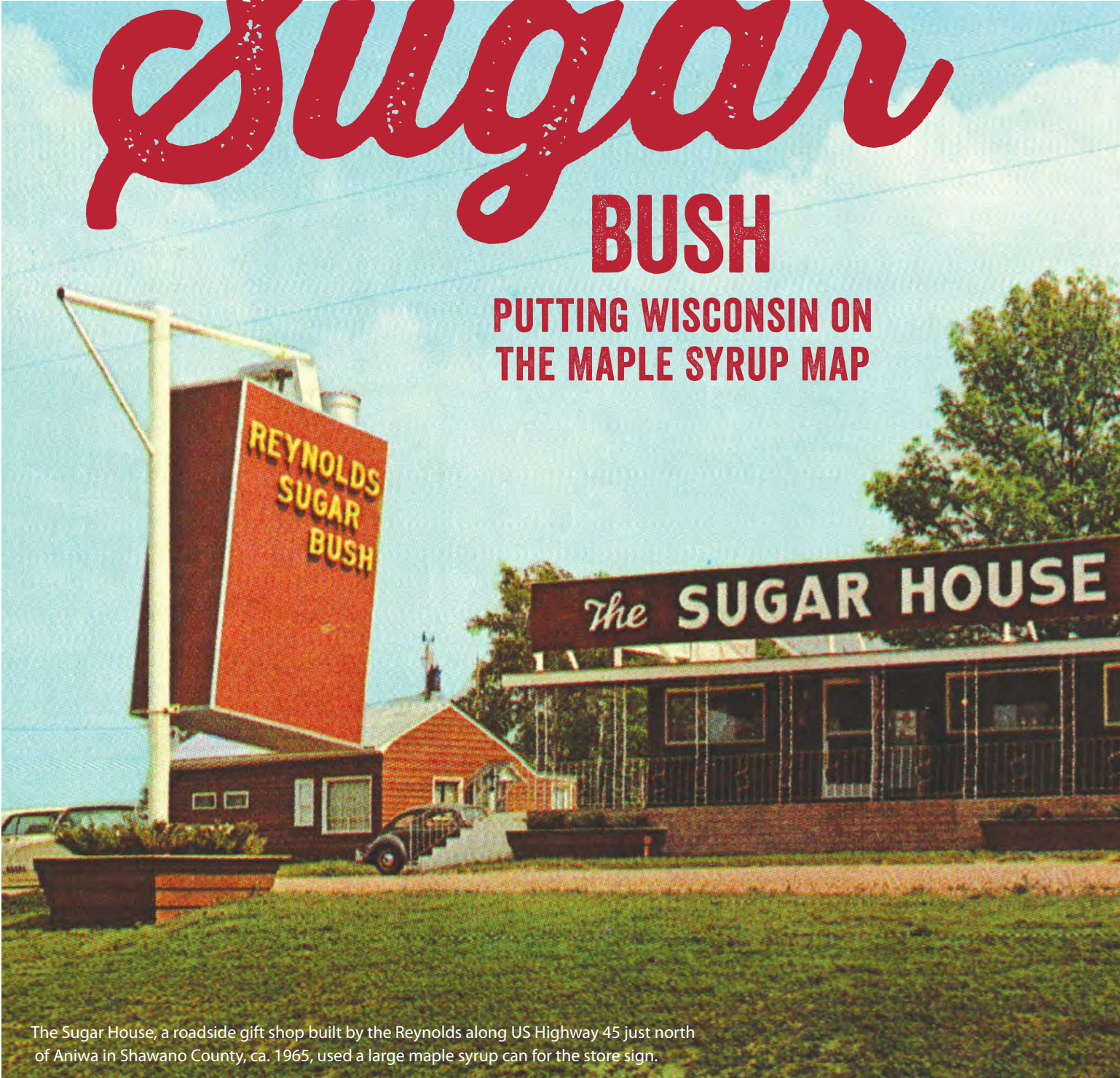


REYNOLDS *Sugar* BUSH

PUTTING WISCONSIN ON
THE MAPLE SYRUP MAP



The Sugar House, a roadside gift shop built by the Reynolds along US Highway 45 just north of Aniwa in Shawano County, ca. 1965, used a large maple syrup can for the store sign.



