

The Second Mountain State Maple Day Eclipses the First

By Ken Bustin

It's always tough to have an encore that's better than the original performance, but that's just what happened on Saturday in Pendleton County. February 19th's Mountain State Maple Day had been considered a "sweet success" by its organizers, who all hoped for an even better result a month later, but they acknowledged that it was going to be a hard act to follow.

But Saturday's weather, unlike that a month ago, cooperated. It was sunny, warm and mostly calm – perfect for all-day outings. And people responded, showing up in even greater numbers than in February. When it was all over, it seemed to be the general agreement that, overall, the second act had eclipsed the first.

On main street in Franklin, Future Generations University (FGU) – the de facto organizer of the event – had set up an information table. They handed out information, provided directions to the site of the former McCoy Mill, just south of Franklin, there was a slightly different demonstration in progress: FGU was boiling down sycamore sap. After having developed a curriculum around maple sugaring and syrup production, FGU is experimenting with alternatives.

In addition to opening up its production facility for the public to tour and offering maple syrup in various sized containers, Cool Hollow Maple Farm in Sugar Grove

was also operating its cotton candy machine, spinning maple sugar into webs of maple cotton candy, and delighting the steady stream of youngsters who were touring the facility with their parents on Saturday afternoon. Proprietor Rick Harper, in between serving up bags of the sweet confection, took time to speak to the Times reporter about the day, the season, and their operation.

Now in their ninth season of production, Cool Hollow Farm is one of the larger producers in the area, maintaining about 5,000 taps on their property. Harper said he had intended to expand that number, but that time, weather, and the arrival of a new member of his family – son Renner Ross Harper, born February 16th – had left not enough time to do so. But he said by next year, that total would be "at least 7,500." All of their taps are located on their own 136-acre farm.

Once again due to the same constraints which prevented the installation of more taps, syrup production was down – only about 700 gallons. Last year, they did considerably better, making about 2,000 gallons. And next year, he projects, production will be about 2,500 gallons. Usually, Harper explained, they produced about 800 gallons for wholesale. But with the reduced production this year, all will be sold at retail.

To produce all that syrup, Cool Hollow employs a giant evaporator, which dominates the scene inside their production facility. "I



There was lots to see and do around Pendleton County on Maple Day, but since some of the maple producers were far out of town on back roads, in addition to giving out information on their Appalachian Program, of which maple production is a part, Future Generations University's table on Main Street in Franklin also served the purpose of providing directions. Here, left to right, Jenny Totten and Lindsay Kazarick of FGU, and Amber Nesselrodt from the Pendleton County Economic Development Authority – who also operates Sunshine Consignment in the same building – greeted visitors, steered them toward the other attractions, and perhaps sold them some syrup or a cookbook of maple recipes.

tell people it's like a stainless-steel locomotive. When it's running, you can see the steam from the road," grins Harper, gesturing toward the mammoth cooker, which does bear a resemblance to a small steam locomotive. "It's more machine than we really need," he admits, but then adds quickly, "But we figured that it would allow us to get things done more quickly." The evaporator is easily capable of producing 7,000 gallons of syrup, which is Harper's goal for the future. It can produce a 40-gallon barrel of syrup in about 1 to 1-1/2 hours.

Fired by oil, the machine has quite an appetite. "We calculate that it burns about .7 gallon of fuel per gallon of syrup produced," he explains. "We've used about 550 gallons of fuel to produce 700 gallons of syrup."

Harper said that they had enjoyed a steady stream of visitors on Saturday. "I'm having a wonderful day," he beamed. "I've met a bunch of great people today," he said, adding, "It's really great to not be needing [COVID] masks, and to start getting back to normal."

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Pendleton County Chamber of Commerce Director, Ciara Lambert, rated the day a good success. Speaking to the Times on Monday, she observed, "Saturday proved to be a beautiful day to get out and enjoy all things maple, and Pendleton County seemed to be 'hopping,' to say the least. On all sides of the county, patrons were out and about, enjoying the beautiful weather and making their rounds for some farm fresh liquid gold – stopping along the way for some delicious eats and freshly-made maple doughnuts. I personally started my day with a maple doughnut – or two – and ended it with homemade maple marinated salmon. I am excited to see the response to the recent Maple Days activities within the county. I can only hope we can build off of that momentum and continue not only agri-tourism events within the county, but also further farm-to-table discussions in the near future.

Luke Taylor-Ide, director of FGU's Appalachian Program, under whose auspices the event had been planned and organized, summed it up with unequivocal enthusiasm:

"Mountain State Maple Days 2022 was a tremendous success! Great weather on Saturday and ideal spring sugar-making weather conditions, created the perfect formula for success. It was a great opportunity to come out and experience the sugar-making process firsthand, so it was great to see so much interest. The addition of so many restaurants and businesses was a really fun addition that certainly lifted participation. It will also hopefully lead to ongoing sales and demand for local syrup. Reports are already pouring in about the buzz that this year's

maple season created for both producers and customers. Future Generations University and the WV Maple Syrup Producers Association would like to thank everyone who came out for Mountain State Maple Days 2022. We would also like to remind anyone who missed it that you can find your nearest participating sugar-shack online at www.wvmspa.org/our_farms."

Laura Brown, Pendleton County Economic Development Authority (EDA) executive director, Laura Brown, also expressed her satisfaction with the outcome of the event:

"Credit goes to Future Generations for their role in making Maple Days a success – twice! We heard from some local producers who once again echoed the success of the February Maple Days. With a county as rural as Pendleton, it's crucial to utilize every opportunity we can to support our local economy and businesses. The EDA was happy to give support to FGU with everything their organization is doing in Pendleton County to support agri-tourism and we look forward to getting together with their team, post-Maple Days, to brainstorm for Maple Days 2023."

That the events are gaining in popularity and garnering more notice was evidenced by Saturday's event having attracted the attention and participation of West Virginia Department of Agriculture Commissioner Kent Leonhardt and Deputy Commissioner Joe Hatton, both of whom were touring sites of producers and vendors in different areas. Leonhardt put in an appearance at Heasley Homestead Maple in Bruceton Mills, while Hatton was scheduled to make a variety of stops in Pocahontas and Pendleton counties.



Though maple products were the predominant feature of Maple Day, its dominance wasn't absolute. FGU was using a "rocket stove" to boil about 20 gallons of sycamore sap down into what would become, when finished, about one gallon of syrup. Here, Luke Taylor-Ide, the director of FGU's Appalachian Program, tops off the pan with a bit more sap in Saturday's live demonstration of the syrup-making process at the site of the former McCoy Mill in Franklin. Sycamore trees, which are plentiful in the area, also produce sap which can be used in combination with maple. FGU's Appalachian Program seeks to help local farmers and landowners find sustainable and profitable ways to use their land responsibly.