

Everything Old is New Again

Kevin Sittauer

Local history dates the sugar shack back to 1945 or so, when the sugar rationing of WWII left the sweet-toothed brothers without their fix. The current shack is actually the second to house syrup activities (the first burned under "suspicious circumstances"). While the shack itself is far from new, soon there will be a new space specifically set up for interpretive environmental education.

The sugar shack is the home of the maple syrup season activities and almost a seasonal home of sorts for those involved in that activity. It hosts quite a range of people, from pre-school students and University students to retired types and the faithful daily appearance of 90-year-old wood-splitting Father Fintan Bromenshenkel, OSB. This year a decision was made that our "home" needed remodeling to handle the burgeoning throngs of inquiring minds.

When I heard about it, my tough love side questioned it. "Shouldn't these school groups experience the cold reality of maple syruping? I mean, they don't have to sit out on a wet bale of hay in the 45-degree rain of March listening about the virtues of tree sap for *that* long." I thought this as I opened the doors of the wood stove to stoke another load in the 700-degree oven under the cover of the shed. I suppose that's why I'm not in charge of the education program.

It's hard to think about taking on a project like this without some confidence in your workers. Then again, you'd be foolish to put it off when you have the broad background of experience like that at the Arboretum. Sarah Gainey tapped retired construction supervisor Bill Mock for the job rather easily. Seems Bill was feeling a little pressed in the confined space of the current evaporator shed. Having grandchildren of his own, he felt as nervous as anyone when the young visitors were getting

the tour around the wood-eating, fire-breathing, steam-belching beast. Sarah had broader intentions than just safety, of course, and Bill is (sometimes) a softy.

A concrete pad that doubled the size of the building was poured in 2007. After the 2008 syrup season was finished (and what a year it was), the rest of the building was laid into with gusto. With the help of a long list of volunteers, the old roof was removed, rafters were torn off, and new trusses were nailed in place. It took quite a few more work sessions led by Bill and Brother Walter Kieffer to get the roof and siding on, windows and ceiling in, and garbage cleaned up.

Of course, a new building just wasn't enough. Harnessing the momentum of the volunteers, they started on the wood shed. Using leftover materials, a new roof was put over the outdoor storage area, ensuring another generation of leak-free protection for buckets, firewood, the tractor, and other Maple Syrup Festival equipment.

None of this could happen without the wide spectrum of volunteers. Every acorn that falls is a potential oak tree, but it takes care and nurturing for the potential to be reached. The "idea people," the visionaries, see a tree where there is only grass. They have

both the responsibility and drive to keep these projects moving forward. The benefactors provide the seed. Donlar construction and Larry Schwietz stepped in to provide lumber, trusses, and roofing. The supervisors plant the seed. Bill and Brother Walter knew just where to put it for optimum growth. The workers water the new seedling and prune it through its life to provide for others. This is the longest list of volunteers, and it is ever growing.

So now that we've had our chance to stop for a bit and look back at our new achievement, we can congratulate ourselves and everyone else while we admire our handiwork. More importantly, it is also time to move forward. Put in the finishing touches, plan the next Festival, and get the inquisitive minds of children out to the woods where their early contact with nature will inspire deeper love and greater care for the future of our planet.

Kevin Sittauer is an Arboretum member, friend, and volunteer. Just like Bill, he is sometimes a softy, too – although he will only write newsletter articles if you ask "pretty please."



Photograph by Monica Bokinskie

Renovation of the sugar shack goes forward thanks to our many volunteers, especially Steve Saupe, Brother Walter Kieffer, and Bill Mock.