BY MATTHEW M. THOMAS

By one measure of mid-twentieth-century popular culture, greatness was been achieved when one appeared on television's *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, at the time the largest maple syrup-making operation in the world. Reynolds's appearance on television was surprising to some viewers because many thought of Vermont and Quebec, not the American heartland of the Upper Midwest, as the centers of syrup production.¹

From the time the Reynolds family arrived in Wisconsin from New York state in 1845, making maple sugar and syrup was just one of the family's diversified subsistence and commercial activities. As was true of many of their Shawano County neighbors, it was logging, sawmill operations, and dairy farming that formed the core of the family's business during their first seventy years in the state.²

Maple syruping and sugaring have historically been spring-time activities in the seasonal rural economy of Wisconsin, beginning with the resident Ojibwe, Menominee, and Potawatomi populations and extending to the early Euro-American settlers, and later to the dairy farmers and those harvesting forest products in the north. Over the first half of the twentieth century, however, commercial maple sugar and syrup production in the United States was in a state of gradual decline. Although this



Left: Workers walk from tree to tree in this photograph of a Wisconsin sugarbush in 1949, carrying the heavy, sloshing pails of sap to a gathering tank pulled by a team of horses. **Right:** The maple woods tapped by the Reynolds included a concrete storage reservoir where sap was pumped from mobile gathering tank pulled by horses or tractor. From the reservoir, the sap was run by underground pipe for a few thousand feet to the boiling plant.

decline was most pronounced in New England and New York, the core of the maple-producing region, it was also present in Wisconsin. As cane and beet sugars became less expensive, more available, and of better quality, they became the dominant sweeteners on the market. At the same time, blended syrups gained in popularity.³

After World War II, maple syrup-making reached an all-time low in the United States. Rural America was witnessing important shifts in attitudes and demographics, along with the introduction of new agricultural technology and business models. For those willing to take on risk, such change presented great opportunity. 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 pursuit alongside its sawmill and dairy operation to a year-round, factory-scale business, ultimately becoming the industry leader far from the maple syrup hubs of the northeastern United States and adjacent Quebec.

The massive growth of the Reynoldses' syrupmaking operation was due to several factors, including the family's investment in updated processing facilities and infrastructure

and neighbors' willingness to supply sap from their own trees. Adin Reynolds also took advantage of the gap created by the industry decline, securing partnerships and, along with them, new markets. Of course, growth did not happen overnight. The Reynolds family was tapping a few thousand trees in the mid-1940s, but in 1947, they increased their production capacity with a new sugarhouse built adjacent to a paved county road and alongside the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad line—an ideal location for reaching urban markets. That year, the Reynoldses also began a partnership with the Vermont Evaporator Company, becoming the midwestern dealer and distributor of maple syrup-making equipment. Until the late 1940s, there were no dealers in Wisconsin or Minnesota, and maple producers had to buy their evaporators and other large equipment from dealers in Ohio, New York, or New England. Adin saw a clear opportunity and an eager group of customers in the Midwest. Now, with his syrup plant on an accessible road and two large evaporators for processing, he began buying sap that came from about four thousand of their neighbors' taps, augmenting the more than six thousand taps on the Reynoldses' own land.⁴



The Reynolds Sugar Bush began its life with the construction of this syrup plant in 1947. In the beginning, the plant featured two wood-fired evaporators, but rapid growth of their business led the family to expand the plant with the addition of a third evaporator and conversion of all evaporators to oil fired. Note the stacks of waste wood from the sawmill to the left.

