

French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

ARTICLE TRIMESTRIEL QUARTERLY ARTICLE

HIVER / WINTER 2024



Maple Syrup-Making Season on Île Ducharme, Québec

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer


French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

Mission Statement: To foster a greater understanding of the rich history and heritage of French-speaking people who helped form what is now Minnesota. Website: fahfminn.org YouTube: FAHF Minn



Le temps des sucres!

March was always an exciting time in my family. As soon as the nights were below freezing and days were warmer, we would head to the Berthier Islands and journey to the sugar shack. It was time to make maple syrup. *Le temps des sucres!* For a long time, for me it meant playing outside with my cousins and waiting to pour syrup on my pancakes. The best kind of day!

My paternal grandparents had a farm and raised 12 children. They were busy year round, but they had a little bit of *free* time each March for syrup making. The cows were giving birth and feeding their calves. There was still a lot to do on the farm, but my grandfather wasn't milking his cows three times a day. As soon as they were old enough, my aunts and uncles would go to the sugar shack with my grandparents and great-grandfather. After two to three weeks of going to the shack daily, they would have enough maple syrup for the upcoming year. [Fun Fact #1: Québec produces 90% of Canada's maple syrup and 70% of maple syrup production worldwide.]



**Canadian maple syrup bottled on
Île Ducharme, Québec.**

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer



The Cournoyer family sugar shack on Île Ducharme, Québec.

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer

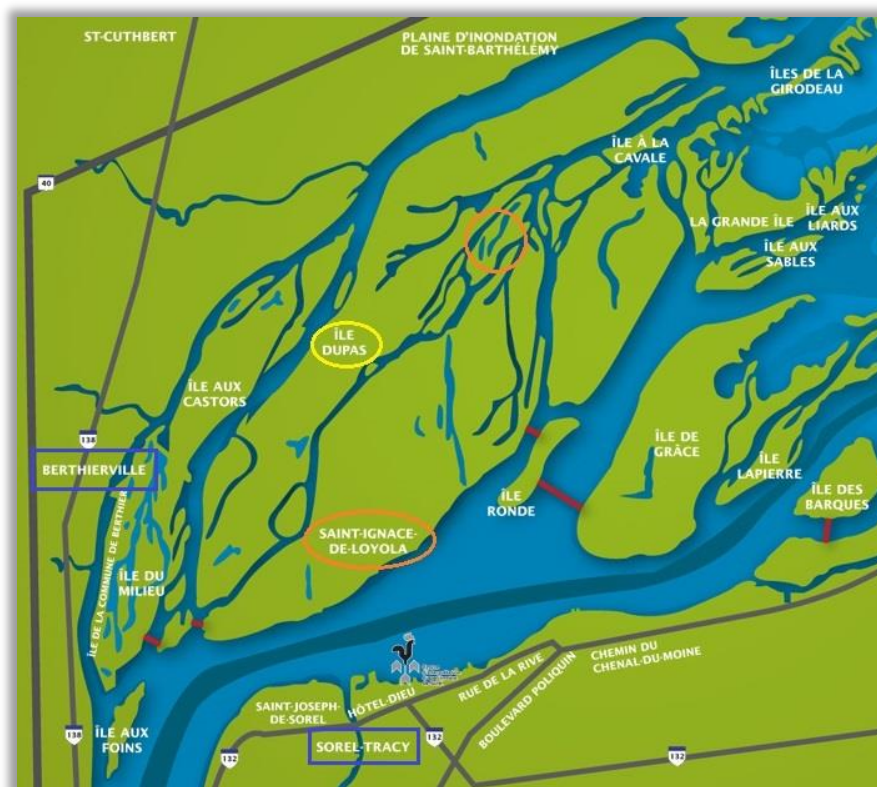


Three-year-old Laurence with her grand-papa Bernard in 1990.

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer

My first time there was in 1990 when I was three years old. Over the years, I built fewer snow forts while waiting to eat maple taffy and spent more time actually helping out and learning how to make it.

The syrup is being made almost the same way it was when my *arrière-grand-père* Joseph and *grand-papa* Bernard started in the 1930s. They were first using an empty hay barn to boil the syrup and eventually purchased a shack in 1948. My grandparent's house is on an island called *St-Ignace-de-Loyola*, and the shack is on another, *Île Ducharme* (orange circle on map below). They are part of the archipelago of St. Pierre Lake, a delta of the St. Lawrence River, with the Islands of Berthier to the north, and Islands of Sorel to the south. It is approximately 45 miles northeast of Montréal. [Fun Fact #2: Jean-Baptiste Faribault, fur trader and early settler in Minnesota, was baptized in 1775 on *Île Dupas* next to *St-Ignace*.]



