



Walnut Acres Foundation News

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Making Apple Butter

by Paul Keene

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In fall 1946, our six old apple trees produced their first crop for us. We were amazed to find the fruit practically insect free. We felt sure that those trees had never been sprayed. Question: what to do with ten to fifteen bushels of precious apples, our first, our very own?

Apple butter had always been a part of wintertime fare in my Pennsylvania Dutch background – a way of saving the fruit for late, delectable use. At a farm sale we had purchased a kettle and tripod. What better than to make our first lot of apple butter on this, our brand-new farm?

We were already cutting our winter wood supply (by hand, no chain saws) because we used only woodstoves then. And so we had everything we needed but a recipe and a fancy name. We tried making small lots from varying recipes until we found one that seemed the very best for our mixture of sweet and tart apples. We used no added sweetening, of course, but found the result so delightful that we have used the same recipe ever since. And the name? Well, because we concentrated the apple flavor in all its deliciousness by boiling off most of the water, we finally settled on Apple Essence. For many years this was the product's official name. In that first year we made a hundred quarts and sold them at a dollar each. How that helped the early coffers – and it also helped us consider seriously the idea of mail-order foods.



Paul with daughters Ann (right) and Ruth, at the outside apple butter boil.

As this is written, our thirty-sixth "apple-essence" season is in progress, but with a difference. We now boil it down with steam, in indoor kettles. The open sky, the scent of leaves, the smoke are gone. We really cannot detect any difference in the wondrous flavor, but our hearts know the difference. Making apple butter in the new way does not do for us what the old-fashioned way used to.

Here is how we used to do it. Sometime before the making, firewood was gathered, split, and stacked for use. Some of the apples had to be made into juice, and so they were taken to the old cider press, where one waited hours for one's turn to get to the business of pressing. Valves and pistons clicked and whistled and squealed on the old one-cylinder gasoline engine that powered the whole complicated system. The more power required, the more the engine chugged. In periods of slack demand, the huge flywheel kept the engine loafing along with only an occasional "putt-putt" to maintain a minimal speed. When power was called for, each explosion of the compressed fuel could be counted, as it burst upon the scene, denoting its tremendous power, background music to a world of pleasurable fulfillment.

At the apple press, children were everywhere. Young maidens and swains cast long sideward glances at one another, shy smiles lighting up blossoming faces. Horses and wagons were tied to all the trees. Bees and yellowjackets had a field day with the pile of apple pomace that remained after the pressing. One suspected that stray insects found themselves squeezed into cider from time to time. Happy banter, smiling faces, philosophical oldsters, a county-fair atmosphere, all made one almost sad to leave when the apples were finally pressed, the heavy barrels full of the most delectable apple juice.

When one's turn came, one dumped the bags or baskets of cider apples into a trough for washing. They were then carried up by an elevator to the top of the press. There they fell into a grinder, which chopped them into bits with a roar, accompanied by much putt-putting and considerable flying about of juice and pieces. The mass fell onto a sticky, soaked square of canvas, held up by a sturdy wooden piece, all surrounded by a wooden form. When several inches of shredded apples had built up on the canvas "pocket" within the movable form, the mass was moved into the press, where tremendous pressure was applied. Again the putt-putting.

The juice leapt from the canvas, running down in all directions to a hopper and then flowing into one's barrel. Three gallons of juice to a bushel of apples was average. When the mass was squeezed dry, the press opened, the pomace was dumped from the canvas, and things began all over again.

Next we prepared the applesauce, first cutting up the sauce apples, cooking and straining them. Then we combined some sauce and some cider in set proportions and cooked and cooked all day long, stirring constantly toward the end, until the proper texture and color were reached. Finally, when finished, the apple butter was placed in the jars and sealed. We often finished late at night, after the little ones had long since taken to their beds. How those jars gleamed on the cellar shelves.



David Thomas 'Daddy' Morgan, with Paul, Betty and daughters Ann (left) and Ruth

I'll never forget the contributions of Betty's father as he held a baby on his hip, in one arm, cooing and singing, and used his other arm to work the stirrer. He spent his last years with us. Surely he stirred something into the souls of those young ones as he completed our joy in the day's work. Remembrances are sweet. Something in all this speaks of the way in which life was meant to be lived. ■