

Maple Sugar Farmer, filmed and produced by W. Craig Hinde and Robert Davis, copyright 1973. 16 mm, color, sound over, 29 minutes. Distributed by ACI Films, 35 West 45th St., New York, N. Y. 10036. Purchase: \$350.

by Ormond H. Loomis

Anyone who has ever made maple syrup knows that it involves a lot of work. The job demands as much patience as skill. Many hours must be spent in the woods tapping trees and collecting sap. Afterwards, hours are passed carefully boiling down the sap, or "water," to syrup. Although the labor may be lightened by the companionship of fellow sugarers, it remains, necessarily, a time consuming activity. Filming this traditional industry could have had disastrously boring results. Yet Maple Sugar Farmer portrays the process well, and successfully avoids tedium.

The information this film contains about maple syrup and maple sugar manufacture is fascinating. The subject is Sherman Graff, a farmer in southern Illinois, who learned the art of sugaring from his father and grandfather. Farmer casually depicts and comments on: making sassafras spiles, tapping maples, gathering water, boiling, testing hot syrup, cleaning syrup, boiling syrup to sugar, testing hot sugar, and molding sugar.

As one might expect, there are strong stylistic similarities between Farmer and Canoe Builder. The quality of the photography and sound, the use of nature shots and old black and white snapshots suggest a formulaic method of filmmaking. There is improvement on one point. The way vignettes of Graff at work blend with coherent sequences of old still photos (both following a rambling monologue) resemble the way a farmer might reminisce to pass time with a visitor. The interest stills in these sequences are far less annoying than the interest stills in Canoe Builder.

But Hinde and Davis have fallen short of producing an adequate documentary. Such basic data as the informant's name, age, and place of residence almost pass unnoticed. The edited sound track obscures the pattern of Graff's thoughts. Still photos, taken from a variety of sources, are put together, without reference, as if they all belong to Graff's personal past. Parts of the traditional sugaring process are ignored. Questions such as what effect does rain have on boiling outdoors, or how must the syrup be bottled to prevent spoilage are not even raised, much less answered. Too little is said concerning the ways in which this farmer and this industry relate to modern life. Is the wood burning stove, on which syrup is shown being reduced to molton sugar, used by Graff for all his cooking, or is it a special touch used only in the film? To what extent is syrup making on this farm done for profit and to what extent for fun?

Hinde's and Davis's product would have been better had they dwelt less on the nostalgic glow with which Graff recalls his childhood and more on the realities of maintaining a tradition which has ceased to be economically competitive. Nevertheless, while not an objective treatment of this craft, Farmer is undeniably appealing. Through it, the viewer has a chance to witness an agricultural operation that has become rare in recent times. It stands as a study of one art, in the repertoire of one man. It can serve as introductory material for novices in the field of folklife or broaden an advanced student's knowledge. Thus, Maple Sugar Farmer has something to offer almost any audience.