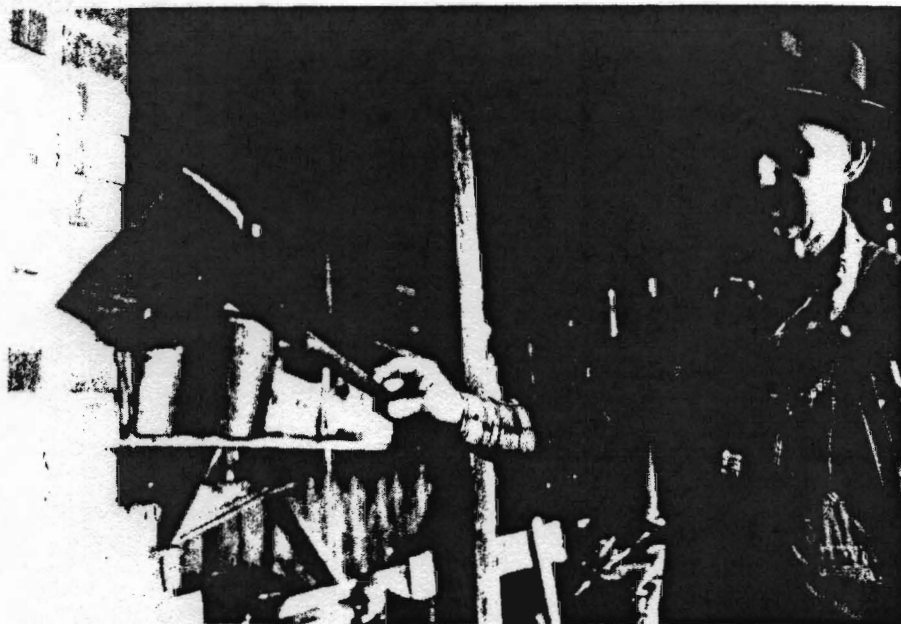


Molasses: An Uncommon Sweetener



Raymond Moran checks the molasses for thickness and color. Photo - Pete Hartman

The molasses shed behind the Raymond Moran farm home.

by Lyn Wolz

Since the mid-nineteenth century, people in the Blue Ridge have used sorghum molasses as a sweetener. Sorghum thrives in this cool, dry climate and provides a good substitute for sugar, which was historically scarce and expensive. The skill needed to extract molasses from sorghum was a common one in days past, but has died out in recent years due to the availability of other sweeteners at a low price. In the Blue Ridge many people continue to prefer the taste of molasses to that of sugar and keep the skills of making molasses alive. Raymond Moran, a farmer from Callaway, Virginia is one such person.

Every fall Mr. Moran makes molasses for himself and his neighbors. As a life-long resident of southwest Virginia, he learned the skill from his father and has passed the tradition on to his sons. On making day, all the family gathers at the molasses shed on the Moran farm and pitches in to help—even Robin, Mr. Moran's two-year old granddaughter. Friends and neighbors drop in to help, to talk, and to swap apple butter for molasses. As Mr. Moran stirs the bubbling green juice, he talks about the process that produces molasses.

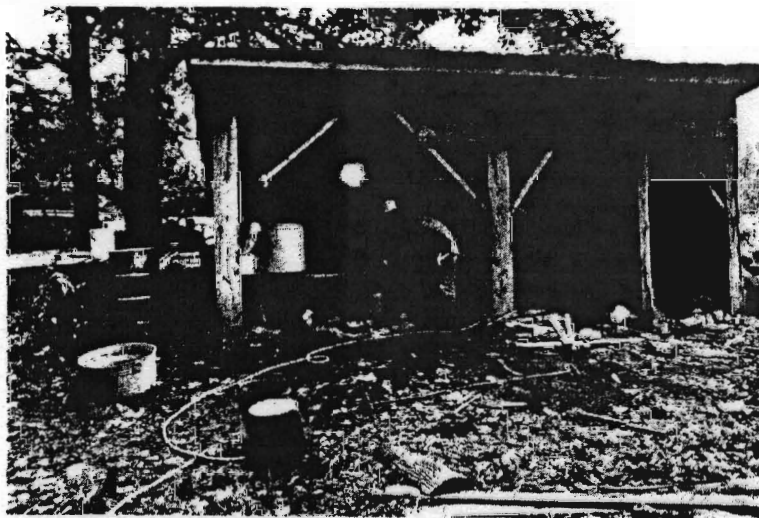
His work begins in the spring when he prepares the cane field and sows it with sorghum seed. While some people store the seed from the year before, Mr. Moran prefers to buy his new. The cane grows through the summer and matures in the early fall. He prepares for the molasses making by cleaning out the shed, scrubbing the boiling pan, and cleaning out the pressing mill.