To provide some stability and supplement the family's farm and forest products businesses, Adin Reynolds had taken work as a part-time mail carrier in 1923; he became the postmaster of Aniwa in 1948. His new emphasis on maple syrup-making and equipment sales was paying off, and in 1951 Adin retired from the post office and began to focus on maple syruping full time.⁵ Around this time, Adin 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 its 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 company's growing portfolio.⁶

Although Adin was the founder and leader of Reynolds Sugar Bush, his sons, Juan and Lynn, who graduated from high school in the early 1950s, were making their way in the world as adults. Both had had roles in the syrup business since they were children, but 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. By the late 1950s, both sons had returned to Aniwa and begun working full time in the now flourishing family maple business. As Lynn Reynolds later recalled, in the late 1950s and the 1960s, Adin oversaw everything and "created the management, marketing, and financing; Juan managed the plant and the personnel; and [I] was the public relations person, salesman for equipment, the syrup buyer, and managed the production plants."⁷

Through the 1950s, Adin continued to expand the 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 the Reynoldses. He also began renting additional trees to augment the maples on the family's 800 acres. In 1949, the company acquired a third large evaporator, and by 1956, the Reynoldses were making syrup from twenty-five thousand of their own taps and buying sap from many thousands more. Another evaporator was added to the plant



Top: Each Reynolds plant boasted two or three massive six-foot-by-eighteen-foot stainless-steel evaporation pans fueled by a series of oil-fired burners. Standing in front of one such evaporator, left to right, are Adin, Lynn, and Juan Reynolds and Bob Lamb, ca. 1960. **Bottom:** The fame and growing influence of the Reynolds Sugar Bush prompted a visit from Bob Lamb of Bernhards Bay, New York. Lamb was an early inventor of flexible plastic tubing used for gathering maple sap. From left to right are Lynn, Juan, and Adin Reynolds and Bob Lamb in front of the Aniwa plant, ca. 1960.



Getting sap from the woods to the syrup plant or sugarhouse is sometimes a multistep process, as seen in this transfer of sap from a gathering tank to a roadside storage tank in Forest County, ca. 1971.

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; the family never thinned their maple woods and burned waste slabs from a local sawmill before switching to oil.⁸

At Reynolds Sugar Bush, syrup was made from tens of thousands of gallons of maple sap on an industrial scale inside large factory-like buildings. Fresh sap was stored in enormous stainless-steel tanks lit with ultraviolet lights that killed the bacteria that sometimes developed on the liquid's surface. The sap was then concentrated using reverse osmosis, in which water was removed from the sap before it was run into automated oil-fired stainless-steel evaporators covered with steam hoods. Inside the evaporators, the oil-fueled flames would rapidly reduce the sap to the proper consistency for syrup through boiling and steam removal, as well as provide the heat necessary for the caramelization of the sugars that creates the unique flavors of maple syrup. Electronic sensors would bring in sap and draw off syrup automatically, with the system kept on a continuous boil hour after hour. When the flavor and density were right, the syrup was run through massive pressurized filter presses to create a clear product, and then pumped into forty-five-gallon metal barrels or four-thousand-gallon bulk tanks for transport. In comparison with a backyard maple operation where a few gallons of sap boil in the open air on an uncovered flat pan or kettle heated by a wood fire fed by hand, the Reynolds Sugar Bush plants may have looked to some like futuristic space-age technology.

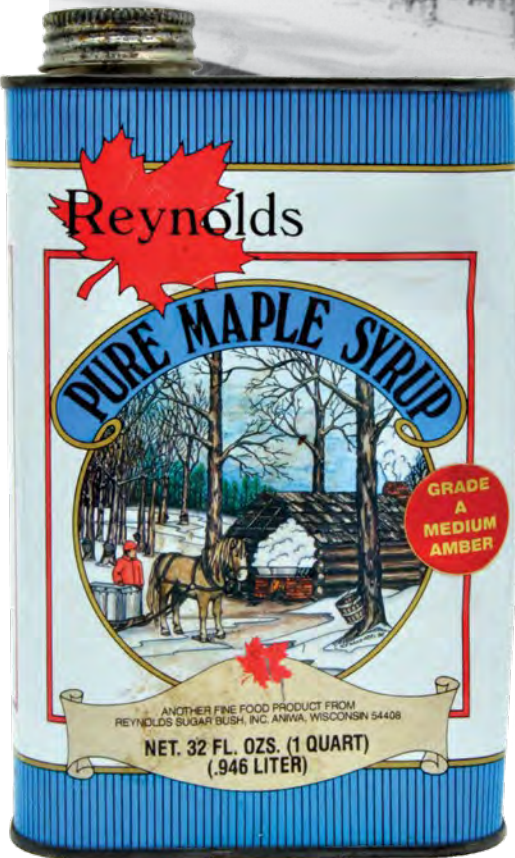
The idea of only selling sap rather than taking on the whole task of making finished syrup was not invented by the

