

Minnesota Maple News

Newsletter of the Minnesota Maple Syrup Producers Association

Third / Autumn Quarter

<http://www.mnmaple.org>

September 2026



Early Commercial Maple Syrup Making in Minnesota: Wolsfeld Farm

by Matthew M. Thomas

Through the first half of the 20th century, one of the largest and oldest maple syrup operations in Minnesota could be found just north of Long Lake, in Hennepin County. Known as Wolsfeld Bros. or Wolsfeld Farm, the Wolsfeld family maple syrup operation was well-known in the Twin Cities metro area thanks to frequent newspaper stories and photographs each March and April in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* newspaper.

Maple syrup making at the Wolsfeld Farm began in 1881, when three young brothers decided to start tapping trees on the farm of their father Karl Joseph “Charles” Wolsfeld to make some pocket money. The Wolsfeld family of father Johann, mother Margarethe, son Charles, and Charles’ siblings Johann “John”, Gerhard, Nicholas, and Anna, left Germany in 1852 to avoid having the four young sons

serve in the Prussian army. Tragically, Charles’ father Johann died from typhoid fever in 1855 in Illinois, after which the family moved west to be near a settlement of other German immigrants in Hennepin County. Brother John Wolsfeld first established a homestead and title to a farm in 1857 on the western end of what is today known as Wolsfeld Lake, with Charles Wolsfeld following suit on the rolling wooded lands around the eastern portion of Wolsfeld Lake in 1861.

Following a return from service in the civil war, Charles Wolsfeld married Mary Elizabeth Merz, and began a family of three sons, Frank, John, and Nicholas, and three daughters, Josephine, Elizabeth, and Caroline. Initially, the maple operation was simple, with the three brothers, John, Nicolas, and Frank making syrup in an iron kettle and selling it to neighboring farms. In the later 1880s, the brothers increased the number of trees that were tapped and expanded the boiling operation from the iron kettle to boiling sap on a large flat pan under an open-sided shingle-roofed shelter. This rudimentary sugar shack was built into the slope of a hillside in the middle of the sugar bush, with a storage shed and sap storage tanks alongside. By the end of the 19th century, the operation had become a significant financial component to the diversified Wolsfeld farm, featuring a complete range of G.H. Grimm Company sugaring equipment, including a Champion brand evaporator and a proper sugarhouse located in the center of the sugar bush.

The family patriarch, Charles Wolsfeld, passed away in 1896 passing the farm and sugarbush to his sons and daughters. In 1909, Frank Wolsfeld married and left the farm for twenty years in South Dakota. Under the direction of the remaining brothers, bachelor farmers Johnny and Nick Wolsfeld, spinster sister Josie Wolsfeld, and married sister Caroline Wolsfeld



Figure 1 Open sided sugarhouse from the 1880s and 1890s built to cover a large flat pan at the Wolsfeld sugarbush. Photo courtesy of the Western Hennepin County Pioneer Association.

MN Maple News**Autumn Quarter Sept. 2026**

Minnesota Maple News is the official publication of the Minnesota Maple Syrup Producers Association. The officers and Board of Directors are listed on the last page.

The *MN Maple News* is published quarterly (March, June, September and December). A full-color version of the newsletter is sent to all members via email, and a black/white version is also sent to those who request a paper copy. The deadline for contributions is the first day of the publication month. Send articles, photos, ads, etc., to: Stephen Saupe, editor, *MN Maple News*, 14493 325th St., St. Joseph, MN. 56374 or email to sgsaupe@icloud.com.

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Thanks heaps to Stu Peterson and Dave Dahl for editorial assistance.

Potter and her husband C.G. Potter, the Wolsfeld sugarbush moved into full-fledged commercial syrup operation, tapping around 1000 trees in their 150 acres of maple woods.

The Wolsfeld sugarbush was known for having an open, park-like appearance where the maple trees were carefully managed with selective harvest and thinning, “forest grooming” methods, perhaps learned from late 19th and early 20th century forestry methods of their German ancestors. A great deal of dead wood was removed from the forest and burned in the sugar house with around 150 cords of wood cut and gathered each year. Most of the wild ginseng was harvested by 1900, and a lot of basswood, hickory and oak was cut and sold to the barrel works in nearby Long Lake or for use for firewood and tool handles, leaving the large maples one sees today.

Through the early 20th century, the Wolsfelds ran a diversified farm operation that sold and traded eggs, honey, milked 13 cows, cut 70 acres of hay fields, and sold maple syrup and firewood. In addition, they raised and gathered a wide variety of crops and plants and game for their own use. The family owned a truck but the farm never used tractors, and instead relied on a group of eight well cared for work horses. The entrance to the farm was from County Road 6 due north of the village of Long Lake, with a long winding driveway through the maple woods and across Wolsfeld Creek at the foot of the spring fed Wolsfeld Lake.

