“Maple Sweet” sung by Margaret MacArthur.

Hello, welcome to VT Untapped, a podcast from the Vermont Folklife Center that explores the state through the voices of its own residents. I’m Mary Wesley and it’s sugaring season! The song you just heard is is sung by Vermont singer and song collector Margaret MacArthur and it describes the signs and scenes of late February/early March in Vermont: “Frosty night and thawy day make the maple pulses play.” The “golden billows” coming from the sugar house as sugar makers boil down sap into maple syrup.

Sugaring is a central part of life in Vermont. Anthropologist Marge Bruchac tells us that the Abenaki people, the indigenous group native to Vermont, called the fourth new moon of the year the “maple sugar-making moon.” The Abenaki were the first people in the place we now call Vermont to boil down sap and make syrup, and they taught European settlers this practice—one unique to North America. Today in Vermont sugaring is an important economic activity and a seasonal milestone that marks the transition from winter to spring—not to mention it’s how we create our best known, homegrown, sweet treat. Along with syrup, candy and other maple products, the seasonal pastime of visiting the sugar house is often evoked as a classic ‘Vermont’ activity for tourists and locals alike. It’s no surprise then that there are songs about sugaring or even that the Vermont Folklife Center might make reference to the activity in the name of its own podcast, VT Untapped! In our case we’re not tapping trees, but our archive, which contains thousands of interviews with Vermonters talking about their everyday lives and experiences. Today’s episode brings you a seasonal selection of audio excerpts from our collection that reflect the sugaring tradition and its prominence in Vermont life across generations.

First let’s return to the opening song - “Maple Sweet,” also known as the “Vermont Sugar Maker’s Song.” It was composed by the Reverend Perrin B. Fiske of Waitsfield, VT in 1858, and it’s a staple in the Vermont traditional song repertoire as documented by multiple song collectors. One of the remarkable things about “Maple Sweet” is that, despite being over 160 years old, it’s still relevant today. The specifics of how we sugar have certainly changed since the 19th century, but the gist—collecting sap and boiling it down—is fundamentally the same. In a lot of ways, it could have been written today.

We opened the show with Margaret MacArthur's version from her 1982 album, An Almanac of New England Farm Songs, but we have our own seasonal tradition at the VFC of asking a present-day Vermont musician to record their own rendition of Maple Sweet. Over the years we’ve received versions from two of Margaret’s children, Dan and Megan MacArthur, as well as Deb Flanders, Amanda Witman and Tony Barrand and Pete Sutherland. This year we’re lucky to have someone participating in our Apprenticeship Program who is studying traditional Vermont
song! Here’s Maeve Fairfax of Burlington. We’re big fans of the refrain around here, so by all means feel free to sing along.

*Maeve singing “Maple Sweet”.*

Maeve is 16 and is apprenticed with Vermont folk music legend Pete Sutherland who made his own recording of Maple Sweet last year! You’ll hear it a little later in the show. To listen to all our Maple Sweet recordings and learn more about the apprenticeship program visit our website at vtfolklife.org/untapped.

*Cello plays.*

Next up you’ll hear a selection of voices sharing memories and stories about sugaring tapped straight from our archive. Since so much of our earlier work focused on rural and farm life in the state--and since sugaring is so intertwined with people’s everyday experiences--the topic of sugaring came up a lot, and is well represented across the collection. Many of the clips you’ll hear are drawn from the extensive research of late VFC folklorist Greg Sharrow, particularly the large body of interviews he conducted while working on our radio series, Never Done: Farm Life in Vermont. These recordings were made in the early 90s, and in addition to providing insight into life experiences, they also document some wonderful, older Vermont accents from around the state. Continuing with our musical theme, think of the next eight minutes as a medley of reflections on the work of sugaring and its sweet rewards.

**Ken Hastings:** “You know sugaring is something that’s really a disease. You either have the disease of sugar or you don’t and it’s something that, you know I can’t explain it. If you like sugaring, you know, and I can talk to people today and you can have a conversation with a sugarmaker that’s totally different than I can have with you, because maybe the knowledge that we both share or the quirks of how the thing goes or ponder, you know, “how do you do that?” Or you know, and sometimes you have secrets and I think maybe you try to make everything seem a secret sometimes, like “I know something you don’t!” But you know, that’s part of the cherished part of the sugar maker community I guess.”

**Unknown:** “Sugaring is something that you’ve got to do it when the weather is right. You have to have sap running in order to tap or else it dries the tree up”

**Unknown:** “They used to have two weeks vacation in the spring, early spring, I think they used to call it sugaring vacation. And I don’t know whether they did it elsewhere or not but up here in East Braintree, they call it the Snowsville School, there were enough children whose parents sugared so that when a farmer thought it was time to start sugaring all he did was call up the teacher and say that he wanted to start sugaring and they had their vacation when they thought that the children could be the most useful in the sugar orchard.”

