

Photo of the Month

Pressing Sorghum Cane



A sorghum mill in operation near Rogers, mid 1900s. (Neg. #N008454)

Molasses was the major sweetener used in America until after World War I, since until then it was less expensive than sugar. In early America molasses made from sugar cane mostly was imported from the West Indies. As Americans settled the frontier during the mid-1800s, a sweet syrup made from sorghum cane became more and more popular as a substitute for sugar cane molasses.

The variety of sorghum used for syrup-making is called sweet sorghum; it is taller than grain sorghum, which is grown for its seed heads. Back in the 1800s and early 1900s some farmers grew sorghum as a cash crop, while other planted only enough for their own use.

Most every neighborhood in the Midwest and Upper South had at least one farmer with a mill and evaporator pan. Sorghum was grown and made into syrup in Northwest Arkansas throughout the late 1800s and into the 1900s.

This photograph of a sorghum mill in operation was taken about 1950.

To make syrup, the farmer would harvest the cane. First he would strip the stalks of their leaves. The head of seeds would be removed and the stalks would be cut close to the ground. At the mill the cane would be run between rollers to press out the juice.

Next the juice was strained and cooked in the evaporating pan. A pan has several compartments, and the juice would be moved from one to the other, becoming thicker all the while. Only practice allowed the farmer to know exactly when to remove the completed product from the final compartment. If he waited too long, the syrup would be too thick and the taste too strong.

While often called sorghum molasses, the correct label for the final result of all this hard work is "sorghum syrup" or "pure sorghum." Technically the term "sorghum molasses" should be used only for a combination of sorghum syrup and sugar cane molasses. But whatever you call it, this tasty syrup sure is good poured on a hot biscuit!