Reynoldses, but it became a major part of their business beginning in the late 1940s. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture had been promoting the idea of having a central evaporation plant for maple syrup producers since the 1930s. In the 1930s and 1940s, a group called the Antigo Maple Syrup Producers Association, of which Adin Reynolds was an early leader, attempted to pool their efforts in processing sap and marketing maple syrup—but without much success. However, as Reynolds Sugar Bush grew, Adin was able to make the central evaporator plant (CEP) model a reality, processing sap gathered from many independently owned sugarbushes at the family's own large boiling facility.⁹

For Wisconsinites, the CEP concept will be 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. With maple syrup, the sap producers brought cans or tanks full of sap to the Reynolds plant, or the Reynoldses picked up sap on a daily sap run with their own tanker trucks. As with butterfat in milk, the value of and compensation for raw maple sap was based on its relative sugar content. Sap at 1.5 percent sugar might get three cents a gallon while sap at 6 percent sugar might earn six cents a gallon. As Juan Reynolds described it, "If [a supplier] 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."¹⁰ Like milk, sap from multiple sources is combined and handled by individuals with the technology, expertise, and market connections to turn their raw product into processed content for packaging, sale, and distribution. Combining and finishing the concentrated sap at a central location resulted in better quality and more uniform syrup than was often produced in smaller sugarhouses and backyard boiling operations at that time.¹¹

The countryside around the Aniwa plant is marked with dairy farms interspersed with stands of second-growth sugar maples. Farm families had the two most important components for sap production: trees and available labor to tap and gather. Moreover, the months of March and April were the slow season for most farm families; that time of year was too early to begin planting crops. People in the region were more than willing to tap their maple trees and sell their sap for cash. Juan Reynolds recalled that the Reynoldses had as many as fifty to sixty families from within a twenty-mile radius selling sap to them, with most of the sap sellers tapping between five hundred and eight hundred trees.¹²

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 twenty thousand gallons of maple syrup annually. With scheduled deliveries of syrup from



For many years, the Reynolds family operated a maple products sales booth at the Wisconsin State Fair, complete with a replica sugarhouse. In this ca. 1963 photo, Geraldine Reynolds, Lynn Reynolds, and Adin Reynolds pose with Marilyn Draeger, that year's Alice in Dairyland.

The Reynoldses designed their own consumer-oriented packaging, including their Reynolds Sugar Bush pure maple syrup can.



(Patented in the U.S.A. and Canada)

THE *NEW* WAY TO COLLECT SAP!

Hundreds of syrup makers are now using SAP-SAKS. The SAP-SAK has been on the market for three seasons and in *Wisconsin* has outsold all other sap collec-
tors combined! And we sold more *in Wisconsin* than in any other state. This proves that users like them. We

Ultra violet color was introduced
a new bottom seal corrected any
which is more abrasion and r...
We welcome your ideas too.



- SIMPLE STORAGE
- NO WASHING

- G
- A
- E
- C
- W
- B

Above: The Sap Sak, a simple, inexpensive two-piece metal holder and plastic bag, was developed and patented by Adin Reynolds as a replacement for the more cumbersome metal sap pail. It was introduced for sale in the fall of 1968. **Right:** The Reynolds Sugar Bush was the largest dealer of maple syrup supplies and equipment west of Lake Michigan, promoting its wares through catalogs, agricultural trade shows, and local maple association meetings.

