatore Nicastro and the AMPAK Corporation, investors from Montreal with experience in the plastics business and the necessary capital to fund the expansion. Gerard Filion and members of his family stayed on to assist

the company for another 5 to 6 years. In 2014 Les Cruchons J.U.G.S., Inc. formally changed its name to Ampak Plast Inc., and continues to manufacture and distribute the Les Cruchons plastic syrup containers from their Hawkesbury facility.

As illustrated in the three-part series culminating in this article, the story of the development and introduction of the jug-shaped plastic container for packaging maple syrup spanned three decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s. Although the industry continues to evolve and grow, the largest manufacturers in the modern syrup jug market can trace their origins to the 1980s and the earlier efforts, events, and individuals that paved the way for them.

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