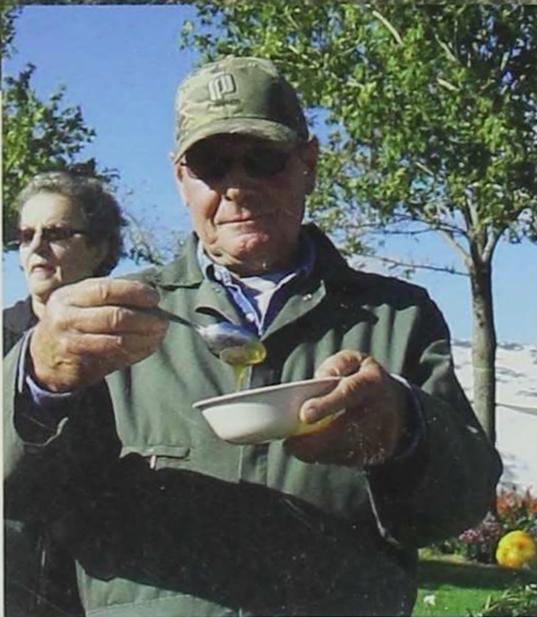




SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Ralph Manternach of Cascade, Iowa, checks the syrup. Top: Farmers in Johnson County decades ago prepare to press sorghum.

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## A Sweet Tradition Endures on Iowa Farms

by Amy Karon

Ralph Manternach knelt by a 6-foot-long, 75-gallon boiler pan set over an open fire pit. He had stirred the pan for hours as its swirling green contents slowly thickened and turned brown. Spooning up the steaming liquid to check its consistency, Manternach grinned. "Nearly ready," he told his relatives, who crowded around to watch and snap photos.

On a damp, chilly Saturday last September on the Manternach farm near Cascade, Iowa, more than a hundred family members gathered—some from as far as Texas, California and Alaska—to take part in a generations-old practice of making syrup from a species of sweet grass called sorghum.

Americans consumed millions of gallons of sorghum syrup during the Civil War, and Iowa made more of the molasses-like product than any other state. Corn and sugar cane sweeteners eventually replaced sorghum syrup on most tables, but each fall in Iowa, hundreds of people still attend sorghum festivals where farmers like the Manternachs keep the old ways alive by sharing this part of their state's heritage.

Until the 1850s, Iowans had two choices for sweeteners—honey and cane sugar, said Joe Anderson, assistant history professor at Mount Royal University in Canada and an expert on Iowa's agricultural history. But bee trees were scarce, and cane sugar was expensive. So when an agent from the U.S. Patent Office visited France

and saw sweet sorghum growing at Verrieres, he took note. The plants' tall, sturdy stalks and attractive brown seed heads reminded him of corn, and he thought sweet sorghum could grow as well as corn did back home.

The agent sent a small amount of seed to the U.S. Patent Office, which grew an experimental crop in 1855. The result was promising enough for congressmen and *American Agriculturist* magazine to mail farmers thousands of packets of sorghum seed in the next several years. In 1858, the Iowa State Agricultural Society also created a prize for local sugar and syrup production.

Farmers embraced the new crop. "I consider it one of the greatest things ever brought into this country," Iowa farmer Reuben



Ellmaker wrote in a letter to his brother Enos in December 1857. "I planted four ounce of seed last spring and we made about 30 gallons of good molasses. . . . I put me up a temporary mill that can run out one hundred gallons of juice per day. . . . You can make molasses enough on one quarter of an acre for your family for one year and use it every day of the year."

By 1860, farmers grew sorghum in many parts of the Midwest, and that year's agricultural census showed Iowa produced 1.2 million gallons, the most of any

**Sorghum Culture and Profit.**—Many reports come to us of success with this important crop. S. P. Jones, of Hamilton Co., Ohio, cultivating like corn and using a good dressing of stable manure, obtained of good thick molasses at the rate of 225 gallons to the acre, which at the retail price there (1.50 per gallon), would be worth \$337 50. . . . Another subscriber has made 5,000 or 6,000 gallons, much of it from cane of excellent quality, but some from green, frosted and mouldy lots, and all purified without the addition of "chemicals." . . . Another reports 14,000 gallons made in the town of N. Haven, Ct. . . . 5000 gallons were made in Meriden, Conn., 3000 in Berlin, 1000 in Southington, and large quantities in New Britain, and in other towns in the same State.

