

WHAT ARE PEOPLE DOING IN THE VALLEY FOR A LIVING?

When the white men came they cleared the land and started farming. They were not always lucky. Some years the crop would freeze and the game was not as plentiful as they wished. They suffered but managed to survive with the help of their relatives and neighbors. With time and courage, they prospered. In 1920, I was 11 years old and I can remember well. The smallest farmer in the valley had a pair of horses, at least half a dozen milking cows, a dozen sheep, half a dozen pigs, a couple dozen chickens. He had a good garden. He grew oats for his horses and hay, too. He had only straw for his sheep and cattle in the winter but they must have found some grain in that straw, because they survived the winter. He grew buckwheat for flour. The soil was not too good for wheat and too hilly but oats and buckwheat produced well. Close to a dozen farmers in my neighborhood had sugar camps and produced their own maple sugar. They did not make too much syrup because they had no containers to store it.

When I was a young boy I remember that my father had no containers to collect the sap. So in June I would go with him and my uncle on the ridges. They would peel the bark from the big white birches and pile it with weight on it at a proper place. The next spring he would go get his bark and while the others were cutting wood and breaking the trails to collect the sap, he would light a small fire, warm up his birch bark and fold it in good clean containers holding up to two gallons each. When they started tapping the trees, they would bore a hole about a couple of inches deep in a slanting angle on the sunny side of the maple tree, drive a spigot made of cedar in the hole and place a birch bark container (casseau) under it.

When the sap was running they had a big barrel holding about 150 gallons on a sleigh hauled by a horse. They had roads through the maple grove. The horse would haul the big barrel on those roads while the men were collecting the sap in big buckets going from one tree to the other on snowshoes. They had more big containers at the camp where they would empty the sap and go back for more.

At the camp they had two big pans about 12 feet long and three feet wide, about six inches high. Those pans were resting on brick walls with a smokestack at the far end and, of course, a place under for fire. When the sap was running good those pans were busy 24 hours a day. They would fill the pans and get them boiling. When the sap had boiled down to half, they would fill the pans again and when that had boiled down to about a couple of inches, they would empty the pan in a barrel through a felt strainer. When they had enough of that syrup they had a big cast iron kettle holding

15 to 20 gallons. They would set that over a fire, fill it about half full of syrup and boil it until it was turned into sugar. Then they would get it away from the fire and stir it vigorously for a while. When it started to cool and thicken, they would pour it into molds and make big bricks of sugar weighing around 10 lbs. Sometimes when the sugar was about half cooked they would dip some of the hot syrup and pour it on the snow. That would harden into a candy fit for the kings. Later on the evaporators came and the metal pails and spigots to collect the sap.

Now they pipe the trees and the sap runs right into a big vat at the camp. They can let the sap run into the evaporator through pipes when needed. When my grandfather was a young father and his boys were too young to help he would leave with a big cast iron kettle on a moose sleigh, an axe, a brace and bit and go six miles in the forest to a maple grove. He would build himself a lean-to, clear the snow with his snowshoes, cut wood, make his containers and spigots, tap his trees, collect the sap and haul it in buckets to the kettle, boil all the sap he could and turn it into nice maple sugar that he would bring home three or four weeks later. He was stronger than the average man. When the white men had been in the valley for about 10 years, quite a few of them had turned to lumbering. That kept them busy from the middle of September to the middle of March. In April the log drive started and gave them work until the end of June. Then they would help the farmers hay making and doing odd jobs until the middle of September when they went back to the lumbering camps.

Some of the workers were employed in the sawmills and later in paper mills. When I was a boy there was a sawmill in St. Francis, Me., and a couple of them in Connors, N.B., a good one in Baker Brook and another good one in Siegas, below Edmundston. Frasers were just building their paper mill in Edmundston. The Brown Co. had a huge sawmill in Keegan just above Van Buren. When the big companies built their paper mills they bought a lot of forest land and the sawmills folded out. They are coming back but on a much smaller scale. Also the chain- saw and the skidder have driven more than half the workers out of the woods. And the gravel roads and trucks take the wood where it is and haul it anywhere it is wanted. It is more costly but the mill can be anywhere and a much bigger territory can be harvested. Less men being needed, the workers leave for Connecticut. Commercial farming being the common practice, we have less and less farmers. The family farm is out. To stay on a farm and survive you have to grow or produce what you can sell and sell it when the price is right. Most of the farms in the Valley are deserted and going back to the forest.

Maple sugar making is practically out in the Valley. A few farmers grow beef, I know of one egg farm, one poultry farm. The remaining farms grow potatoes and some grain. They tried sugar beets but did not succeed because in my opinion the situation got out of control, those in control did not play it right. They made a lot of money and went away. Some say that it is too cold around here but they grow them in North Dakota where it is colder than here. In my humble opinion Aroostook County is an under-developed area, the only good bread-winner in the Valley is the pulp and paper mills at Edmundston and Madawaska. There is a good sawmill 40 miles south of Fort Kent at Ashland and another one about ten miles further but with the budworms killing trees by the millions the forest is practically dying. I cannot imagine where they will get their trees 30 years from now. Traveling through the woods you can see hundreds of trees standing dead along the roads and huge clearings with nothing but raspberry bushes growing in them. Of course, I know that those who live in the Valley are comfortable, but both parents have to work and the children are too few to give us hope and they have been neglected some. Nobody can take the place of dad and mum in the education of their children. If those are not doing their share the others are losing their time. Of course we are the victims of the salesmen and we buy much more than we need and that is why we want more money and spend too much time getting it.