On the farm, the family’s original log cabin was expanded and framed in with additional rooms and a second floor, growing from a simple cabin to a large 15 room farm house. At its height, the farm grew to 264 acres with 20 buildings, including house, barns, smoke house, ice house, hog shed, corn crib, chicken coop, and more. To preserve the log cabin established by Charles Wolsfeld in



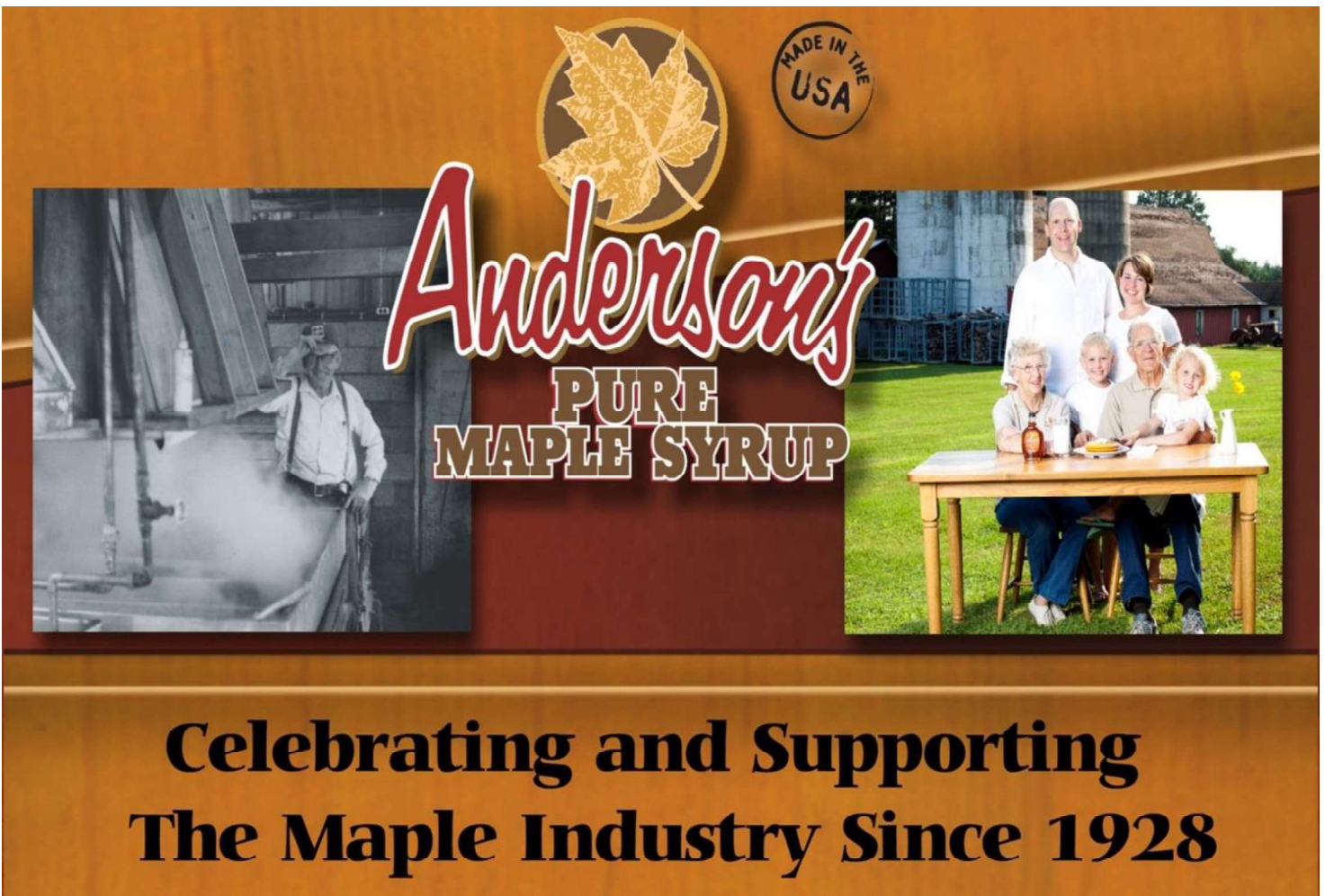
Figure 2. Enclosed sugarhouse with two-tiered cupola at Wolsfeld Farm, circa 1935. Photo courtesy of the Western Hennepin County Pioneer Association.

the 1860s, the remnants of the additions to the farm house were removed in the early 1990s, and in 1994 the friends of Wolsfeld Woods dismantled and reassembled the cabin at the grounds of Medina's City Hall in 1998.

It is not known where the earliest kettle boiling took place at the Wolsfeld sugarbush. The first sugar house, an open sided gable roofed structure, served as the frame for the later more substantial sugar house. Built to cover their early flat pan of the 1880s and 1890s, it was centrally located in the heart of the sugarbush, just off a curve of the driveway and connected by a network of paths and wagon trails. In the early 1900s the Wolsfelds upgraded to a continuous flow, flue evaporator from the Grimm Company. At this time, they also enclosed the walls of the initial sugarhouse shelter, and added a tall square smoke stack and cupola to the roof line to release steam.

