

# Laurel Messenger

Historical and Genealogical Society of Somerset County

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## Mountain Meadow Farms Made Maple History

By **MATTHEW M. THOMAS**

Mountain Meadow Farms was a gigantic maple syrup operation and game farm that operated in Somerset County in the 1960s and 1970s. What made Mountain Meadow Farms unique, both in general and in Somerset County in particular, was that rather than being a small family sugaring operation that grew over time, it was created from scratch as a new operation on a scale not previously seen – and with the most modern technology and design available at the time.

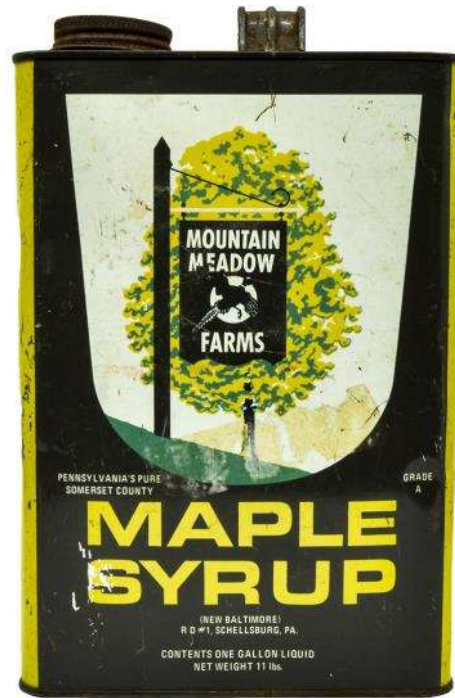
The Farms began in 1964 when Blaine “Bud” Walters and his wife Geneva purchased an existing game farm about two miles north of the village of New Baltimore. The Walters were the owners of the successful Walters Tire Service in Somerset. Started in 1941, Walters Tire Service focused on manufacturing, retreading, and selling large-size tires for road building equipment as well as servicing large trucks used in the Pennsylvania coal industry.

According to one account, it was the Walters’ farm manger, Gerald

Gasser, who came up with the idea of making maple syrup. As the Walters’ son Jimmy Walters tells it, “Bud never did anything small. When they bought the farm, it already had two pens of pheasants and they added turkeys and

cattle. There were lots of maple trees so it made sense to tap those.” In addition to pheasants and turkeys, there were chuckers, too. Cattle was usually totaled around 300 head, but at one point with calves and heifers, it got up to close to 1,000 head, which required a lot of feed and work resulting in Walters installing big Harvestore silos and automated feeding machines.

Walters settled on the idea of starting a maple operation around 1963, and over the next two years he did everything he could to learn about the maple syrup business. For example, in 1965 he attended the Maple Industry Conference in Philadelphia. When it became known just how large of an operation he was planning, he was put in touch with Adin Reynolds of Reynolds Sugar Bush, in Aniwa, WI, at that time the largest maple sugaring operation in the world. In addition to being able to offer Walters practical advice on setting up and running an operation of this size, the Reynolds Sugar Bush was an equipment dealer for the Vermont Evaporator Company. In the fall of 1965 it sold Walters three



**Mountain Meadow Farms had its own custom-designed, lithographed metal syrup cans. A popular can among syrup can collectors.**

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# Mountain Meadow Farms, *Continued*

6' x 20' oil-fired evaporators along with all the requisite piping, tanks, and finishing equipment, as well as tapping supplies, plastic tubing and bags for collecting sap from around 20,000 trees. A brand new, 50' x 110' state-of-the-art sugarhouse – complete with finishing area, candy-making room, and sales area – was built at a cost of \$75,000.