**Unknown:** “It’s a lot of hard work, of course, it’s the hardest work on the farm. And it’s terribly boring doing the boiling. And terribly hot. It’s physically difficult work. It’s hard work to gather and
there have been seasons when we’ve done the whole season on snowshoes. And to carry big pails of sap with snowshoes and maybe sink down a foot or two in the snow with every step you know that’s just brutal.”

Wallace Illsey: “That’s the most important place to put a horse is in the sugar woods. You just hang your lines up and while you’re gathering sap and they’ll go from tree to tree on demand and you just tend to your gathering and you don’t lug the sap back to them or ahead to them you just stop them right where it’s the most handiest spot to dump the sap. You don’t have to have an extra man just to set there and drive a tractor and freeze to death. Yeah, you can be behind of them or ahead of them. You speak to them to get up and they’ll come. And a well trained horse, the minute you holler “ho” they’ll stop.”

Katharine Flint DuClos: “Dad always had about three pair, and one of them would be a pair of calves, little small ones. And he would let us girls break those so that by the time they got big they would be handy for him. And then we had a sled that in the spring of the year we girls would hitch our little yoke of oxen to the sled and dad put in six big milk cans and we’d go round and gather the sap, bring it down to the sugar house with our little oxen and he’d go out and dump it into the big tank and we’d go and get some more.”

Unknown: “It’s a beautiful smell, it’s, well some people like roses. I like the smell of sap boiling when it’s fresh, when it’s new. And then along towards the end of the season it smells like someone’s boiling up their socks and then it’s about time I pull the hose out and throw it in the brook.”

Unknown: "Just about anything I cook you could use maple syrup. Rice pudding, you use it as a sauce on apple dumpling and on ice cream, donuts and cakes and pies.”

Wallace Illsley: “I sweeten anything with syrup, I don’t use any white sugar and I love little syrup on toast, bread, any way. I like, especially syrup on my bread when I’m having baked beans. And we have syrup in the baked beans, we use syrup for sweetening baked beans. Syrup is something I use all the time. Three times a day.”

Unknown: "It's excellent in bran muffins"

Unknown: “…and cake and maple pudding is very good. It's like a corn starch pudding only put maple syrup in instead of white sugar. You can pickle hams and bacons with maple syrup. You use dark maple syrup so to give it more flavor when you’re pickling hams and bacon with it.”

Unknown: "We had maple cream. And Maple cream we used on hot muffins, toast, could use it as frostings. It was a nice sandwich bread with peanut butter. Maple cream and bananas are very good, and peanut butter."

Katharine Flint DuClos: “We children never had any candy. I can’t ever remember having any candy when I was a child. But we always had maple sugar cakes that we could go and get
whenever we wanted sweet.”

**John Messier:** "Oh Christ, I use maple syrup on everything. When I was a kid I used to have it on my potato. My grandfather started me with that."

**Edgar Dodge:** “Well I can tell you that you would take the last run of the sugaring operation, know what I’m talking about? ‘Bout to get down to where you can kind of taste the leaves in it, that sort of thing? Yep. And instead of boiling it down to syrup you boiled it down more or less halfway we’ll say, it’s still like water as far as that part of it goes, and of course it’s got considerable sweet in it. And then you dry it off and you put it in the barrel. And it was not only permissible but it was common to put in anything you might happen to think would add something to it. Like, perhaps 10 quarts of corn. Course you’d put in the hops and you’d put in the raisins and you’d let it work. Course the sugar would work it, so forth and so on. And this would be fit to drink about the first of haying, which in those days was 4th of July. You started haying 4th of July. And so by the middle of July, the sap beer, now sap beer, was very peculiar stuff. The same people would make sap beer to the best of their ability and sometimes it turned out junk. Stringy! Nobody could drink it. Cut it off with a pair of shears. That sort of thing! Again, you could have sap beer that was just as clear as any ale you ever saw. And I don’t think the man ever lived that could drink two 8 oz glasses and walk 10 minutes later. I don’t believe so. So that was sap beer. I doubt if there’s a barrel of sap beer in the state of Vermont today. I doubt it. But I don’t really know. But I must say, it was a pretty good drink for haying. Pretty good drink for haying, yup."

*Chorus excerpt of Pete singing “Maple Sweet”.*

To complete our maple-themed-tour of the VFC archive we’re excited to share another song!

