

Harry and Dot Morse
April 21, 1988

Mary Kasamatsu
Interviewer

MK I'm with Dot and Harry Morse at the Morse Farm and this is the, so what is this, the 20th of April.

HM The 20th of April.

MK The 20th of April. Let's see, now I got his level, I need to get your level. What did you have for breakfast? Let's start with a little bit of background and we'll _____ back and forth.

HM I can get them toned down.

MK Do you want to go and talk to somebody or? While he's doing that, let's start with you. Now where did you grow up?

DM I grew up in Putney which is in southern Vermont, just a few steps from Brattleboro.

MK Do you mind telling me when you were born?

DM I was born in April of 1915, which makes me an ancient one.

MK April baby huh? So was my older son. Now your family is from this part of Vermont for quite a ways back weren't they?

HM Yes, right up the road in Calais.

MK So you grew up on?

HM I grew up on Robinson Hill up in Calais.

MK Okay.

HM And that was, that was settled back by some of the family many years ago.

MK So that was really the family farm, family homestead. Now was your family a farm family?

HM Always been a farm family, yes.

MK I wanted to ask, of course your father was running the nursery business as you were growing up?

DM That's right.

MK As well as many other things in his political activities. Did you remember sugaring as a child, was that one of the things _____?

DM That's one thing we never did at home. We had to depend on the neighbors to get our syrup from them and so many times whenever we got syrup it always turned out to taste as though it had been burned. It wasn't until I married him that I discovered that it isn't a burned taste, it's a buddy taste meaning they've used the sap much too far into the season after the buds had began to swell.

MK Uh, interesting.

DM So I didn't know about sugaring really very much til I met him!

MK Wow! How did you two meet?

DM Well I came up to Maple Corner to teach the four upper grades and met him.

HM Luckiest thing that ever happened to me. That was over 50 years ago. We've had our 50th wedding anniversary.

MK That's great, that's wonderful. So you must have grown up with a lot of sugaring as a child though?

HM We did sugaring on more, more of a modest scale then than we do now and most of the farm families did. They just, they had to, they didn't sell a lot of syrup. They made some syrup and made some sugar and that was their, that was their sugar supply for the family. They didn't depend on selling a lot syrup. As a matter of fact, when I grew up, syrup was selling for \$3 or \$4 a gallon as opposed to what it sells for now an arm and a leg.

MK It's interesting. So it really was just part of the farmer's season?

HM Yes, that's right. Part of the self sufficiency farm life pattern at that time.

MK Seems like people are standing in the doorway more now than they were before?

HM I should have unplugged that.

MK Is it just something you unplug here?

HM Yea it is.

DM You just take the battery out, you just take the battery out.

MK Okay.

HM You won't hear anymore from that.

MK Okay. You'll probably people coming back looking for you because you're not out there. Okay. So yea, I had talked to other people who said well gee sugaring used to just be what you did in the spring. You'd work in the woods for awhile and then you'd sugar for awhile and then it was time to start working in the fields and it was just part of the farmer's year.

HM Yes, well that's true.

MK How has it changed, how is different now than it used to be?

HM Oh, there's more specialization now. The dairy farmers used to make a little sugar, maple syrup and sugar in the spring as a side line and nowadays because of, of the milk market, the milk situation being what it is, they can't afford to take on too many side lines because they have to produce milk in such large quantities nowadays to get by that they can't have any, take on any side lines.

MK Yea, it's interesting. So instead of it being a piece of farm income, how it paid the taxes or whatever...

HM That's right.

MK ...now maybe farmers do it just, just to have enough for their own use maybe if that even.

HM Some of the dairy farmers still make some maple syrup. Most of those people use burn oil instead of wood for fuel, for the sugaring.

MK Because it's easier or?

HM Well because they don't have to spend a lot of time putting up a big wood supply for sugaring.

MK What about in terms of how, how the sap is collected, has that changed?

HM It's changed a great deal. We, during the time when I was growing up and most of my lifetime we used sap buckets and we had to go from tree to tree to gather the sap. Early in the season we'd have to go on snowshoes and it's very, very time consuming and now we use plastic tubing, a network of plastic tubing that goes from tree to tree and we, one man can do the labor of three or four.

MK Does that work as well if you got fairly flat land? Do you need to be a hilly, a hillside location to have the tubing work really well?