1963 SUGAR MAKERS SUPPLY CATALOG

The Enclosed envelope It doesn't need any stamp All Prices Subject to Change Without Notice

REYNOLDS SUGAR BUSH

ANIWA, WISCONSIN

THIS IS THE YEAR
TO GET THAT NEW
VERMONT EVAPORATOR

LET YOUR MAPLE TREES PAY FOR IT

Everything in Stock at Aniwa. We
Trade in Your Old Evaporator
We Deliver — We Install

Buy the Finest - Buy a Vermont!

Views of Vermont Special Evaporator showing Bottom Construction of Pans

Liberal Terms
New Features
50 to 5,000 trees
Made in two or three pan style
Wood or Oil Burning

WE SPECIALIZE IN OIL FIRED INSTALLATIONS

We try to keep in stock — Pans to fit all size evaporators — However, order early as possible!

Why not start a central evaporating plant. Buy sap from your neighbors. Let us help you with details and planning. This is part of our business — and we will buy your syrup.

COURTESY OF MATTHEW M. THOMAS

the Aniwa plant to the General Foods Chicago bottling plant, the Reynolds seriously entered 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 that was needed. This large syrup contract led the Reynoldses to start shipping syrup four thousand gallons at a time via tanker truck. Wisconsin was not producing enough syrup to meet this need, so the Reynoldses 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 each year. Moving this volume of maple syrup out of a midwestern hub rather than out of New England or Quebec was a significant departure from how the maple industry had traditionally operated.¹³

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: George Klement's Maple Orchard in nearby Polar, Wisconsin, in 1960; the CEP operation of Sidney Maas at Tilleda, Wisconsin, in 1963; and a General Mills operation in King-

sley, Michigan, in 1966. For the first two, Reynolds converted the evaporators from wood fired to oil fired and expanded the number of taps. General Mills, which had built its operation in 1962, was already modernized. The Reynolds purchased the operation for next to nothing on the condition that all the syrup produced by the plant would be sold to General Foods.¹⁴

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 Reynoldses' one hundred-by-forty-foot display was the primary promotional booth for maple syrup at the Wisconsin State Fair. The Reynoldses even erected the Sugar House, a roadside gift shop along Highway 45 that targeted tourist traffic between Milwaukee and Chicago and between the North Woods and lake country of northern Wisconsin.¹⁵

One of Adin Reynolds's most popular ideas for promoting the maple industry was an annual pancake breakfast and maple festival. Starting in 1950 with around one thousand



Juan Reynolds tests the sugar content of maple syrup, 1977. Despite the aid of technology, there was still a need to periodically check and confirm the accuracy of the equipment.

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 had made the state's best syrup that year. In 1956, the WMSPA came on board to help, and the festival grew to upwards of five thousand yearly attendees. Visitors were treated to maple syrup-themed exhibits and speakers, enjoyed live entertainment, and were served an all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast. Pancakes were cranked out on an assembly line with a pancake-making machine, designed by Adin, that poured the batter for twenty-four 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 forty-five years, the Wisconsin maple syrup festival continued to be held at Reynolds Sugar Bush. In 1995, it moved to Merrill and became the responsibility of the WMSPA.¹⁶

By the mid- to late 1960s, the four plants operated by Reynolds Sugar Bush were processing a combined 1,200 gallons of sap an hour on a dozen large evaporators from sap gathered from more than 200,000 taps. Adin had even earned a patent for his invention of a simple and economical hanger for disposable plastic sap bags, which was called the Sap Sak.¹⁷ As was

emphasized in Adin's television appearance on *To Tell the Truth*, Reynolds Sugar Bush had become the largest maple syrup-making operation in the world.¹⁸

But in the 1970s, the industry shifted once again as sap prices fell and interest in selling sap diminished. General Foods reduced the amount of maple syrup in its Log Cabin blend from 15 percent in 1959 to 2 percent by 1979. When the General Foods Corporation merged with Philip Morris in 1985, the previous contract was no longer honored, and the twenty-year relationship between General Foods and Reynolds Sugar Bush came to an end. In the 1970s, the Reynoldses' operations in Polar and Telleda, Wisconsin, and in Kingsley, Michigan, were shuttered or sold.¹⁹