In all likelihood, the Reynolds encouraged Walters to focus not only on tapping his many thousands of trees, but also to initiate a plan to get local farmers and families to gather and sell sap to him, similar to how the Reynolds operated their many Central Evaporator Plants in Wisconsin. The Walters made purchasing sap a big part of their operation right from the start. In the spring of 1966 in their first year of operation, they tapped 17,000 of their own trees and bought sap from 8,000 trees tapped by others in the vicinity. In the following years Walters increased his sap buying efforts, bringing in sap from 25,000 trees and paying 5 cents a gallon for delivered

sap and 4 cents per gallon for sap that was picked up. As Jimmy Walters recalled, the farm had a mini fleet of tank trucks to pick up and haul sap along with four 10,000-gallon open tanks for sap storage. The farm was also able to enlist the efforts of a number of local 4-H clubs and scout groups to tap trees and gather maple sap, a valuable fundraiser for their organizations.

The Walters were new to the maple business, but they quickly made it known that they manufactured a good product, taking home a number of awards for their maple candy and confections in the judging at the county maple festivals. Despite their newness to the maple industry, Bud Walters' growing role as an industry leader was recognized when in 1969 he was elected to the Board of



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Or, better yet, plan a trip to the farm which is open all year 'round. Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. It's easy to find by following the signs off Route 20 or 31, about 22 miles east of Somerset. A trip during the evaporating season of February and March is educational and one which you'll never forget.



**MOUNTAIN  
Meadow Farms:** Schellsburg RD 1, New Baltimore, Pa.

**1974 advertisement for Mountain Meadow Farms.**  
(*The Meyersdale Republic newspaper*)

Directors of the Somerset County Maple Syrup Producers. In 1970 he was crowned county Maple King based on the performance of Mountain Meadow Farms maple products at the festival. Rightly so, Bud acknowledged that that award was only possible because of his wife's efforts and it really should go to her. However, there were certainly

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### Annual membership in the Society:

Individual: \$25; Family: \$35; Student (under 18): \$5; Sustaining: \$55; Life: \$1,000  
Includes annual subscription to Laurel Messenger.

### Somerset Historical Center

This PA Historical and Museum Commission site is operated in partnership with the Historical and Genealogical Society of Somerset County.



**Mountain Meadow  
Farms sugarhouse in  
1967.**

(*Bedford County Press, March 30, 1967*)

### Mountain Meadow Farms sugarhouse sales room.

(*Photo courtesy of the  
Historical & Genealogical  
Society of Somerset County*)



## Mountain Meadow Farms, *Continued*

some maple producers from the area who were suspicious and resentful of his approach and rapid success.

The farm sold most of its products through direct sales, mail order sales, accounts with a number of restaurants, and a few retail locations in Pittsburgh. Mail order sales piggy backed on their sale of game birds with a special package of a smoked pheasant, a fresh pheasant, and maple syrup. In addition to making syrup and candy, and encouraging the use of creative and attractive packaging, Geneva Walters was a strong proponent of expanding the range of products that could be made and marketed with maple syrup. Related to that, Jimmy Walters shared that his mother was so influential in introducing new maple products, such

as a maple syrup-based salad dressing, that the Somerset County maple festival was forced to add more categories for judging beyond the traditional syrup, sugar, and candy. Jimmy added that this was one of his parents most important contributions, expanding the range of maple products being made and opening folks' eyes in the county to other ways to sell and make maple syrup.

As a large operation focused on efficiency and cutting-edge technology, it was chosen in 1969 as a test site for the USDA's Eastern Utilization Research Lab's experimental reverse osmosis (R.O.) system. Dr. C.O. Willits and his colleagues from USDA's Philadelphia Lab had developed a portable R.O. unit for testing in real-world sugaring

