

# IN THE SHADOW OF HOGAN'S MOUNTAIN

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## The Fine Art of Making Molasses

From the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, farm life during the fall in our area of North Carolina was marked by traditional activities such as corn shuckings and molasses making. Molasses making time not only provided the sweet rewards from much hard labor but also provided a major social event for the community. Visitors on molasses making day did not see all the challenging work led up to the actual boiling off of the cane juice into molasses. Very few farms today practice the fine art of making molasses in the old ways.

On the Hollar farm, he process started early in the growing season with the planting of the cane seed. A one-horse corn planter with the "cane plate" was pulled behind our mule, old Belle, to plant the cane. The next step was to thin the cane so that it would grow approximately 12 inches apart. This was slow, back breaking work and often fell to the boys under the close supervision of our mother. Ammonium nitrate was used to speed the growth and sweeten the cane. In the late summer or early fall, it was time to strip the fodder (leaves) from the cane stalks. The green fodder was used as cattle feed. This process was often hindered by tangled cane stalks resulting from hurricane-related storms and by the ever-present packsaddles, a stinging insect that fed on cane leaves. When my grandfather set the date for cutting the cane stalks, preparations went into overdrive. The molasses furnace had to be re-mudded, the boiler scraped clean, the skimming hole dug, and the mill oiled and checked for repairs. The furnace was designed out of river rocks and mud with a tin roof. One end of the furnace was open so that pine slabs could be added during the boiling off process. A large 12-inch smokestack ran up the side of the tin roof. The molasses boiler was made of a sheet of roll steel approximately 3' by 8' with sides made of 2" by 8" timbers especially milled at Watt Austin's sawmill. The juice was crushed from the cane stalks with

an ingenuous molasses mill. The components included the rear end out of an "A" model, various gears scavenged by my grandfather from the scrap metal yard, and two specially ordered crushing drums. The power for the mill in the early days was provided by old Belle. A boom pole was constructed above the "A" model rear end. The mule was attached to the boom pole and walked in circles to power the cane crushing wheels. Care had to be taken to avoid the boom pole, or one could deal with a headache for the remainder of the day. In later years, the 8N Ford tractor was used to power the mill after mill modifications by my grandfather.

Since molasses making was a great social event, the forthcoming molasses making schedule was announced at church. Molasses making was an all-day event. Once the cane was cut off in the field using a mowing scythe and brought to the mill, the mule was hooked up to the boom and grinding began early in the morning. The green juice flowed freely into a wash tub. The juice was either carried in a bucket or siphoned to the boiler in a garden hose. Once the cane was ground, the fire was started in the furnace from a pre-laid layer of kindling and other dry wood. If any smoke came from under the boiler instead of the smokestack, sand was added under the sides of the boiler.

The process for boiling the juice to molasses was an interesting art. As the hours of boiling progressed, more residents of the Hogan's Mountain area arrived. My grandfather oversaw the removal of the skimmings from the boiling mixture and directing the addition of the right number of oak slabs to keep the mixture boiling. The men sat around the boiler, discussed world events, and moved from place to place as the sweet, sticky steam rose from the boiler and drifted with the prevailing breeze. Care had to be taken not to step in the skimming hole as the boiling liquid could blister a foot. The example was always given about the resident who had

consumed too much of the mason jar contents from the far side of the mountain and stumbled into the skimming hole. The young people eagerly waited for the late afternoon when hot dogs and marshmallows were roasted at the open end of the furnace. Adventurous young males would impress the young ladies by heating the ends of small cane stalks in the furnace and then popping them on a flat piece of wood, thus creating a loud sound and many colorful sparks from the heated cane. This was the country version of fireworks.

It was an especially important art to know when to remove the molasses from the fire. If one waited too long, the molasses could be as thick as candy. If they were removed too soon, they were too runny. Once the boiler was moved from the fire, the sweet mixture was funneled into mason jars. All participants were then invited to sop the boiler with cane stalks to enjoy the taste of the sweet product produced by many hours of labor. The final test of the quality of the molasses was how well they foamed when mixed with bacon drippings on a frigid winter morning in preparation for spreading on biscuits prepared on the wood burning cook stove.

The history of making

molasses is an ancient art which may be traced back as early as 500 B.C. in India. The process was brought to Spain during the Middle Ages by Arab invaders. Christopher Columbus brought sugar cane to the West Indies a century or so later. A couple of hundred year later, cutting were planted in New Orleans and then spread throughout the southern section of North America. Molasses have had several purposes over the years including the base material for making rum and heavy dark ales, addition to Middle Eastern tobacco, as an iron supplement for anemic persons, and as an additive to livestock grain. In Australia, fermented molasses have been used to produce ethanol, an alternative fuel for vehicles (*History of Molasses*, Wikipedia). My grandfather even used a mixture of molasses and water to remove rust by submerging the rusted part in the liquid for several weeks. A mechanic who worked during my early years said you had to be careful when buying a used car because some dishonest mechanics used molasses to hide the defects of a faulty transmission. I still believe that the best use for molasses is as a topping for a freshly buttered hot biscuit fresh from the oven.

## Mt. Pisgah Church News

Mt. Pisgah Lutheran Church has hosted several events for the community and will have upcoming gatherings, as follows:

**Homecoming**  
Mt. Pisgah Lutheran Church welcomed Assistant to the Bishop of the NC Synod, Deacon Tammy Jones West, as the guest speaker for the Homecoming Service in recognition of the 162nd anniversary of the church. Members enjoyed an Italian lunch prepared by Chef Shawna Cronin following the service.

**BBQ Successful**  
A highly successful Chicken BBQ fundraiser, coordinated by member Ken Wasmund, resulted in donations of \$3,000 to both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts troops meeting at the church. Leaders of the project thanked the church and community for their support that resulted in the sale of 600 chicken dinners.

**Senior Trip**  
Seventeen church members enjoyed a Christian Tours bus trip to the Amish Country, two musical performances including "Queen Ester" and "Mama Mia," Gettysburg, and

Monticello. Church coordinator, Mike Burris, said the trip provided a wonderful opportunity for fun and fellowship.

**Coming Events**

- October 17 -- Confirmation
- October 30 -- Community Trunk or Treat -- Mt. Pisgah members will again offer a Community Trunk or Treat from 2:00-4:00 on October 30 in the church parking lot with twenty plus member cars. Come join us in your cars with kids and bags for a fun and safe afternoon. See you then!
- October 31 -- Reformation Services -- 8:00 and 10:30
- November 6 -- Billy Graham Tour - The church will sponsor a tour of the Billy Graham Library. Maximum of 50 participants.
- November 7 -- All Saints Service -- Remembrance of all who have gone to be with the Lord in the Church Triumphant.
- December 4 -- Bethlehem Star Lighting
- December 18 -- Christmas Show in Marion-Matinee with maximum of 50 participants.

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