

"The Way It Was"

How Sweet It Was!

What could be nicer than raising and processing a product with so many tasty possibilities?

Grandma and Grandpa Grieger probably arrived from Germany with fond memories of Sorghum, which was looked upon as almost a staple ingredient. We can be quite sure that Sorghum was included in their first attempts at gardening.

I do not know how or where the press, used to squeeze out the juice, was obtained, but I do know that the one being used today is the same one used by Grandpa maybe 100 years ago.

Willis remembers Ma and Pa working with Grandma and Grandpa at the old Homestead making Sorghum. He listened and learned all about the process at an early age. Pa said to plant the seed on sandy soil. This seemed to provide the necessary growing conditions for a better quality and lighter color syrup. It thrived under dry conditions.

The 6 or 8 small seeds were planted in hills 3 feet apart. As the little shoots poked through the soil it had the appearance of corn. Hoeing, weeding, and cultivating came next. The slender stalks grew rapidly and by the middle of summer little bushy tops appeared. Their light green color continued to darken until it took on a speckled brown appearance.

An early hard frost could be disastrous because a long growing season is necessary. About the end of September or early October the next phase of the work began.

The Sorghum pan was taken out of storage, scrubbed, and mended if necessary. The pan used by Pa and Ma, as I remember it, had wooden sides and a tin bottom which extended over the ends. Four iron loop holes at the top near the ends served as holders for the wood poles used to lift the pan from the oven, as the wood burning fire box, was called in those days. This original oven was made of brick. A shelter was overhead for protection from the weather. A peaked tin roof was held up by wooden pole type posts. A pile of well dried and seasoned fire wood was near by to be used for fuel.

After checking the press and testing the long pole which extended over the top, the Sorghum season was about to begin.

Pa's instructions were to start stripping the cane. A lath type stick was used. It was swung up and down between the stalks to knock off the leaves. Soon the patch took on a naked look of tall green fish pole type stalks. Next it was cut at ground level by a whack with the large corn knife. The tops were also removed with another slice of the knife. Only enough tops were saved for next years seed.

Definite orders were for the cut ends never to touch the ground. Sand would stick to them and get into the juice. An experienced member of the family loaded the stalks on a wagon to be taken home. The smooth slippery stalks had a way of slidding out if they were not placed just right.

Large poles laid on the ground served as a base for the stalks as they were unloaded near the press. If two pans were to be cooked in one day, the pressing was done the night before. A gentle older horse was hitched to the long pole and a lead strap to a shorter pole at the other end. A few well spoken words started the horse on an endless circle journey. The large cast iron rollers turned and the stalks were fed into the press, large ends first, a few at a time. The sweet green juice began to flow into a barrel covered with a clean burlap bag to serve as a first strainer.

Early the next morning the juice was carried in buckets to the pan and strained again. The pan held about 75 gallons.

The fire was started and a careful watch was kept to control the heat. As the juice started to boil, a thick green scum formed on the top. This was removed with a skimmer and discarded in a sloo bucket. The heavy skimming continued through the first four hours of the boiling. This could be called the unattractive stage. But then the greenish color began to change to a light brown with golden foam. The pleasant aroma filled the air and anticipation began to build up.

The testing dishes and spoons were brought out and little puddles of syrup were dribbled into them off the tip of the stirring paddle, used in the final stages of cooking. Everyone tasted and commented on the quality. It was sure to be better than last year's. The color was good but sometimes just a little more boiling was needed. Six or seven hours of continuous boiling had elapsed and Pa finally made the long awaited decision that the syrup was done!

The pan was carried off the oven by 4 people and placed on two wooden saw horses, with one end lower than the other. The amber syrup was dipped out and strained into 8 gallon milk cans. The original 75 ~~gall~~ gallons of juice yielded about 7 or 8 gallons of finished Sorghum. The children were always on hand to lick the paddles and scrape the pan. Candy never tasted better and it was their treat for being good during the busy day.

After the Sorghum cooled, it was stored in barrels or stone jugs. The sweet rather thick syrup was used throughout the year for table use and baking. Some was traded for other essentials or sold mostly by the gallon. Some people brought their own 2 quart fruit jars to be filled. When last made by Pa and Ma over 30 years ago, the selling price was \$1.00 per gallon.

The sorghum season lasted about two weeks with cooking every day. When two pans were cooked in a day, the second pan was pressed while the first pan cooked. This meant late hours and tired bodies. Willis remembers laying on a sheepskin near the warm cooker to rest.

A dim light from a kerosene lantern hung from the corner of the shelter after dark. It was never hung or held over the pan. A drip of kerosene could spoil the whole batch. My memories include a more modern version. A small electric light bulb was used after electricity was made available.

Pa and Ma made not only their own Sorghum, but also cooked on shares for other people.

