



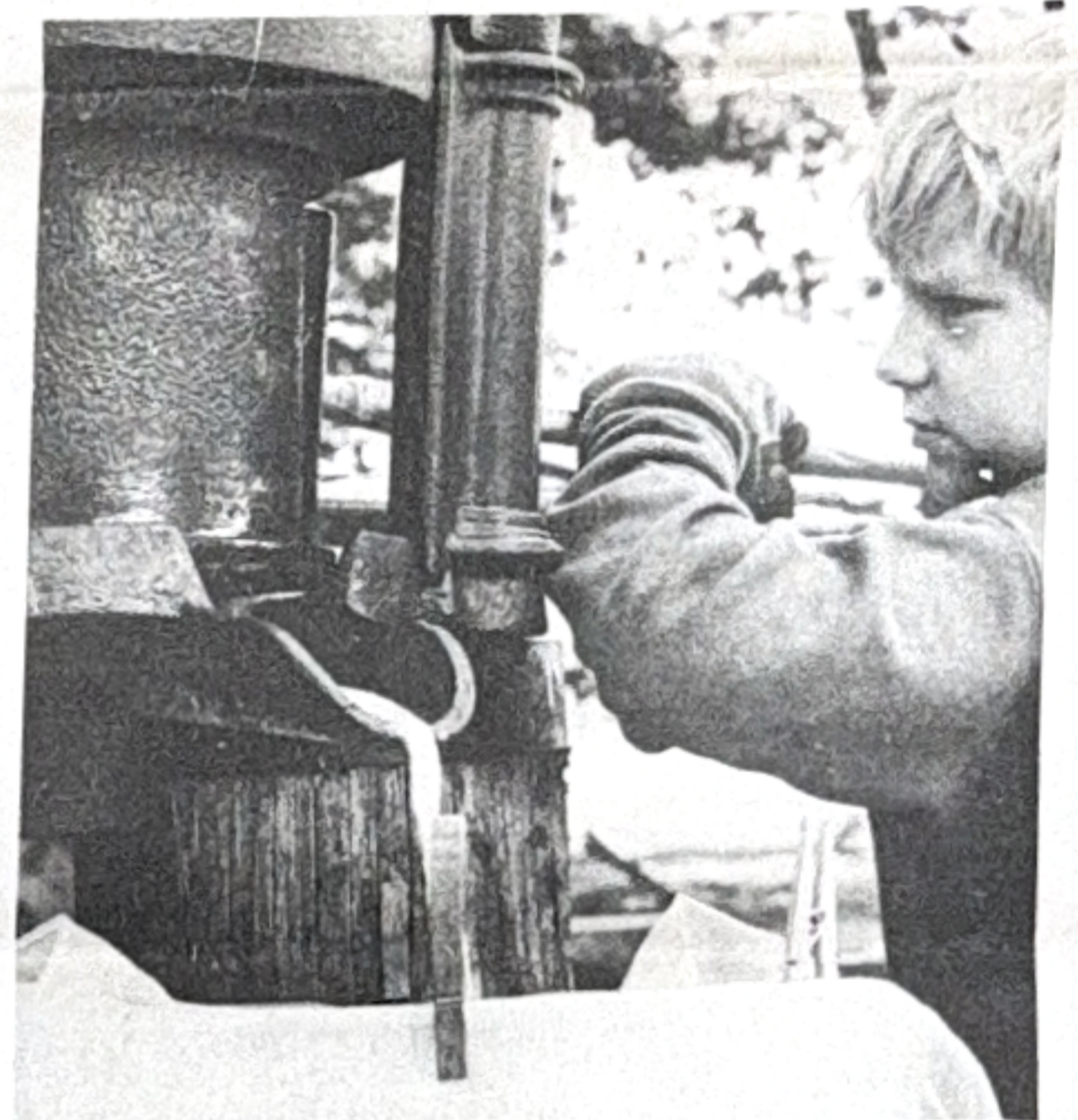
When it's cut...



...the sorghum cane is pressed in this tractor-powered cast iron press....



...and the sap is boiled down into syrup.



Jerry Grieger presses out the juices, too

News-Dispatch
photos by
Jack Meyer

Retiree brings 30-year dream to life

By RITA BROOKS
News-Dispatch Staff Writer

It was a 30-year dream — a dream that finally became reality for Willis Grieger, former Porter County highway supervisor. But it took his retirement years to make it a reality — making sorghum — a past art of the area, now practiced mainly in the South.

Grieger's revival of a family tradition with the antiquated sorghum press, kiln and original cooker and skimmer was set to work over the weekend to produce that molasses-textured syrup popular on pancakes and other foods.

Grieger, a resident of Pine Twp. lives on the family homestead, dating to before 1895 when a large two-story home was built. He is enthusiastic about reviving the family custom. At the corner of Kimmel Road and U.S. 20, he brews a batch of the sweet treat almost daily for onlookers and especially the city folk who have lots to learn about processing sorghum let alone the taste and texture.

