

The Cane Mill

There are few things in life more memorable than a cool morning, sitting on the back porch with a hot biscuit filled with warm molasses and home made butter. That was a perch I normally assumed on Sunday mornings while waiting for breakfast to be put on the table. I was also there to bring in any stove wood or kindling when it was asked for. To be late with that was not a wise thing to do. It was considered a major disaster if the fire in the stove went out or the oven began to cool down, so there I sat. It was a wise place to be, not only that, it kept a lot of limbs on the peach tree. Sometimes I was rewarded with a syrup biscuit for doing it. Not every time, but some times.

It was always a dreadful experience to realize that the biscuit had sprung a leak in the bottom and the molasses had dribbled down the front of my shirt. That would bring on a major tongue lashing at best and a trip to the peach tree if we had company on the way. And this day, we had company coming and they were due any minute. They would be here before we would be able to finish eating, so every thing had to be "ready" for company.

My mother, known around the community as Ms. Pauline, had sliced up a good portion of a sugar cured ham, fried most of that, made a big pot of grits, two pans of biscuits, fried two dozen eggs and made a big pot of red-eye gravy. I think she had made up a big pot of boiled coffee too. She always did on a Sunday morning.

Right after I heard the front yard gate slam shut, I heard our neighbor from up the road, Bob Cotton, call out from the front yard. My dad asked him up on the front porch and the two men began to talk about the nature of life around here in the community. Bob mentioned that he was having a lot of trouble finding good reliable help and that was what he had come to talk about. Bob was offered a place at the table and on was set for him.

During breakfast, Bob announced that he wanted to bring in his sugar cane next week and he needed some body to help him around the cane mill. Wanted to know if my dad thought I would be able to work a full day out there at the cane mill. I do believe that my dad took that as some sort of a back handed challenge and he bellowed, without even looking at me, WHY HELL YES. YOU DON'T THINK MY BOY CAN MANAGE A FULL DAY OF WORK AT A CANE MILL? I choked on my grits & eggs. My fate was sealed when the pay rate was described as "four or five cans of fresh syrup, if ya'll want some". That'll be fine, I heard my dad say. He'll be right there Monday morning, first thing.

My arrival at Bob and Sadie Cotton's house just after daylight was announced by a flea bitten old Walker hound lying on the front porch. He raised up on his front legs and bellowed a long drawn out howl that would make any coon hunter on a moon lit night swell with pride. I noticed from outside the front gate that Bob & Sadie were just getting up from their breakfast table. Sadie was giving Bob his daily dose of direction and Bob was feeling around for his plug of Day's Work chewing tobacco.

He finally located it in his front shirt pocket and wandered out onto the front porch where he beckoned me to come on in. We'll be getting on down to the cane mill in a minute or so.

Bob had a cane mill that was known as a "sweep" mill. That means that it was powered by a mule attached to a long lead pole walking in a circle around the "mill". The pole is attached to a pivot rod which drives a large gear that is locked to the top of one of the two rollers. The mill consists of two opposed rollers closely aligned, about one eighth inch apart. The rollers will squeeze the juice from the sugar cane as the cane stalk is fed in between them. There is a collection chute down which the juice flows into a five gallon bucket.

A really big cast iron kettle, which would hold 55 or 60 gallons of juice was placed over some fire bricks and a hardwood fire was under the kettle to bring the juice to a boil. This process removes the excess water from the juice leaving the natural syrup. During the boiling process the impurities rise to the top and are skimmed off using a broad flat paddle. This is called "skimming". The skimmings are simply discarded on top of the squeezed cane

stalks that I had piled up. The same paddle is used to stir the kettle periodically to prevent burning, in case the fire gets a little too hot. The finished syrup is dipped out by hand using a long handled dipper and poured into one gallon syrup buckets. The syrup is around 200 degrees or so when it is poured into the gallon buckets and the lid is a tight fit. The cooling of the syrup inside the can creates a vacuum which holds the lid on tight and keeps the syrup fresh until the lid is removed.

I noticed that Bob had moved his cane mill to the crest of a small knoll there behind the barn, about sixty or seventy yards above a small creek. Bob had a bunch of Duroc and Yorkshire hogs down there who really loved to wallow in the mud there by that creek, especially in the heat of the afternoon. Turns out that them hogs really loved that creek.