Over the next 50 years the sugarhouse at Wolsfeld Sugar Bush went through a few changes, as windows were added, the cupola was expanded and raised to become a two-tiered affair, and the tall metal smoke stack was reinforced with a bricked-up base. By the late 1940s the exterior of the sugarhouse was painted green with white trim. In 1941 the family purchased new pans from the Grimm Company for their 5' x 16' wood fired Champion evaporator, which were shipped by rail from Rutland, Vermont to Long Lake.

The sugarbush was home to many large old maple trees that had been tapped since the 1880s, sometimes with as many as three pails hanging from them. The trees in this sugarbush were notably sweet, often taking only 32 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. Sap collection was initially carried out with wood pails and sumac spiles, later replaced with metal pails and metal spiles. After more than fifty years of heavy tapping, one of the Wolsfelds commented in 1939 that it gets hard to find a fresh place on the bark of some trees to tap each year.



The advertisement features a central graphic with the text "Anderson's PURE MAPLE SYRUP" in a stylized font. Above the text is a circular logo with a maple leaf and a "MADE IN THE USA" seal. To the left is a black and white photo of a man in a white shirt and suspenders standing next to a large maple syrup evaporator. To the right is a color photo of a family of seven (three adults and four children) sitting at a wooden table outdoors. Below the central graphic, the text "Celebrating and Supporting The Maple Industry Since 1928" is displayed in a bold, serif font.

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Figure 3. Nick Wolsfeld and hired hand Richard Hannen working the evaporator in 1933. Photo courtesy of the Western Hennepin County Pioneer Association.

Sap gathering was always carried out by horse drawn wagon with a pair of 100-gallon metal sap collection tanks, using the labor of the Wolsfeld siblings along with the help of a few hired men and neighbors. At the height of their syrup making years, the Wolsfelds hung around 1000 pails. For example, in 1937 they hung 900 pails; whereas, in 1940, they tapped 1100 trees and made 634 gallons syrup. In most years they produced between 500 and 700 gallons of syrup. In 1929, when they produced 500 gallons, their syrup sold at \$3.50 gallon.

In the sugarhouse, boiling was supervised by brothers Nick and John until they each passed away in 1938 and 1940. By 1945, all the Wolsfeld brothers had all died, but the three daughters of Josephine Wolsfeld, Caroline Wolsfeld Potter, and Elizabeth Wolsfeld Rath carried on the running of the sugarbush, assisted by the “only man of the place,” Caroline’s husband, C.G. Potter. Canning of syrup was always the domain of the Wolsfeld sisters and completed in the sugarhouse, where they filtered and filled a variety of glass jars and bottles as well as plain metal cans, all pasted with Wolsfeld Bros. or Wolsfeld Farm paper labels.

In addition to their popular sugarbush and syrup, the Wolsfelds also made their lake and trails available to weekend recreation and picnickers. For a quarter per car, families could rent one of 40 picnic tables on the park-like lakeshore. Or one could rent a boat on the lake for fishing or stay in a pair of cottages. The woods were popular for family reunions and company picnics and saw as many as 200 visitors a day on some summer weekends.



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Syrup making was a significant part of the Wolsfeld farm economy from the 1880s through the 1940s. The last of the Wolsfeld siblings died in 1958 and brother-in-law C.G. Potter passed away in 1961. With the siblings aging and passing away one by one, the remainder of the family discontinued syrup making in the early 1950s.

As a result, in 1962 the heirs to the Wolsfeld Farm chose to sell the 250-acre farm to the Brooks family who formed the Wolsfeld Lake Co. and initially planned for a residential development on the property. However, the biological importance of the land as the largest piece of preserved Big Woods in the Twin Cities metro area was soon recognized. The Big Woods once covered a continuous stretch of 2 million acres of mixed maple, basswood, elm, and oak forests along the rolling hills of the glacial end moraines marking the margins of the Wisconsin glaciation in south-central Minnesota. Most of the Big Woods have been cut, plowed, and developed, making the Wolsfeld sugarbush a rare and special place.

It was the importance of these woods to the Wolsfeld family for their use as a sugarbush that the large maple trees of this block of original hardwood forest remained largely uncut and minimally disturbed. As a result, the Brooks family donated a 220-acre parcel as the “Wolsfeld Woods” to the Nature Conservancy, who in turn transferred the land to the State of Minnesota in 1978, to be managed under the state’s Scientific and Natural Areas program. The sugar houses, along with other remaining farm buildings, were dismantled in 1975 in anticipation of the transfer of land to the state of Minnesota. Today one can freely hike the trails of Wolsfeld Woods, tracing the former roads through the Wolsfeld sugarbush as well as visit the lakeshore and site of the old homesite and farmstead. The former location of the sugarhouse is now marked by an interpretive sign, but there are still a few remnants of the building and associated features if one knows where to look.

Originally from St. Cloud, Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a historian who researches and writes about the history of all aspects of the maple syrup industry. You can contact Dr. Thomas and read more of his historical writings at www.maplesyruphistory.com.



Figure 4. Early 20th century image of a group of ladies sampling fresh sap in the Wolsfeld sugarbush. Note the size of the trees and multiple pails on each tree. Photo courtesy of the Western Hennepin County Pioneer Association.



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Figure 5. Author Matt Thomas at the maple display at the 2026 MN State Fair. Image courtesy the author.