

**By BRIAN ACKLEY**  
**WIN Columnist**

Like most Erie County employees, Chuck Schweikert has days he can't get out of bed fast enough to punch the time card, and others when the hour hand just creeps towards five o'clock.

But these days – at least these six weeks of the year – there is a distinctive smile on his face and spring in his step when he pulls on his boots and Carhardt and ski hat. Without question, his demeanor is definitely at least a little sweeter. Meet the area's maplemesiter, or, as he likes to laugh and call himself, Erie County's chief sap sucker.

For two decades now, Schweikert has been the man in charge of making one of nature's most pure delights at the county run sugar house about 10 minutes off of Route 219 in southern Erie county.

It may be the one job that, for all practical purposes, technology has barely touched. Oh, true, trees are strung together like Christmas lights with plastic tubing that collects the sap – gone are the Norman Rockwell tin buckets and covers – but the basic elements are as original today as hundreds of years ago when Seneca Indians used fire-hot rocks to boil sap in hollowed out tree trunks.

No secrets, no tricks, no Aunt Jemima short cuts.

"People will tell you buckets were very difficult because you're walking through deep snow and your tripping and sap is running down the back of your leg," Schweikert said. "Well, you go up there in February, and begin operations, and you're still walking through deep snow and you spend as much time tapping and fixing the tubing as you did hauling buckets down."

Beyond that, a few pieces of fire wood and a metal container – not to mention patience – are the key ingredients. Easy? Don't tell that to Schweikert, who's rapt attention rarely wanders from the building's shiny evaporation chamber.

"It's always nerve wracking, you have to be on your toes. It's not like you can't not keep an eye on it," he said, taking a down time in between the 1,500 or so local school children that visit every March. "And, no matter what you do, Mother Nature dictates. You can have everything set up, if Mother Nature doesn't cooperate you're not going to get quality maple syrup."

Want nerve wracking? Schweickert's amber offering has been front and central to some of the area's more memorable events.

"In the past, they've bet it on the Super Bowl," he laughed. "But, you know the story there." Pass the sap, please.

The man knows his trees. There's a reason, for example, why the operation is tucked away on Genesee Road in the Allegany foothills, snuggled between Springville and Arcade, where 900 trees surrender their sap every spring.

"You get into more hilly terrain because sugar maples don't like to get their feet wet, that's why we have most of the sugar maples on the top of our hills," he said. "And the temperature is usually just right. Maple trees don't like to get too hot in the summer."

While many visit with the idea of making their own home brew, his advice is friendly but direct..

"A lot of people are very discouraged when they find out how difficult it is to do," he added. "They come here for pointers We tell them the reason they're called sugar shanties is because it can be a very dangerous process. Whereas a watched pot never boils, here all the sudden it can turn into sugar, and sugar is very flammable. Hence, a building would catch fire, so they never made them too elaborate."

Forty gallons of sap later, the resulting one gallon of syrup often is used as samples to visitors. In good years, excess syrup might go to "a group that would not normally buy it," he said, like a low-income senior nursing home. Little is actually sold to the public, adhering to a policy which prefers to keep the operation educational and not commercial, protecting maple syrup producers who count on it for a living.

Call it a sweet deal, all the way around.

*(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member*

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