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Stephen G. Saupe

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, ssaupe@csbsju.edu

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The Space Age Sugar Shack

Stephen Saupe

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the world's first satellite, called Sputnik, into orbit around the Earth. Though it was relatively small Sputnik had a huge global impact. Among other things, it ushered in the space age.

This winter, more than 55 years after Sputnik made history, the Saint John's maple syrup operation entered the maple-syruping equivalent of the space age when we obtained two new state-of-the-art evaporators. Chief syrup-maker Walter Kieffer, OSB, joked that "almost overnight we've gone from the horse and buggy to the space age." It certainly seems that way, but the journey to the Saint John's maple syrup space age was a long time in the making.

Our previous evaporator served us well for 40 years. It was installed in our sugar house when it was originally built in the fall of 1971, and it has been the heart of our operation ever since. Over the years, the evaporator was fired more than 207 times, and it cooked nearly 220,000 gallons of sap to produce 5,044 gallons of syrup. Those stats aren't too shabby for an evaporator that was already used when we bought it.

Over time, just like we all do, the evaporator began to show its age.

"Almost overnight we've gone from the horse and buggy to the space age." —Walter Kieffer, OSB

We kept it running with tender-loving-care, which included plugging small cracks and holes with sugar sand. The fatal blow to the evaporator came in March 2011. There had been a good sap run on March 25-26. The sap was collected and cooked. Unfortunately, the nighttime temperatures for the next few days averaged 13.6°F. The partially-cooked syrup that was left in the evaporator froze solid, splitting some of the joints in the evaporator. Br. Walter and one of our other syrup-makers, Bill Mock, cobbled the evaporator back together enough to limp through the remainder of the 2011 season. But the proverbial writing was on the wall — we needed a new evaporator.

It was too late to get a new evaporator ordered and installed for 2012, which turned out to be quite fortuitous. Although we lamented that the 2012 season was the worst syrup season in Saint John's history, it meant that we only needed to use the patched evaporator a few times.

In May 2012, Saint John's hosted the International Maple Grading School workshop. During a tour of the sugar shack, one of the instructors casually mentioned that some academic operations they've visited

have multiple evaporators running side-by-side to compare efficiency, syrup flavor, etc. It didn't take much to convince the Saint John's syrup crew that we should not only replace our production evaporator but also get a smaller evaporator, especially for Arboretum teaching purposes.

The remaining obstacle was funding. The Abbey and University jointly agreed to fund the purchase of the production evaporator. Larry and Carole Schwietz and family generously offered to donate funds for the teaching evaporator which is now affectionately called "Little Larry." Fr. Paul Schwietz, Larry's son, was the founder of the Arboretum, and we are grateful for the Schwietz family's tireless support of our work.

The syrup crew has been busy installing the new evaporators and retrofitting the sugar shack to accommodate the new steam and smoke stacks. It's been a big job that will be completed just in time for syruping. We're very grateful to Br. Walter and crew for their hard work; it's been no easy task.

Just as Sputnik launched a new wave of science education in the United States and a race to the moon, Little Larry and his big relative will usher in a new era of maple syruping at Saint John's. Visit us in the sugar shack and check out our new, high-tech evaporators. And the only horse-and-buggy operation you'll see is the one visitors ride to join us at our festivals.

Dr. Stephen Saupe is a CSB/SJU biology professor and is a key member of our maple syrup crew. He's hoping for a busy maple syrup season in our "space age" sugar shack.



Anna Schoeneberger

The "space age" sugar shack is equipped with two shiny new evaporators: "Little Larry" will be fired almost daily for teaching alongside our full-size production evaporator (pictured above).