Adin retired from running Reynolds Sugar Bush in 1979, turning over leadership of the company to his eldest son, Juan, but not without having earned a place in the highest ranks of the maple syrup industry. Although the Wisconsin-based company was operating far from the maple syrup centers of the Northeastern US and Quebec, industry leaders in the North American Maple Syrup Council (NAMSC) recognized Adin's leadership and influence and elected him council vice president in 1963 and president in 1965. Adin also helped to organize the International Maple Syrup Institute (IMSI), a group focused on developing markets for the maple industry. Upon retiring,

Adin was given the highest honor by the maple syrup industry when he became the fifth inductee into the North American Maple Syrup Producers Hall of Fame. Son Lynn followed with his own induction into the Hall of Fame in 1995. In 1982, Adin was one of five men recognized by the University of Wisconsin for his contribution to agriculture and quality of life by the UW–Madison College of Agriculture. Adin passed away in 1987 at the age of eighty-two. Juan and Lynn continued his legacy of leadership, serving as officers and board members of the IMSI and the NAMSC.²⁰

In the 1980s, changing markets and the increased difficulty of finding seasonal labor pushed Reynolds Sugar Bush to scale back its sap buying and syrup production even further, and only one plant on the farm north of Aniwa continued to make syrup. Rapid growth in syrup production out of Quebec and falling syrup prices became too difficult to compete with, and in 1991, the Reynoldses were forced to liquidate many of their assets, including their sizable sugarbush, and to resize and restructure the company as part of bankruptcy proceedings.²¹ With the company facing reorganization and a limited sap supply, syrup production came to an end for Reynolds Sugar Bush, although equipment sales continued for another ten years as the company passed into the third generation of Reynoldses.

With the Reynoldses' leadership and the foundation they helped lay, Wisconsin went from being a minor contributor in the maple syrup industry to being one of the leading states in the industry.²² Reynolds Sugar Bush production numbers were undeniably significant, as was the Reynoldses' influence as sap buyers, equipment sellers, and syrup brokers. Adin Reynolds succeeded in establishing a collaborative maple syrup production process, based on the modern creamery, that made sense in a dairy state like Wisconsin, and the company took the lead in consolidating operations with CEPs. When Reynolds Sugar Bush was at its peak, 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 kept pace for the next three decades.²³ Unfortunately for the Reynolds family, the industry and markets shifted rapidly, and the family could not maintain the same operation they had in the company's heyday. Change came, as it always does, but not before the Reynolds family and Reynolds Sugar Bush had put Wisconsin maple syrup-making on the map.

Notes

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3. Matthew M. Thomas, "Where the Forest Meets the Farm: A Comparison of Spatial and Historical Change in the Euro-American and American Indian Maple Production Landscape," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2004).
4. Juan Reynolds, interview with the author, July 31, 2002, Aniwa, Wisconsin; Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History*, 359. The Reynoldses would continue to sell for the

Vermont Evaporator Company for the lifetime of that company. After being sold to the Leader Evaporator Company in 1972, Reynolds Sugar Bush carried Leader brands for the remaining years of its equipment sales business.

5. Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History*, 307.
6. Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History*, 348–349.
7. Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History*, 402.
8. Reynolds, interview; Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History*, 371.
9. "Favor Central Boiling Plant: State Speaker Says Maple Syrup Should Be Made Like Creamery Butter," *Chippewa Herald Telegram*, December 2, 1931; "Maple Syrup Plant Now in Operation at Antigo," *Wausau Daily Herald*, March 27, 1934.
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13. Reynolds, *Reynolds, Maple and History*, 398–400; "A Sticky Situation: Maple Syrup Providers Can't Satisfy Demand," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 1967; "Log Cabin Syrup Maker Cuts Maple Use From 3% To 2%," *Pittsburgh Press*, January 15, 1979; Juan Reynolds, interview by the author, July 31, 2002.
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