The *American Agriculturist* in 1865 urged farmers to grow sorghum for syrup.



state. Yet farmers consumed nearly all the syrup at home or sold it locally. "Storekeepers would take it as payment, as they did with eggs and pork," Anderson said.

Then the Civil War broke out. Union blockades of cane sugar shipments from Louisiana created a sugar shortage in the North and a powerful impetus for growing more sorghum. Midwestern states produced twice as much syrup in 1862 as they had two years before, and by 1863, Iowa's contribution surged to three million gallons.

The sorghum boom began to stabilize when cane sugar prices dropped after the war. Syrup production continued to rise in the United States until 1880, however, when it peaked at more than 28 million gallons—enough to fill 42 Olympic-sized swimming pools. Iowa alone contributed more than 2 million gallons. At the time, hundreds of Iowa farmers were still growing and processing sorghum. Most,

like Ellmaker, made syrup with their own or a neighbor's small, horse-turned press, but a few used steam-operated mills that produced thousands of gallons a year.

Meanwhile, the federal government was searching for cost-effective ways to make sugar from crops besides sugar cane, which didn't grow well in northern and western states. But after years of experiments, scientists concluded that making sugar from sorghum syrup proved too difficult to be economical. They succeeded with sugar beets, however, and also developed cheap glucose syrup from corn. By the 1890s, sorghum syrup's popularity in Iowa began to fade. "It is doubtful if sorghum ever dominated the enterprises of many prairie farmers," writes agricultural historian Allan Bogue. "A patch of an acre or less satisfied the sweet tooth of most families."

Several factors prevented the development of a major commercial market for sorghum syrup. The plants didn't grow as reliably as expected in the North, and except during times of war or

economic hardship, cane sugar's price never climbed enough to offset the amount of time and labor needed to make quality sorghum syrup. Later generations of Iowa farmers also sometimes spurned old-fashioned foods, Anderson said: "There was a bit of a stigma to that for some people—it was something your parents or your grandparents did, or that you had done when you were poor."

And not only was family size shrinking by the early 1900s, but more people were moving to town, leaving fewer behind to help on the farm. "If you're going to process sorghum, you need to have a big family or you need to have cousins or others to help you," Anderson noted. "And if people are primarily leaving the farm, or if Uncle Dave who used to help now lives in Cedar Rapids or Milwaukee, it becomes a lot harder."

Some farmers did keep growing sweet sorghum through the turn of the century. Katherine Buxbaum, who grew up in Washington County, Iowa, during the 1890s, reminisced about watching



her neighbors make syrup as a child: "Some magic drew us to the open door of the kiln shed, where huge iron pans . . . set over the fire of the brick stoves. Stationed by the pans were [the farmer's] sons, armed with long wooden paddles, stirring the thickening syrup. . . . We stepped across the threshold from the slight chill of a September night into warmth, fragrance and Rembrandt tones of color. . . . The rhythm of the paddles as they moved to and fro through the rich brown syrup made a kind of wordless music."

**A**lthough the Manternachs don't recall what year they started growing sorghum, Ralph Manternach's oldest sibling, Florence Schockemoehl, who is in her late 80s, remembers her grandfather using a roller press to extract juice from his crop. Later during the Great Depression, Florence and Ralph's father used the press. "The syrup kept 10 years in a cool

place. When we were running low, we'd plant more sorghum," Schockemoehl recalled of her childhood in the 1930s.

Syrup production resurged in Iowa during the Great Depression, said Mike Witmer, agricultural programs and collections manager at Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa. "My grandfather really liked the heavy molasses taste," Witmer said. "People who lived through the Depression either like it now for nostalgic reasons or can't stand it because they ate so much; it was all they could afford."

After World War II, a decrease in farm labor caused production to plummet. But the syrup remained a specialty product for Iowa families like the Manternachs. When Ralph Manternach was a boy in the 1940s, his father grew about two acres of sorghum each year to support a growing family. On crisp autumn mornings and again after school, Ralph and his siblings helped harvest and process the crop. "We were still doing all our other chores too. We were milking

cows by hand at the same time," he recalled.