Finally after many many years of this annual routine, Sorghum raising was discontinued. The last of it was made in 1942 when Roger was a baby placed in a play pen near the proceedings. I'm sure he can not remember it and our daughter, Bonnie, was not even born then. I was sure that was the last of Sorghum making for us, never to be revived by our family again. But then.....

How Sweet It Is!

Willis's retirement meant time for him to do some of the things not allowed before. He was going to make Sorghum again in 1974! This seemed almost an impossibility. How could the necessary equipment ever be found or put together again? Time and elements have a way of destroying much of the past.

Little by little Willis dug out or reconstructed everything needed. The press was in good shape and well preserved. A different smaller cast iron pan was substituted for the old one, a new oven was built of cement blocks. The original copper screened metal framed skimmer, resembling a small long handled scoop shovel, was found and he was ready to proceed.

Finding the seed was another problem. It was Spring and time to plant. Finally it was located by a phone call to a seed company in Rockford, Illinois. Our seed catalogs do not include it because it is seldom grown this far North.

The first planting was made and the crop grew and thrived. The whole neighborhood became excited, as this "new" venture was brought into the community. The racoons must have been very upset when the stalks never developed ears of corn, their favorite food.

It seemed everyone turned out to be a part of that first season of something from the past. Willis shared the revival with everyone who was interested in it and opened the cooking process to the public.

The old methods previously described were used with a few minor changes. A tractor is used to turn the press for practical purposes but Cousin Edwin Nicholson's 33 year old horse, Flicka, is still available for demonstration purposes. The tops or seeds are not left in the field. They are cut off just before pressing and saved for bird food or sold by the Grandchildren, to be used in dried arrangements for Fall decorations.

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We are again using that wonderful natural ingredient called Sorghum. It soon replaced the store boughten substitute known as molasses, which we used during the in-between years. The Sorghum season has now become an anual affair, with the work and product being shared by friends, relatives, and neighbors. It is our way of bringing back a little of the past and sharing it with others.

Let's continue to think.....

How Sweet It Will Be!

WELCOME

GRIEGER SORGHUM FESTIVAL

Join the fun and see "the way it was"

Sorghum growing, cut, pressed, and cooked
Samples and recipes of Sorghum products
Sauerkraut making demonstration
Cider making - Yours and ours
Rug making loom
Farm products and home canned goods on display
Old time family treasures and pictures
Swings and activities for the children

There will be music for dancing and listening
David Kelly's German Band "THE HAPPY WANDERERS"

Bring your own picnic lunch. We will provide outdoor
grills, French fry maker, and tables.

If you enjoy yourself, a Kitty bank will be there for
small donations to help pay the band, etc.

PLACE: GRIEGER'S CORNER at
FURNESSVILLE, U.S. 20 and KEMIL ROAD (300E)

TIME: OCTOBER 10, 1976 - MORNING and AFTERNOON
WEATHER PERMITTING



Sweet smell of sorghum sparks Griegers' festival

By DOLORES EMLET

FURNESSVILLE — When Willis Grieger was a young boy at Furnessville, he often watched wide-eyed as his parents spent long fall days reaping and processing sorghum. The little boy often curled up on a sheepskin near a warm sorghum cooker to rest as adults worked feverishly during the two-week sorghum season.

Today Grieger is retired and a grandfather. But through his time and love for people, sorghum making is still a happening at Furnessville.

The annual Grieger Sorghum Festival is a series of weekends to which the whole community is invited. The 110-year-old Grieger homestead on U.S. 20 is the festival site.

Stepping out of your car and onto the festival grounds is like a trip back in time. The pungent smell of sorghum boiling over a wood fire mingles with the tart apples in a nearby cider press.

The sights and sounds are pure nostalgia: neighbors greeting each other with a slap on the back and talk of harvesting; children squealing with delight as they swing on a heavy rope from an ancient tree, or bouncing on bed springs as if they were on the most modern of rides in an amusement park.

Young people sit on bales of timothy hay and watch older couples walking to a German band, the Wanderers. Mrs. Agnes Brummitt sits contentedly as dozens of bystanders watch her weaving on a rug loom of her grandmother's.