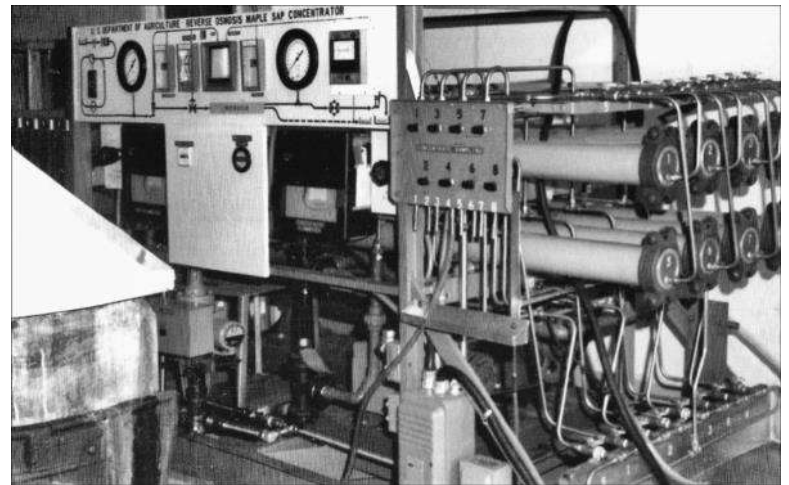
operations. The previous season it was tested at the Sipple sugarbush in Bainbridge, NY, but it was decided that the amount of sap available from the Sipple sugarbush for running through the R.O. was insufficient to really measure the R.O.'s performance. Instead, the lab researchers needed a larger operation like Bud Walters' to really test how well it processed sap. The USDA test R.O. was operated at Mountain Meadow Farms again the following season, contributing valuable information to the USDA labs development and improvement of reverse osmosis as a viable technology for the maple syrup industry.

Making syrup from 40,000 to 45,000 taps in the 1960s and 1970s

*Continued on Page 4*



**Mountain Meadow Farms sugarhouse in 1967.**  
(Bedford County Press, March 30, 1967)



**View of the USDA Eastern Utilization Research Lab experimental reverse osmosis sap concentrator in use at Mountain Meadow Farms 1969 and 1970.** (Photo courtesy of the Historical & Genealogical Society of Somerset County)



**View of the entrance to the Mountain Meadow Farms sugarhouse. Note the reverse osmosis unit inside.** (Photo courtesy of the Historical & Genealogical Society of Somerset County)



**Geneva Walters enjoyed creating advertising for their maple products and experimented with maple syrup recipes.**  
(Photo: Somerset Daily American, March 30, 1970)

## President's Message

This year Mountain Craft Days allowed us to welcome over 7000 visitors to the Historical Center. Mountain Craft Days not only allows us to preserve the rich crafting history of our region but also has a positive economic impact on our community. Our vendors and non-profits, many of whom hail from Somerset County, sold over \$100,000 worth of food and crafts. The artisans and visitors often stay the weekend at our hotels and bed and breakfast establishments, and dine at local restaurants. We have many visitors say they attend Mountain Craft Days every year and many that are new to the event. It is a proud tradition of the Historical Society to present this event for 52 years now. It is important for me to again acknowledge all the volunteers, and our staff, whose contributions of time and effort make the event possible. Thank you to everyone who lent a hand this year.

The Society has been focusing on craft apprenticeships and carrying on many of the traditional crafts you may have seen represented at Mountain Craft Days. Our staff is currently working on a shoemaking apprenticeship (see page 6).

We are already planning our Ethnic Traditions program for December 4<sup>th</sup>. This event brings together local families from diverse cultural backgrounds for a tasting and discussion of various foods, music and traditions. This year Ethnic Traditions will feature dishes from Indian, Swedish, and Chilean cuisine. For more information on tickets to the event please visit our website at [somersethistoricalcenter.org](http://somersethistoricalcenter.org) or call the offices at 814.445.6077. Event seating is limited so get your ticket soon.

As the holiday season approaches, keep in mind that our museum shop offers many unique gifts. We will also feature Christmas Crafts from the end of November until Christmas. Stop by the Historical Center and find that perfect gift for someone.