Archipelago of St. Pierre Lake

Image from <http://www.survoldulacsaintpierre.com/survold/html/francais/printemps/navigation.html>

St-Ignace is accessible by car but not *Ducharme*. This meant we had to cross a small river that was usually frozen. Because we didn't want to chance the ice breaking under our feet, we would use a jon boat, (a small utility boat), and then have my aunts and uncles on each side to glide it on the ice. If they heard a cracking sound, they would jump into the boat! Of course, anyone too young was sitting in the boat from the start and being pushed across. From that shore, there was still more than half a mile to the shack so we would hop on ski-doo's (snowmobiles). At least the adults did. The younger ones (including myself) would be on a toboggan hooked to the ski-doo, next to or on the supplies needed for the day. Nothing like being bounced around sitting on a water jug trying not to fall over. "Tenez-vous bien," my uncle Lucien would say. "Hold on tight!"



The sugarmakers crossing the river with a jon boat (chaloupe) to get to Île Ducharme.

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer

The journey to the sugar shack was half the fun!

Once at the shack, we would start collecting the sap from the 400-ish taps. The lucky ones using the ski-doo just poured the maple water in a plastic barrel hooked to it and would slalom between trees. The unfortunate ones would carry the buckets by hand back and forth. The sap was poured into the metal vat outside the shack.

My grandfather, aunts, and uncles had been tapping the trees at the beginning of the season. There would often be four or five taps per tree when they were big enough. They would do it with a crankshaft by hand, place a metal spile in the bark and hook a bucket to it. Nowadays, using a drill speeds up the process.

From the vat outside, the sap was pumped inside the shack to start heating it up in the evaporator. To make sure we had syrup at the end of the day, we needed to start the evaporator at 10 a.m. Our evaporator is a continuous boil pan with three main compartments. We needed plenty of wood to keep the fire going underneath, so Bernard would chop wood outside several times a day. He was pumping the sap and making sure it was evaporating properly. He also had to get rid of the foam forming on top of the sap in the first compartment. With no lids on top of the buckets outside, we needed to make sure there wasn't any debris, or pieces of wood, in the water.



Wood-burning evaporator with three main compartments.

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer



The old cast iron cook stove in the sugar shack kitchen.

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer

The water was thickening as it was evaporating, increasing in sugar density as it traveled from one compartment to the others with siphons. It would take a few hours for the sap to turn to syrup. The length of time also depends on the size of the shack and how many times the door was being opened throughout the day by a dozen cousins running around.

In the meantime, my *grand-maman* Marguerite would make (***the best***) pancakes for lunch, alongside eggs and ham on the stove. She had brought all the supplies needed for the day, including our drinking water, since the shack doesn't have electricity, let alone a fridge. There is no bathroom either, so we would use the *bécosse* (backhouse/outhouse) nearby the shack.

Around 4 p.m., my grandfather would take a ladle and perform the drip test. If the drips hang, it means the syrup is done. Only he could use the ladle and it always felt ceremonial. I watched him do it many times and still am not sure how he could tell. (Nowadays, you just need a thermometer and wait for it to reach 218-220° F.) When ready, it was time to open the valve of the evaporator and let the golden liquid fill the one to two barrels. To make sure there weren't any impurities, he would pour the syrup onto a *tuque*, a piece of felt, which was filtering the syrup one last time.



The drip test.

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer



Aunt Line, far left, pouring the taffy in 2000.

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer

Before leaving, my grandmother would take some syrup aside, boiling it again a little bit on the stove and preparing the fresh snow outside. It was time for taffy! This probably was the best moment of the day for me and my cousins. We would gather around her as she poured the syrup onto the snow. We used every ounce of patience we had to wait a few minutes for the syrup to harden before rolling it around a wooden tongue (Popsicle stick).

When the sun was setting, it was time to head back to the main house.

Like winemaking, the soil where the maples grow will change the taste of the syrup. On my family's land, the soil is dark, humid, and claylike so the syrup has a darker tint. It is, in my unbiased opinion, the best maple syrup on earth.

I end this article with an easy recipe for anyone with a sweet tooth. It's called *Pain dans le sirop*. All you need is crusted bread, maple syrup, and a little bit of water. Start by adding maple syrup to fill the bottom of a pan on the stove on medium heat and bring to a boil. Add a little bit of water to make it less sticky. Slice the bread a few inches thick, and put it in the pan. It will soak all the syrup and become golden brown. It's like making French toast, using only maple syrup. After a few minutes, put the bread in a Pyrex dish and pour the leftover syrup on top (yes, more sugar). Let it chill a bit (or not) and serve with ice cream. Simple and decadent!



Pain dans le sirop. Bon appétit!

Photo Courtesy of Laurence Côté-Cournoyer

~ Guest Editor Laurence Côté-Cournoyer
French-American Heritage Foundation Board Member