There are cider samples in paper cups, sorghum cakes and cookies prepared by the Griegers and their neighbors, recipes, farm products, canned-good displays, sauerkraut making, music and dancing, and everything is free. A quart milk bottle sits on a table should anyone wish to continue, but no one asks anything other

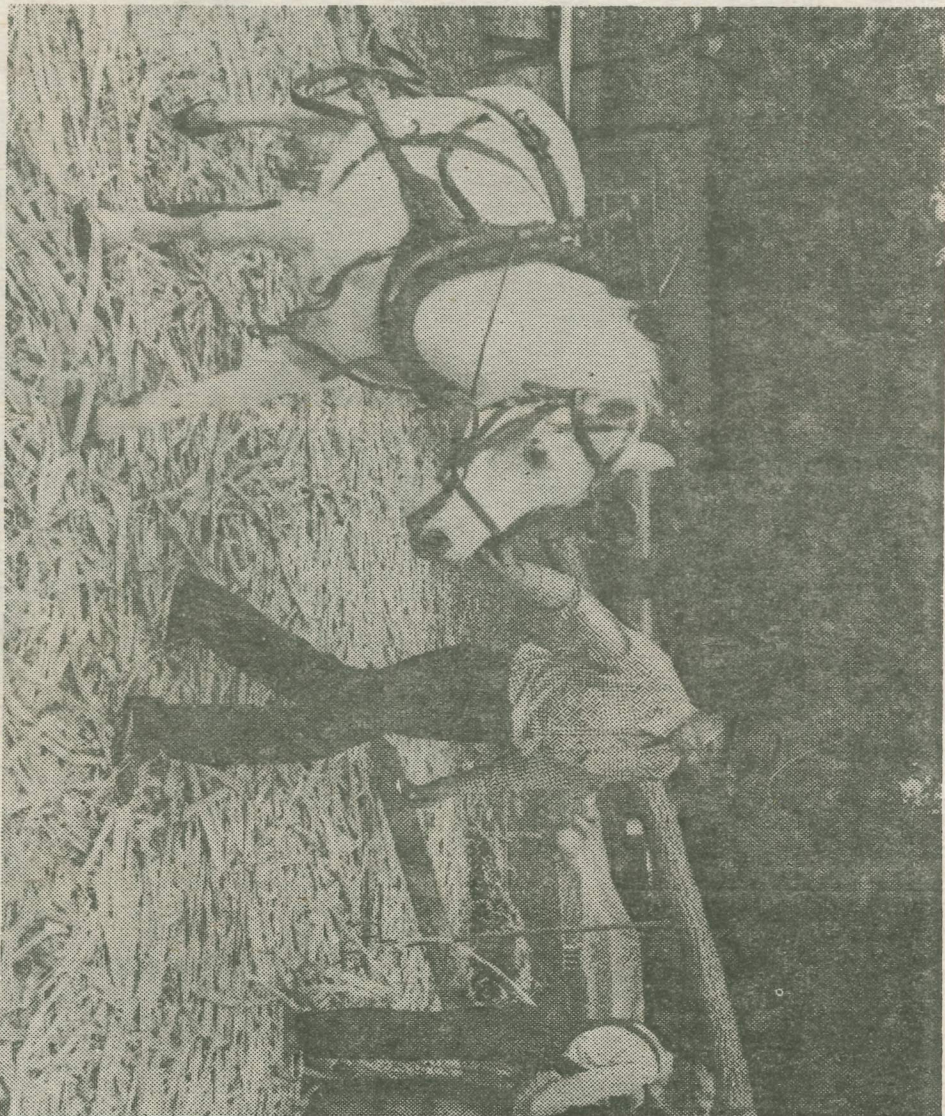
tion is carefully tested, and at last the verdict is given: The syrup is done. Just as in the past, the children are on hand to lick the paddles and scrape the pan of the sweet syrup. When the finished product is cooled, the Griegers ladle it into small baby-food jars and give each family attending a free sample.

The Grieger family's sorghum making declined more than 30 years ago, and the family secret was about to be lost when in 1974 Willis Grieger retired and found time to begin the process again.

With determination, Grieger reconstructed everything needed. The sorghum press was in good shape and well preserved, a smaller cast-iron pan was substituted for the old one, and a new oven was built of cement block. The original copper-screened metal-framed skimmer, resembling a small, long-handled scoop shovel, was found, but locating sorghum seed looked almost impossible.

In the spring of 1974 Grieger finally obtained some seed, and the planting was begun with excitement. The sandy soil provided the necessary growing conditions, and the plant thrived. Dolores Grieger Brooks, Grieger's sister, laughs as she describes the new shoots: "The racoons must have been very upset when the stalks never developed ears of corn, their favorite food."

That fall Grieger shared the revival with everyone who was interested in it, and he opened the cooking process to the public. Each year the festival has attracted more visitors who enjoy the trip back in time and the old-fashioned hospitality of the Griegers, their family and their neighbors.



ONE HORSE POWER — Willis Grieger leads his ancient horse on the circular path powering the century-old sorghum press still in use at the Grieger homestead in Furnessville. The homestead is the site of the family's annual "sorghum festival." Other members of the family

tend the press as the grain is turned into super-sweet molasses. From left at the press are Dolores Grieger Brooks, Grieger's sister; Myrtle Grieger, his wife, and Ralph Brooks. (Staff photo by Bob Jackson)

Festival to continue with special activities