**T**he family made about 250 gallons of syrup in those days, consuming about 25 gallons themselves and selling the rest to relatives and neighbors. "My dad cooked sorghum for most of a week," Manternach said. "My mother had many recipes. We put sorghum in milk and stirred it with a spoon. We put it on pancakes, and my mother made cookies from it. We put it in pork and beans."

But the annual ritual ended when Ralph and Florence's mother became terminally ill in 1956. It wasn't until 1979 that Ralph and his wife, Rita, decided to reunite their now-dispersed family by dusting off the old iron press that had sat unused in their barn for more than two decades. The event was such a success that three more sorghum festivals followed. About every ten years, relatives from all over the United States travel to

PHOTO BY PAM OCKENFELS



The syrup is strained one more time. After cooling down, it's ready to be enjoyed.

Ralph and Rita's farm to see each other and take part in a generations-old tradition.

To prepare for the 2010 festival, Ralph and his brother Larry used a machine planter to sow half an acre of sorghum seeds in May. In late June, local family members cultivated, weeded, and thinned the rows, and in July they weeded again and pulled suckers (offshoots) from the sorghum plants to keep the sugar

concentrated in the main stalk. In early August, ten relatives weeded for the last time.

Processing seven-foot-tall sorghum plants takes skill and hard labor, much of it by hand. On Thursday before the big reunion weekend, dozens of family members arrived to help harvest. Men and women stripped the leaves, sliced off the seed heads, and cut the stalks with corn knives.

They piled the cane in a wagon and hauled it to the sorghum press. Then they dug the fire pit. The work—punctuated by jokes, conversation, and a lunch of grilled hamburgers—lasted all day.

On Friday, the Manternachs began making syrup the way they had for decades. One man hooked a John Deere tractor to the press's wooden sweep (or lever) and drove in circles around the press while Ralph's identical twin, Joe—dressed in a striped railroad cap and overalls that matched his brother's—fed a few stalks of cane at a time between the press's two iron rollers. As the tractor wheels turned, so did the rollers, squeezing sorghum juice into an old metal bucket. A horse had turned the press in Ralph's father's day, harnessed to the sweep and walking in circles.

The family then strained the juice into the boiler pan and cooked it down over the fire. Cooking sorghum juice takes particular care. If removed from the fire too early, the syrup will be thin and susceptible to mold. Stirred too little, it will stick and burn. And if impurities aren't removed it's inedible.

Six hours passed as Ralph, Joe, and other family members skimmed the pan, fed the fire, and traded stories. Again and again Ralph checked the syrup's temperature and consistency. When it had reached 224 degrees he deemed it ready, and four men lifted the pan off the fire pit. At the house they strained the syrup into a whiskey barrel to cool before draining it into glass jars. One batch of syrup—about 18 gallons—was finished.

The Manternachs made a second batch on Saturday, when a

buffet of chili and chicken noodle and kielbasa soups provided respite from the afternoon's chill drizzle. And Sunday dawned clear and warm. Ralph and Rita rose at 4:30 a.m., for this was the day they'd invited the community to come watch them make syrup—and sample the results.

The day's first batch of sorghum juice was on the fire by six o'clock. At noon, the Manternachs served four hundred people a lunch of sausage, pancakes, and sorghum syrup. The second batch came off the fire at 8:30 that night, and family members bade good-bye bearing bottles of sweet amber syrup.

"Just being with everybody

else, that's my favorite thing. Just having all of us together," said Ralph's sister Florence Schockemoehl of her fourth sorghum festival. "The children have gone so far away."

It's no small feat to organize an event for hundreds of people, said Rita Manternach, 72. But she and Ralph enjoyed the work and felt satisfied to have shared a practice that was part of their lives for so long.

"I like doing that for people," she said. "That's part of me."

Like other sorghum farmers his age, Ralph knows he won't be able to play a central role in making syrup a decade from now. Whether the tradition continues

depends on the next generation—in Ralph's case, his sons, who farm nearby.

"I tell them it's up to them if they want to do it," Ralph said. "They have ten years to think about it." ❖

*Amy Karon is a freelance writer living in Madison, Wisconsin. Her mother's family is from northwestern Iowa, and she fondly recalls childhood visits to the churches and cornfields of Newell, population 838.*



PHOTO BY PAM OCKENFELS

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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