HM We need to be a hillside location, but Vermont is not flat as you know and it just falls right into place. It's a natural for Vermont. Some sugar makers even use a vacuum system on the tubing lines, but and they can get even more sap from the trees doing that, but they still need to have the tubing lines on an incline.

MK When you were a child, do you have memories of, of being a really little kid and being out in the woods collecting the sap and/or tapping the trees?

HM Well I even started boiling the sap. My father had a, very small evaporator just outside his dairy barn where he was doing chores, taking care of the cattle and I was hardly old enough to look over the edge of the pan of the evaporator and he would be inside the barn doing, doing chores and I remember particularly it happened the first of April, when I was doing that, that I had to play an April Fool joke on him and I said everything was just working fine, evaporator was going beautifully and I started yelling, Dad, Dad, the evaporators burning down and he came out of the barn and I just did it as an April Fool joke, but he didn't appreciate the April Fool joke and I think I had a trip to the woodshed.

MK That was quite a serious joke you played?

HM Yes.

MK How volatile is maple syrup, I mean the sap as it is boiling? How quickly does it change from just boiling along calmly and evenly to really, to flashing up or getting out of control?

HM As it gets near the syrup stage it starts to boil up. It boils differently. The bubbles get larger and that's when sometimes we have to use just a little bit of some kind of

grease to knock it down, we usually use butter, nice Vermont Dairy butter and just an infinitesimal speck of that will melt down that boiling instantly.

MK Why, do you know? Why does that?

HM I don't know.

MK Just a clinical thing happens?

HM Bust the bubbles.

MK Do you need, do you need to be unhooked for a second?

DM No, I guess not.

MK This is all edittible, so anything you need to interrupt you know, _____.

DM No I don't think Sally wanted anything very important.

MK Okay, she should feel free to holler if she does, so. (LAUGHING) It's real interesting. I was reading some place, oh I know, Noel Perrin has a little book on sugaring.

HM Yes.

MK And I think it was, it's either in his book or another one that I was reading, it talks about how some real _____ sugar makers could tell whether a true, whether the syrup was coming from a hillside that faced to the south or whether it faced to another direction or you know, they could tell various things about where the syrup was made just by the taste.

HM Yes, every, every, every tree is an individual and every sugar place has a little, makes syrup that has a little bit different taste. Some of the maple inspectors in Montpelier have developed fine enough taste buds so that by tasting a sample of some syrup, they can pick out that taste, that sugar place from hundreds of sugar places in Vermont, pick out that one.

MK That's amazing. It's really, that's incredible you know, just real interesting.

DM It is.

- MK It's fascinating. It's got such, there's such a lore to the whole idea of sugar making and such, such a, I mean you say maple sugar and people say Vermont you know, I mean it's, maple syrup and Vermont just do seem to go together.
- HM Yes.
- MK My five year old goes to a preschool on Culver Hill in Middlesex and they do just a backyard sugar operation. I mean they still collect in buckets and they just boil down basically and I guess that's for their own use. I don't think they really sell any, but they took the kids out of course and showed them how, you know, how to tap the trees. They gave them a taste of the sugar water and the sap as it was dripping and all this and my son came home that night and he said Mom, let's go maple treeing.
(LAUGHING)
- DM That's cute. (LAUGHING)
- MK He was so into it. In fact, we brought him over along with his little brother and some friends when you were doing your sugar on snow back in March and he was the one who just stood there in the sugar house and stood there and stood there and watched. He didn't say anything, he just watched and watched.
- DM That's pretty nice. They _____ their own new terminology. We have a lot of little school kids come here and then they send us cute little thank you pictures and notes and one made a picture of a maple tree and underneath it he wrote this is the tree we saw sapping.
(LAUGHING)
- HM Just as long as they don't call us sugar makers saps.
(LAUGHING)
- MK I don't think they will. That's great. That's wonderful. Let's see what else did I want to ask you about. Are you, I've been reading in recent years about that the trees are declining, or that they are having a lot of problems with disease and acid rain and various things that are affecting the sugar tree, the maple tree population generally. Are you noticing that change in your sugaring?
- HM We have been alarmed by some, some maple decline in certain areas of Vermont. We know that acid rain is for real and that is doing damage in some, some parts of the country and we're sure it is in Vermont. I think more serious damage in some parts of Quebec, but I think that

sugar makers becoming aware of the fact that maybe we need to mend our ways. Maybe we have tapped the trees, put too many taps in the trees. We have drilled too deep in the trees and we're just trying to, to mend our ways and to take care of those maple trees better.

