

# Laurel Fork Sapsuckers

*A Case Study By The Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network*

## BACKGROUND AND TRAINING

Laurel Fork Sapsuckers grew out of a family-owned farm that began 70 years ago, when Missy Moyers-Jarrells' grandparents purchased 600 acres of woodlands and pasture in Hightown, Virginia. They raised sheep and made maple syrup. Their son, Ronnie Moyers, created a lumber business (Moyers Logging), and raised sheep. Tapping maple trees took a back seat until about 2011, when Ronnie and his daughter, Missy, decided to revive the maple syrup operation.

Maple syrup had once been widely produced in Highland County, but few people were making it there by the beginning of the 21st century. Intent on reviving an important aspect of local forest heritage, Ronnie interviewed dozens of elders to capture their memories of what maple sugaring was like in their youth. He then thinned out a grove to enhance conditions for sugar maples, retrieved his parents' old buckets and equipment, and tapped twenty-five trees. It quickly became a community event as people stopped by to talk and share their own memories of making syrup and the many ways there are to use it. Ronnie decided to build a structure to store and process maple sap (commonly called a sugar camp), and named the operation "Laurel Fork Sapsuckers" after Laurel Fork – the stream flowing through the farm, and the yellow-bellied sapsucker, a species of woodpecker (*Sphyrapicus varius*). The camp, which has grown in capacity over the past eleven years, is a shared project of Ronnie, his two daughters, his son, and his grandchildren. It is commonly known that the sapsucker, seeking to satisfy its need for insects, taps holes in the back of sugar maple trees, the sap attracts insects, and which they return to eat. There is a resonance between the lure set up by the sapsucker, designed to attract insects, and the sugar camps that



"I had a vision. I've always wanted to do this. To actually build a sugar camp. And I told the family, I said, 'I think if we build a sugar camp and invite the public to come see the farm, during the maple festival, it would be nice if we could get maybe 200 people to come up.' The first year on the first day we had over a thousand people."

—Ronnie Moyers

open to the public each March, drawing thousands during the Highland County Maple Festival.

## CULTURAL VALUES AND MEANINGS

The sugar camp is motivated by love of the land and its cultural and historical legacies, and by a desire to demonstrate, through educational outreach, possibilities for making a living stewarding woodlands. The aim, said Ronnie, is not to keep growing bigger and bigger, producing more and more maple syrup, but to make enough to pay the taxes on the land, and to build community around the production of maple syrup. What they hope to grow is greater public awareness of sustainable forest-based livelihood opportunities in the region. They have opened their farm to the public for a variety of uses, including as a venue for camping and weddings.

The land has been in the family for three generations, with the fourth generation now helping with work. The names for places on the farm are thresholds to its history. Ronnie Moyers' hope is that in another three decades the farm will be designated as a "centennial farm" - that has been owned and operated as a farm for over 100 years. Ronnie relates the history of those

who used the land as he gives tours and answers visitors' questions.

## ECOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF THE SITES



Missy Moyers-Jarrells, Laurel Fork Sapsuckers Tree Farm, Hightown, Virginia  
(Photo by Mary Hufford)

Ronnie Moyers managed the forest for thirty years, as a forester. He logged his own woods, and also consulted with and logged the woods of other landowners. Prescribing thinnings is a way of shaping the forest, and he was very interested in what worked, and what did not, and why.

One newer part of the Laurel Fork Sapsucker's program is providing habitat for golden-winged warblers. A program organized by NCRS has provided support and technical advice to the Daniels. Reflecting this new direction in forest management, patches of forests have been harvested to provide habitat for warblers.

A key focus of the operation is the management of the sugar maple stand (i.e., thinning) for increased and sustained sap production. The thinning provides openings for non-timber forest products and for regeneration of sugar maple. The farm has actively practiced sustainable forest management - Ronnie and Missy advise other landowners on sustainable forest management. Laurel Fork Sapsuckers was approved for certification by the American Tree Farm Program. In 2018, the farm was recognized as the State of Virginia Tree Farm of the Year. For Missy, who trained in forestry, the knowledge exchange is rewarding, not unlike the participation in the older barter and borrow system that still thrives in the mountains. The farm is busy helping to raise awareness of syrup making, forest management, and non-timber forest products in the understory. It often hosts educational workshops, guided school field trips, and recreational visitors.

“Every day,” Ronnie pointed out, “With my business. . .if I don’t learn something new, I’m not paying attention.” After thirty years, he said, “It’s coming together.”

## FOREST FARMING MANAGEMENT AND PRODUCTION



Harvesting mushrooms in the sugar bush (Photo by Tom Hammett)

The sugar grove occupies 30 acres of the 600 acre farm. The sugar house is located in a clearing downslope of the grove. The sugaring initially made use of the buckets and spiles used by Ronnie's father. They have upgraded to use tubing through which maple sap travels down hill to the sugar house, where the wood-fired evaporator is located, turning the steep slope into an asset for the business.

Ramps are a specialty. Sandy Moyers has developed successful techniques for transplanting and caring for ramp plants - sustaining and expanding the ramp resources at LFSS. She has successfully thinned and transplanted ramps to moist areas on the farm. The ramps dishes are well appreciated, and Missy has developed and sells a very popular ramp salt.

Seasonal gatherings require more labor at some times than at others. The festivals draw thousands of visitors over two weekends every year in March. Most labor is provided by family members; more help is brought in during special events. But some just show up and help. A visitor was so enamored with the boiling and syrup processing that he returns each year to help. Missy travels to give maple syrup talks at workshops and visits schools. She organizes and staffs a maple syrup exhibit at the Virginia State Fair.

## ECONOMICS AND MARKETING

Laurel Fork Sapsuckers stays well connected so it can offer opportunities for agritourism. The Moyers family sugar camp is included as one of 10 stops on the Virginia Maple Trail. A passport designed to encourage visitors to tour several sugar camps, was developed by Mlssy and other producers with the help of Virginia Tech. Highland County has, since the 1950s, been the site of an annual Highland County Maple Festival. Every year on two weekends in March, ten sugar camps open to visitors. And venues in the county offer arts and crafts, music, and food. Visitors are attracted by the maple syrup but also purchase locally produced goods – fabric arts, baskets, carvings, canned goods, herbs, baked goods (maple donuts!), and ciders from heirloom apples. In addition to the Highland County event, Every year Laurel Forks also hosts an apple butter festival in October, and a Christmas fair in December. Laurel Fork Sapsuckers harvests greenery and makes wreaths and other decorative products for sale at the Christmas fair.



Incorporating NTFPs at Laurel Fork Sapsuckers (Photo by Tom Hammett)



LFSS is a member of a regional agritourism program

## FUTURE PLANS



Seasons of the sugar maple (Infographic by Raul Perales)

There are several new products and services being discussed. This year, as in recent years, the maple syrup operation was expanded to include a reverse osmosis treatment. The forest lands will continue to be managed for sustainable timber production, focusing on increasing sap production in the sugar maple stands, and through thinning and other silvicultural practices.

–Written by Tom Hammett

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