
Contes et légendes – Short Stories

Sweet Memories by Lillian Smith Sherrer

At last it was spring! Not only could you tell by the calendar, but, you could feel it in the air. What a change in the adults! Dad was whistling as he hurried out to do the morning chores. Mom seemed a bit more cheery as she prepared oatmeal for the gang.

Everyone was looking forward to the sugar season. The men had discussed over and over again whether or not it would be a good producing one, as they chatted endlessly last night during one of Henry's routine visits. "The snow has melted away from trees." Dad said, "Likely to be a lot of sap and probably sweet too. We had a big thaw this winter, that generally makes for a good year." Henry replied. "Looks like we should tap early as the moon changes towards the end of March."

No wonder they looked forward to a change of pace. It had been a hard winter. Even I knew that. I remember sitting by the table listening to the ping of the circular saw as it sliced yet more wood for the hungry box stoves. The sound rang out into the still frosty air as the men braved the cold dressed in home knitted socks, mitts and sweaters, to saw more wood as the pile had diminished rapidly during the last storm.

That storm left many memories. We had just enjoyed a quiet country Christmas. Gram and Grampa Smith came to spend it with us. I had tagged along when Dad had chosen and cut the tree. It was a nicely shaped balsam. Last year the boys cut a cat spruce. As the tree warmed in the house it smelled like cat pee. We were real anxious to discard it the day after Christmas!

We trimmed the balsam tree with home made ornaments and twisted crepe paper to form garlands. The gifts were also mostly homemade. Sis had cut a fruit basket in half and added to make a doll's high chair. A doll bed was created using another basket. Mom had knitted continuously to complete items for us. Gramma's colourful knitted double mittens, a pair for each of the men, hung on the strings, which held up the Christmas tree.

The yearly box of used articles had arrived from the States sent by our rich cousins. These were wrapped and marked for whomever most appropriate. But, mine wasn't wrapped. It was a thin book of fairy tales and it hung on the tree at just the right height so I couldn't quite see it clearly, only my name on the cover. I went round and around the tree curiously trying to see the pictures.

Finally the day wound down. The chores were done and the women had cleaned up after the meal. During dishes Mom and we girls had sung carols till our tonsils tingled. What fun! Then we all played Crokinole while Dad listened to the radio. The boys liked that game better than "Old maid" or "Flinch". Dad later wanted to play dominoes. I couldn't figure that game out. The way they took so long to decide where to place them end-to-end. Dad was a whiz at it and always boasted about winning.

Mom had mixed a batch of bread, made with potato yeast, to be baked in the morning. She sat it by the wood stove, covered with a blanket, to keep it warm.

The snow started falling outside as we went upstairs with our kerosene lamps. We huddled in our beds loaded down with home made patchwork quilts. The feather ticks under us helped to make us feel more comfortable and warm.

The sound of Dad's radio reached up through the stovepipe hole in the floor. It was really scary as it was the weekly episode of "The Squeaking Door". What an eerie sound! I was so frightened. I covered my head and peeked out to watch the dim flicker of the lamp, as the wick had been turned down for the night.

The next morning when we arose we were astonished to see the amount of snow piled high about the windows and doors. It was blowing and bitter cold. The house took hours to warm and we had shivered as we dressed close by the box stove. My itchy home knit stockings, which were held up with an elastic garter belt, were more than welcome.

Brother Ross, who was always sickly, and I thought, babied, (as a I was jealous of all the attention focused on him), seemed worse today, I could see that. He coughed and was feverish, so was put to bed in Mom and Dad's bedroom downstairs. Mom took his temperature and found it to be one hundred and three degrees. She was frightened. They decided to send for the doctor. Because we did not have a telephone, a horse had to wade through the snow and Dad in the sleigh had to weather the storm, to summon him.

Dad learned on arrival that Doc was out on another house call and would come as soon as possible. We all waited anxiously watching brother, whom I even forgave for getting all the attention.

In late afternoon the storm decided to move on. I sat brooding by the window, scraping a bit of frost from the pane so I could see outside. What was that sound Mom? I asked. Mom stopped sweeping the floor to listen. Must be a train, she said as she hastened in to check on Ross. The noise grew louder and louder. We all gathered by the window to peek out. Soon the cause of the noise came into

view. It was a large grey object coming right over the snowdrifts directly towards our house.

As it approached the men rushed outside. The engine shut off and old Doc stepped out the door of the snowmobile, which boasted a Model T car motor, an enclosed body of welded metal windshield and even a back window. It had large lags, which pulled it over the snow. This was a wonder machine!