MK It's interesting to hear you say that, because as I was starting to read up on sugaring a little bit after my son got so interested, I went out and got some books and started reading about the history of sugaring and reading about how the indians used to tap the trees and how the early _____ with just a gash you know, a big slice.

HM That's right.

MK And then of course within a few seasons the trees would die.

HM Yea. That, that was back when people were cutting down maple trees to get rid of them to try to clear their land. Maple trees were an ongoing resource. They just didn't worry about taking care of maple trees. Now we better be thinking about doing just that.

MK That's interesting. I notice there is a pattern of sort of abusing the tree.

HM That's right.

MK But it's produced so well anyway. That's wonderful. I'm going to let you go if you want to, need to go attend to anything.

HM Uh huh.

MK I just wanted to ask whether before I do that, whether there's anything that you would like to say about sugaring that I haven't ask you about?

HM Oh, just, just a gut feeling that I have that Vermont is a, has made a great name for itself as a, in the maple business as a maple state. And I think that's just wonderful. Sugaring is done all over the State of Vermont, a geographical and quadratic conditions are just right for maple sugaring and I just hope that we can do things right and hang onto that maple image because it's wonderful for us and wonderful for Vermont.

MK Thank you. Do you have a couple of more minutes?

DM Sure.

MK Okay. Just see which one of these is hooked up to. There I think you're still hooked up. Okay. I'm going to manage to tangle this all in knots yea I know I am. You run the sugar on snow here, um a few times a season or couple of times a season usually or?

DM We, as a whole run it yes, but I personally don't do much about it. We have other girls who help yea.

MK I guess _____.

DM Well I know how to run it, put it that way, but I guess I'd rather talk to people out front than to be out here cooking.

MK Sure, that's nice. It's such a, do you know, you didn't grow up in a family that did sugaring on its own?

DM No, but of course all the kids in the neighborhood tapped the trees and cooked a little teaspoonful down on the back of their stoves. So we knew where maple came from and how it was done and all that, but.

MK Do you remember sugar on snow parties from when you were a kid?

DM Oh sure, yea. I guess sugar on snow parties have always been with us in the State of Vermont.

MK Were sugar on snow parties a bigger part of the sugar season, the syrup season when you were growing up same as they are today?

DM I think, I think they were a bigger part up here in the northern part of Vermont than they were in the southern part of Vermont and when I came here to teach, oh sure, it was the accepted thing to have a sugar party every time you turned around. But I guess now since people are selling more of their syrup rather than just using it in their home, they don't use so much for neighborhood sugar parties as they used to.

MK It's interesting.

DM Also, the sno-cone idea that's come into being kind of, it tends to in sugar parties because unless you catch the people really fast before they start in, they try to mix up their syrup with the snow as you would in a snow cone

and of course in a true sugar party you don't even eat the snow.

MK That's true. When I brought my sister-in-law and a friend of hers over back in March, she kept saying how come I can't get the snow.

DM Yea, that's it.

MK You're trying to _____.

DM Yea, that's right. They all try to do that. Another thing they do if we don't tell them before they leave here. They go home and they try to pour the stuff right from the can onto the snow and you know what that does. It just sinks down in and it's gone forever because they haven't cooked it a little bit thicker.

MK How thick do you have to cook it?

DM Uh

MK I never tried it at home.

DM Half the people around here, Bo could probably tell you there what temperature you cook it to, but all I do is have my little dish of snow handy right beside the stove and then as it cooks, put on a quarter of a teaspoon and as soon as it will stay on top, instead of sinking down in, then it's done, but I'm guessing it's somewhere around 235, 236, 240, somewhere along in there, but it's a lot simpler to just have the dish of snow waiting.

MK Sure. How much of your business here is maple syrup, maple sugar candy?

DM I suppose probably, oh the maple must account for oh, two-thirds of it I would think. I'm, I don't believe I'm too far off on that, but you should ask our son, he'd know exactly.

MK Well I should let you go too, so I don't keep you.

DM That's okay.

MK Is someone trying to flag you down, you just _____?

DM No, I don't know what she wanted. I don't think it, I don't even know who she is, so I don't think it.

MK Oh okay.

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DM I think Sally can take care of.

MK Okay, let me just get a couple of seconds of the sound of the room, which is going to sound really silly I know but.