Grieger, a tall thin man with a twinkle in his eye and a love of nature and his family, couldn't help but explain his "back to nature" philosophy, exclaiming "It's as good as wild hickory nuts," impersonating Euell Gibbons and pointing to a hickory tree towering in an umbrella-like fashion over his steaming pan of sorghum cane that was brewing over a wood-fed kiln.

It has been 30 years since his family made the last sorghum molasses. The Grieger tradition began five generations ago. Grieger recalls his grandparents, Louis and Pauline Grieger and his parents, Henry and Minnie Grieger, tackling the project annually for farmers in a 10-mile radius — plus their own project.

"My grandparents and folks pressed the cane and cooked sorghum molasses for a percent of the finished project, then took it to town to sell with other farm products for staples not homegrown. He recalled attics that served as meat storage and underground fruit cellars where the old folks stashed away food in squirrel fashion for months ahead. At that time only a narrow road existed south of U.S. 20. Grieger owns 80 acres where on a

small tract on the north side of U.S. 20 he harvested sorghum cane — much to the dismay of raccoons, he quipped. Daily the family watched the raccoons converge on the sorghum—which resembles and smells like corn in early stages of growth. The coons waited anxiously to rob the new formed ears as they did in previous years but the ears never formed. Another family project developed — feeding raccoons.

Only one minor change has occurred in the pressing and processing of sorghum, Grieger said. That is pressing the cane through three interlocking roller-type wheels once turned by one horse and now by a modern 22-horse power tractor.

Stalks of sorghum harvested from Grieger's acreage is fed into the side of a cast iron press which stands in a vertical position. A large log perpendicular to the gigantic iron contraption is turned, pulling the stalks through to the other side and sending the greenish, creamy juices down a spout through cheesecloth and into a barrel. It takes 100 gallons of raw juices to produce 10 gallons of syrup, he said.

Sorghum, mainly a delicacy of the South, is served as syrup, used for cooking, and as children's lollipops. The cane bark was stripped, exposing the fibrous material filled with sweet juices tasting a littler richer than sugar water. A child grabbed one end, and either sucked or chewed the inner layer to get his candy of the day.

Sorghum, an economically important genus of Old World tropical grasses that are sometimes grown for grain and herbage even in temperate regions, is characterized by growth habit and stems resembling Indian corn but have sawtoothed leaves and the spikelets in pairs. The seeded tops are placed where corn tassels would be and they sometimes are used for grains and cereals. Grieger's tops will be salvaged for some seed next year and the remainder tied in bunches for winter bird feed. Press out stalks are often used for cattle fodder and roughage in moderate amounts to add to silage, he explained.

Apparently good sorghum cane and all the leftovers benefitted both animal and man in one form or another.

Brewing a batch of syrup takes patience and a careful eye so it doesn't scorch. Grieger refurbished the old angle iron frame and

a 3-foot-by-8-foot kiln by lining it with concrete block and brick for insulation. Scrap wood from dead trees gathered on his farm, is used to fire the kiln carefully kept at a certain temperature for about six to eight hours until enough moisture has evaporated leaving a molasses texture, golden sweet, (unbitter like molasses) delicacy.

Skimming the top of the cooking juices takes skill, Grieger explained. He said he will probably make a few errors in view of the time lapse involved in the family project. He uses a 10-by-12-inch shovel built in a square fashion, resembling an oversized fire place shovel with a screen covering the upper half of the scoop to filter the foamy material that surfaces as it cooks.

The interest that has generated in his family will continue each year, he said. Grieger and his wife, Myrtle; his sister, Delores Brooks, and her husband, Ralph, along with Roger, Grieger's son, and Roger's family — Sandy, his wife and his children Jerry, 9 years and Steve 10 years, and the baby age 3 — congregate at the end of the sorghum-making day for an old fashioned cookout. They use the remaining fire to toast hot dogs and marshmallows and even follow it with a singalong in the old fashioned campfire manner lost by urbanization in recent years. Delores' daughter, Bonnie, a Monticello resident, and her husband, David Kelly, and daughter, Cindy, try to make one of the cooking sessions for a Grieger family reunion.

Why has such a project been on the mind of a busy man for 30 years? He explains, "I love the outdoors. We grow vegetables, pumpkins and a lot of sweet corn right here in the middle of this urbanized area and we don't want to lose that type of life for anything. It has become a family affair with the grandchildren getting an education, and it has generated enthusiasm and closeness for us which is lost to so many — and besides, I guess I love people and I would like to share my fun-making with the world."

What will they do next as a family project and free demonstration outside to the public? "Make sauerkraut, of course," he said, "just like the old folks did with the old kraut cutter and stomper. And we will have a ball!"