Bombardier, who had a garage in Mansonville at that time, built the machine for old Doc Gillanders. This snowmobile can now be seen at the Bombardier Museum in Valcourt.

Doc came inside and warmed himself before going into the bedroom. He examined Ross and stated he had pneumonia, which threw a scare into Mom. But Doc assured her Ross would be ok. "Keep him in bed and give him plenty of fresh air," he said. It was real strange to see the bedroom window raised an inch or two in the winter. But those were the orders. Also, Doc said to fan Ross to make him more comfortable. Mom left me at times to fan brother with a newspaper. However, mischievously, I occasionally nipped his nose as he was weak and irritable, it made him cry.

Regardless, Ross got well. Then it was my turn. I had severe earaches for days on end. One after the other formed an abscess and ran fluid. I sat by the box stove and wiped my ears as one does a runny nose. Mom had an ear syringe so she syringed my ears with a warm solution. Ouch! We survived.

But now a happier atmosphere surrounded everyone. It was finally spring. We checked every day or so to see if the pussy willows were out. Then later the may flowers and adder tongues would make an appearance. What a gorgeous time of the year!

There was always so much work to be done on a farm in the spring. The cows were freshening so that made more work. The men sent me out of the barn because a calf was going to be born. I asked Mom how the cow got her calf and Mom said she went to the woods to find it. I stood for hours by the window to see the cow go to find her calf, but I must have missed her as I left once to get a drink of water!

The season, which the men had discussed for such a long time, was here. It was now time to break a road to the sugar place. Dick and Prince, the team of horses, were hitched to the sled and coaxed to walk through the deep snow. They sank belly deep as they struggled on and on. Once Dick fell so the tugs on his harness had to be unfastened from the sled and Dad pulled on his bridle to urge him back up onto his feet. Luckily, his shoes had been removed before starting, as they were sharp. He could have corked himself with them!

However, at the end of the two days it took to break roads among the maple trees, the horses had only scratches on their legs, which left blood on the snow. The scratches were inflicted as they broke through the crust formed during the thaws of winter.



Dick and Prince, the team of horses

Early the next day after doing the barn chores Dad and the boy left to tap the trees. Dad drilled holes with a tapping bit. Robert followed with the team pulling the dray loaded with buckets and spout. Dick and Prince found it easier as they made the return trip the snow was packed. They co-operated stopping and starting commands. Robert leaped off the dray to hang buckets on the spouts, which Ross had hammered into the holes. Soon the men had several hundred tapped. In the afternoon we girls rode on the dray and helped hang buckets wherever we could manage to walk. The snow was deep, so our boots filled to their tops.

While the sap ran, it was on to the next job. The smoke stack was assembled and attached to the arch. It soon was jutting out of the sugarhouse roof ready for another season. The pans were adjusted on the arch and the sap storage vat, which sat upon a platform built higher than the arch was checked for holes and cleanliness. Sometimes wild animals chewed boards and left debris spread about. The gathering tub was loaded onto the dray ready to gather sap.

We all returned home for a hearty supper. Mother had made a batch of ginger snap cookies and baking powder biscuits. The house smelled great. We got to bed early as Dad said it would be real cold that night, which meant a good run of sap.

Sure enough the next day was a busy one. Some buckets were over half full of sap while the ones in the sun were running over. The men took their sap pails and emptied sap from the buckets into them, carried it back to the sled and poured the sap

into the strainer of the gathering tub. Sometimes as they walked, one leg would break through the crust and sap spilled into their boots.

Often, Dad and the boys wore skis while gathering sap. It was real tricky to carry sap on skis and not spill it; also to stop abruptly when reaching the sled. Seldom did they don snow shoes as did some other farmers. It was more exciting on skis.

When the gathering tub was full, they headed for the sugarhouse to empty. The horses were driven up onto the rise built outside, making the tub equal height to the storage tank inside. The canvas hose on the tub was lowered, allowing the sap to flow freely into the trough leading to the storage tank. What a great sound! Like a babbling brook.

After several loads Dad stayed at the sugarhouse to start the fire in the arch. The wood had been cut and stored in the shed right after last season, and now it was real dry, and so burned furiously. Dad stoked the fire often, as he liked a roaring fire. Soon there was steam rising out the vents on the roof of the sugarhouse, the first steam of the season.

Dad's lunch was brought to him, as he couldn't leave. To complement the lunch he put eggs in a bucket and set the bucket in the pan of boiling sap to cook quickly.