*Excerpt of “Dans l'temps des sucres”.*

You might notice this one is in French! Of course, Vermont shares not only a border with Quebec but also a rich history of cultural exchange and influence. As a result of immigration from Quebec in the 19th and 20th centuries, almost 25% of Vermont’s population today traces its roots to French Canada. One of VFC’s goals is to help foster these connections, calling attention to the ways Franco-Americans have shaped the culture of modern Vermont, and creating ways for all Vermonters to engage with these components of our collective heritage.

In Vermont we go to the sugar house. In Quebec it’s “la cabane à sucre,” or the “sugar shack,” and the social aspect of gathering in the sugar woods is also celebrated in depictions of Quebecois and Franco-American culture.

In the late 1990s Franco-American cultural advocate Martha Pellerin—whom you met in Episode 6 of VT Untapped—received a small grant from VFC to document the song repertoire of Alberta Gangné of Highgate, Vermont. Martha documented hours of Alberta’s songs, and thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we are working with our friend,
colleague, and French Canadian music specialist--Lisa Ornstein to create a detailed catalog of Martha’s work with Mme Gangné.

More of “Dans l'temps des sucres”.

The title of the song you just heard, *Dans l'temps des sucres*, translates to “In maple syrup season.” Here’s Lisa sharing a little bit of what she learned:

Lisa: Hi I’m Lisa Ornstein I am a fiddle player, a folklorist, a political activist. I live in Olympia, Washington. When I was in my teens I was fortunate enough to know the Beaudoin family…

Just a note - the Beaudoins are a Burlington-based family who greatly influenced Franco-American culture in Vermont and nationally, in particular through the fiddle music of the late Louis Beaudoin.

Lisa: ...and Louis Beaudoin was really my mentor, first introducing me to the beautiful music of Quebec and Franco-American New England. I’m lucky enough right now to be working on a project with the Vermont Folklife Center focusing on cataloguing the songs of an amazing singer who’s name was Alberta Gagne from Highgate Springs.

VFC archivist Andy Kolovos hopped on Zoom to speak with Lisa about the history of this song and the importance of this particular recording within collections of Franco-American and Canadian songs:

Andy Kolovos: So, Lisa, it’s always fun to play with you in the archives and it was super fun to come across this song with you. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you learned about this particular song so our non French speaking audience could get some insight into what it’s about.

Lisa Ornstein: Ok so the title of the song is “Dans le temps des sucres,” which means basically “In maple syrup season,” and the song is a good natured evocation of a family gathering at the sugar shack during maple syrup season. Trudging out there with all of the things you’re going to use to make your meal, everything cooked in syrup and everybody in a high state of spirits and eating too much “tire” or maple taffy and going home totally stuffed and, you know, with a few regrets about… you should have stopped there but you just didn’t. Overall enjoying the whole thing and realizing that the day after you’re already thinking about next year. So that’s the gist of the song and the authorship is unknown. It appears to have originated in Quebec, obviously not in France where maple sugaring is just not a thing, right? Very likely dates back to the second half of the 1800s. And what’s interesting is that there are very few documented versions of this song and up until the Vermont Folklife Center received Martha Pellerin’s collection with the song’s of Alberta Gagne there were no documented versions in the United States. So, this is the one at the Vermont Folklife Center!

Excerpt of “Dans l'temps des sucres”.
Lisa Ornstein: The song itself, the melody is a very old melody dating back at least to the end of the 1600s and probably earlier than that. It was a very popular melody in France. Got pressed into service for any number of sets of lyrics that people made up about it and in fact in Quebec there is another song that is a humorous evocation of another tradition, which is the Christmas season tradition called “Dans le temps des fêtes,” which is set to the same melody.

Music excerpt of “Dans l'temps des sucres”

Thank you Lisa for all your amazing work helping us better understand the Franco-American materials in the VFC archive and making them more accessible. To learn more about these collections and the other recordings you heard in this episode check out our show notes at vtfolklife.org/untapped.

Spring is on the horizon! I’m looking forward to sharing more VT Untapped with you in the coming months in our somewhat official THIRD SEASON of this show. Expect new episodes monthly through mid-summer, when we'll probably take a little break. We are always looking to make the show better and to reach more people! So if you’re a fan please tell others to look us up and subscribe. Lastly, I hope you find the “sweetest joys” of the season at your local sugar house or cabane à sucre! I’ll leave you with Pete Sutherland singing Maple Sweet.

Pete Sutherland singing “Maple Sweet”.

This episode of VT Untapped has been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom. It was produced by me, Mary Wesley. Our executive producer, who also happens to be the VFC archivist, is Andy Kolovos. The cello music in this show was recorded by Dave Haughey.

We thank the MacArthur Family for use of Margaret MacArthur’s recording of Maple Sweet from her album, An Almanac of New England Farm Songs, and Ty Gibbons for providing us with a copy of the song.

Thanks for listening.