Holiday blessings to you and yours this season,

**Lisa Bittner**  
President of HGSSC

## Mountain Meadow Farms, *Continued*

positioned Mountain Meadow Farms as arguably the second largest maple operation in the world, second only to the Reynolds Sugar Bush in Wisconsin. By 1974 the farm was advertising itself to be "The Largest and Most Modern Central Evaporating Plant in the World!" and was clearly helping push and pull the maple industry to a new level of technological sophistication. But it did come with costs. According to Jimmy Walters, the farms had fairly high overhead with payroll to meet and little actual profit coming in. Many of the business ventures the Walters were involved with, including Mountain Meadow Farms, were operating on loans and credit at a time when interest rates were relatively high (around 20-21%). The last season of the Mountain Meadow Farms maple syrup making operation was the spring of

1977. When the costs of operation became too great, Bud Walters decided to sell and attempted to keep the sugaring operation together by selling it as a package to an interested buyer. Unfortunately, at that time, the scale of the operation was simply too large for any potentially interested buyers. In May 1978 the farming and sugaring equipment of the farm were sold at auction and the Mountain Meadow Farms ceased to operate. Bud and Geneva Walters passed the tire

business to their son Jimmy in 1978 and enjoyed retirement. Bud passed away in 1990 and Geneva in 1995.

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*(Special thanks to Mark Ware, Executive Director of the Historical & Genealogical Society of Somerset County, and to Jimmy Walters, son of Bud and Geneva Walters, for their assistance and sharing of personal memories and materials.)*

### About the Author

Matthew Thomas is an independent researcher with a wide range of interests in all things maple and creator of a website called "Maple Syrup History" ([www.maplesyruphistory.com](http://www.maplesyruphistory.com)). With an academic background in American Indian studies, anthropology, archaeology, and geography, including a doctorate degree from the University of Wisconsin, he has been researching and writing about the history of maple syrup and sugar for the past 20 years.

# Rutchin' Around Somerset County



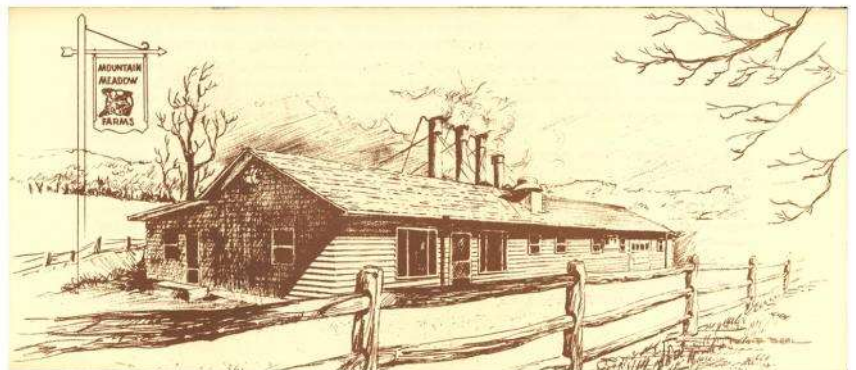
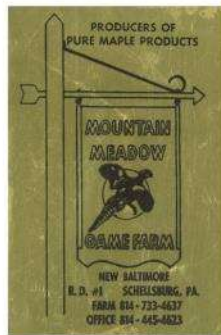
*This label (above) appeared on wine-like and whiskey-like bottles of maple syrup. A promotional card for these products stated: "Both bottles were chosen to add a little humor to a fine product. Customers visiting our Sugar House in the Spring can watch deer grazing back of it - so we've labeled these bottles 'Mountain Maple Shine, A Backwoods Product of Somerset County,' and show the deer enjoying our product. (We're sure they enjoy the aroma.)"*

*Wishing You  
an  
Old Fashioned Christmas  
and a  
Happy New Year*

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*Maple Old Fashioned*

*One-half Teaspoon Pure Maple Sugar  
2 Dashes Angostura Bitters  
1 oz. plain water  
1 Tablespoon Orange Juice  
Muddle together  
Add 1 1/2 ozo. Favorite Whiskey  
Stir well. Add Ice to glass.  
Decorate around ice with one stemmed  
cherry and one-half slice of orange.*



**Geneva Walters designed this label for Swank Hardware. Swank had a branch store in Meyersdale, which opened in 1921 and closed in 1966.**