Our day got started as Bob had already brought in four or five wagon loads of cane and piled them there by the mill, but within the path that the mule needed. My job would be to keep the cane going into the mill and make sure that the extruded juice always fell into the collection bucket. We held the buckets with lids clamped on them while the kettle was "cooked off" and was ready for another batch of juice. I noticed that it took about fifty gallons of juice to make three or four gallons of syrup. But if you wanted Black Strap Molasses, that required a little longer cooking and a little more reduction of the syrup. Bob liked the Molasses better than he did the thin syrup.

All in all, the day started and I began to squeeze that cane, fill them buckets, put the lids on them and then pour them into that hot kettle. It was hard work but I was determined to do a good job because it was up to me to make sure my dad was not "put off" by me not being able to work a full day at the cane mill. Fierce pressure.

As the day wore on, I began to pile up the squeezed cane stalks just outside the mule's circle on the side of the little knoll, and just inside the wire fence that kept the hogs out. This activity went on for three days straight until we had cooked down all Bob's cane juice into syrup and Black Strap Molasses.

We had been finished with the syrup making about two weeks when the late summer rains started. As the rains poured down harder and harder, the water began to seep through the pile of crushed cane skimmings piled there on the side of the knoll above the creek. Bob had been a little late in getting a grinder to grind the cane stalks into silage as he normally did. As the rain water leached through the cane stalks and skimmings, it carried with it the fermented alcohol right out of the pile down the hill into the creek. The hogs were now in "hog heaven", or so it seemed.

Hogs being what they are, naturally inquisitive and always hungry, they began to sip the sweet water that came flowing down that hill. Later on that afternoon, here comes Bob scampering down the road towards our house. He stomped right through the front yard gate without stopping and asked if my dad was at home. He was. We all went back up to Bob's place to see what was wrong with his hogs. He was certain that they had come down with "cholera" that very day and he'd have to slaughter ever dam one of them. Said if he waited another day or so the meat would not be "fit to eat". He was totally sure of that.

It was difficult to convince Bob not to start butchering his heard of hogs, but we sort of did talk him into getting the vet out to be sure they had that awful disease before he started to kill them. My dad said that maybe Bob could "get a hold of that young vet that had just come into the community and maybe he could sort out what was wrong with them". Bob lit out for town to get the vet and we went back home.

Later on that afternoon, there came Bob flying down the road as fast as that old '48 Dodge pickup would go with the vet right behind him in his fancy new Studebaker pickup. They turned up the lane to Bob's place and we lit out for there too. We wanted to see about them hogs, just in case we ought to keep an eye on our own hogs.

As we were walking around the barn, the vet had already began his trek down the knoll to the creek where the hogs were wallowing in the mud, grunting and contented as any hog I have ever seen. Some of them were laying on their backs with all four feet in the air, just grunting. Those hogs were rolling over, squealing, staggering and flopping around all over the place. Some of them were even out into the creek, which was over the heads of

most of them, but they had their front feet on the bank with their hind feet in the water.

The vet got about two thirds of the way down to the hogs and he stopped cold, bent down and got a hand full of the seepage water from the hill side. He began to wave that under his nose, looked back at the hogs, up at the hillside and the pile of cane skimmings, stood up and began to slowly walk backup the hill. Some of the hogs began to follow him and they were having a real hard time just walking. Some went sideways, some just sat down and some just gave up and laid down. Them that made it all the way up to the fence just sat down and began to sip the water seeping out of the pile of cane skimmngs.

The vet turned to Bob and said, "Bob, that'll be \$40.00. You can pay me now or I'll just send you the bill, but I have to get on over to the Ben Stone's dairy to help him out with a young cow having a calf". Bob bellowed like a gored bull. Said "Hell, you ain't done a dam thang and now you want me to just fork over forty dollars, just like that? You must be one dumb assed dam vet if you think I'm gonna do something that stupid". The vet calmly said, "Now Bob, you wanted me to come out here and see what was wrong with your hogs. I say the only thing wrong with them right now is that they are just falling down drunk". "They been sipping on this here seepage coming from under them cane skimmings and it's made them drunk. They'll be mean as hell for a day or two but they'll be alright. I'd do something about that pile of cane skimmings though, if it was me". "Might piss off them hogs though".

I just got another rotten job. I learned to hate Black Strap Molasses.....