Later Mother came up to the sugarhouse to see the first syrup as Dad syruped-off. He kept testing the thickening sap until it was just right. Then he lowered the spout on the pan to let the syrup run into a bucket. Boy it was hot! (Some syrup makers removed the sap before it was syrup, putting it onto a smaller rig or arch to finish boiling.)

As our maple bush didn't have much niter, Dad used cloth strainers instead of felt to strain the

syrup. They had to be washed often so Dad washed them in sap until later in the season when the streams thawed. Sometimes it was my chore to wash the strainers in the stream. It made me feel real grown up and also gave me a chance to play in the beautiful clear cool water.

Dad said, "Stand back so you won't get burned," as he brought the hot bucket of syrup to pour through the cloth strainer into a milk can. Mom filled a container to take to the house.

The following Sunday Mom boiled the syrup on the wood stove. "Get a small dipper of snow," Mom said, "so I can see if the syrup is ready." It was thick enough to stay on top of the snow. We got pans of snow and packed it down. Mom poured the hot syrup over the snow. Older brother, Fred and his wife had been invited for sugar on snow, so now we all dug in. We filled small bowls with the leftover syrup and stirred until it grained. Then we dropped spoonfuls of it on wax paper and filled tiny tins, which we left to cool and harden. Yum! Yum! Sugar cakes.

We got several more days of good sap weather, then it slowed down. Dad said we needed a storm to wet the trees. The next night it started to snow big fluffy sugar snow. It was stuck to the trees when we got up in the morning.

During the day it warmed up, making more sap, which made Dad happy. However, later in the week it rained and because we didn't have covers on the buckets, the sap was diluted and they had to be emptied. This was a tedious job, but with all hands helping it was done quickly.

Dad decided to bring syrup down to the house as there was no sap to gather or boil. The boys helped hold it on the dray and placed it on the

veranda. It was a sweet, sticky mess as they dipped syrup from the milk cans to fill the syrup cans. "Watch out for the washing," Mom said. Mother had washed the woollen mitts and they were spread about the veranda to dry. There was also a woollen sweater for each man, except Ross, on the line drying. While Ross was grinding turnips for the cows, with a large turnip grinder, his hand knit sweater had fallen in with the turnips and had been ground to shreds.

Now that the syrup was canned, it was crated in wooden crates ready to be shipped to Ontario and parts of the States. Dad took the syrup to the Highwater train station. On arrival, he was notified that the chickens Mom had ordered from Tweedle's had arrived. The chickens were put in cardboard boxes behind the kitchen stove. They were fed, watered and cleaned, remaining in the kitchen for three weeks. Just more work right during the busy sugar season.

There was a "freeze up", so Dad had to go to the sugarhouse to build a fire in the sugar rig, to keep the pipes from freezing and bursting. It warmed up again and the sap ran. But the syrup was darker and Dad said it would be the last and might taste of the buds, which were forming on the trees. The sap drizzled for a day or two. Dad made dark syrup, which he later boiled down on the finishing rig until it was real thick. Mom stirred the syrup to make it grain into sugar. It was then put into containers to be used for baked beans, pickles and baking. It made yummy rag muffins and was good on warm bread.

"I guess that is it for this year, Henry and I were right this time. It was a great season. We made more syrup than usual," boasted Dad. "Now it is time to clean up," he added. The smoke tack was dismantled and the pans washed. Buckets were gathered, along with the spouts. It was warm and the snow about

gone. The mud was knee deep in places. It was fun to be in the sugar bush and hear the streams flowing. The hillsides were matted with may flowers and violets, while the adder tongues competed for colour.



**Buckets bottom side up
on the grass to dry**

The buckets were drawn down on the dray to the house waiting for a sunny day without wind to be washed. The day had arrived. The finishing rig was put outside by the shed, and a fire built. Dad asked the boys to fill the pans with water. Soon the water was real hot.

Mom and Sis set washtubs on the table, which the men had fashioned by placing an old door across saw horses. They filled the tubs with hot water and started scrubbing the buckets. Dad rinsed them in scalding water. Then the buckets were scattered bottom side up on the grass to dry. The boys knocked the stacks of buckets apart and brought them to Mom and Sis and we little ones put them to dry. It was like a chain gang. When the buckets were dry, they were again stacked together and carried to the shed chamber to await another sugar season. The spouts were boiled, dried and stored away.

Phew! We were glad to have finished that job. But – no time to relax. Dad had to repair fences. The cows were anxious to get outside. They had been tied up all winter and now they could smell the grass just waiting to be nibbled. They bellered and pulled at the stanchions. Wait up cows. Give us a break