At maturity just before the first frost, Mr. Moran strips the fodder off the cane, cuts off the seed head, and cuts the cane itself at ground level. He and his sons work through the cane field with long-handled knives and load

the cut stalks onto a truck. Mr. Moran has stored the stalks in the molasses shed for up to a week, but prefers to process them right away. He feeds both the leftover fodder and seed heads to his hogs and cattle.

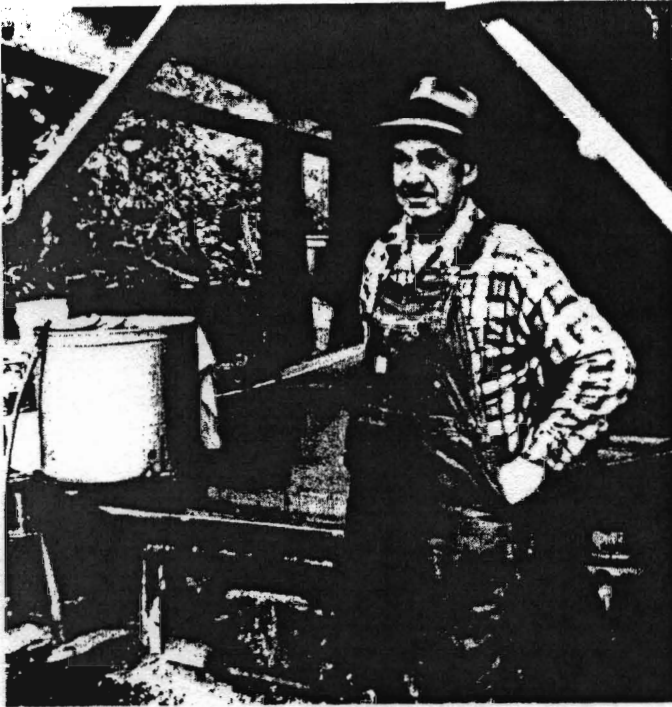
Mr. Moran actually makes the molasses in a shed that covers a furnace, an evaporation pan, and a large stack of dry wood. On the hill behind the shed, a tractor powered mill is set up to crush and strain the sorghum cane. Mr. Moran's son usually presses the cane. The wheels of the mill squeeze out large quantities of raw bright green sorghum juice. This juice runs out of the mill's chute and into a trough made of house guttering. A bucket catches the juice after straining it through a fine screen.

After pressing out enough juice to fill a bucket or two, Mr. Moran mixes the raw sorghum and pours it into the pan. The evaporation pan is made of

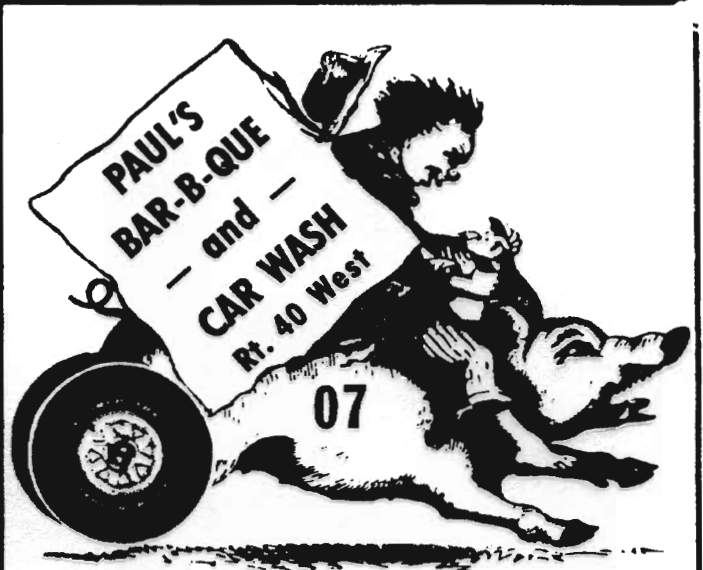


sheet metal, is about ten feet long, four feet wide, and six inches deep. It has a series of baffles that the juice must flow through, slowing the travel of the liquid and causing it to evaporate more quickly. In front of the pan the juice is watery and thin. Near the rear, the juice becomes thicker and thicker due to the constant cooking that it goes through. Mr. Moran periodically skims the juice of impurities throughout the cooking process.

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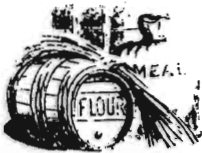


Raymond Moran in front of his shed. He's forgotten more about molasses than most people will ever know.
Photo by Pete Hartman.



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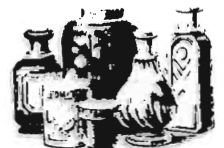
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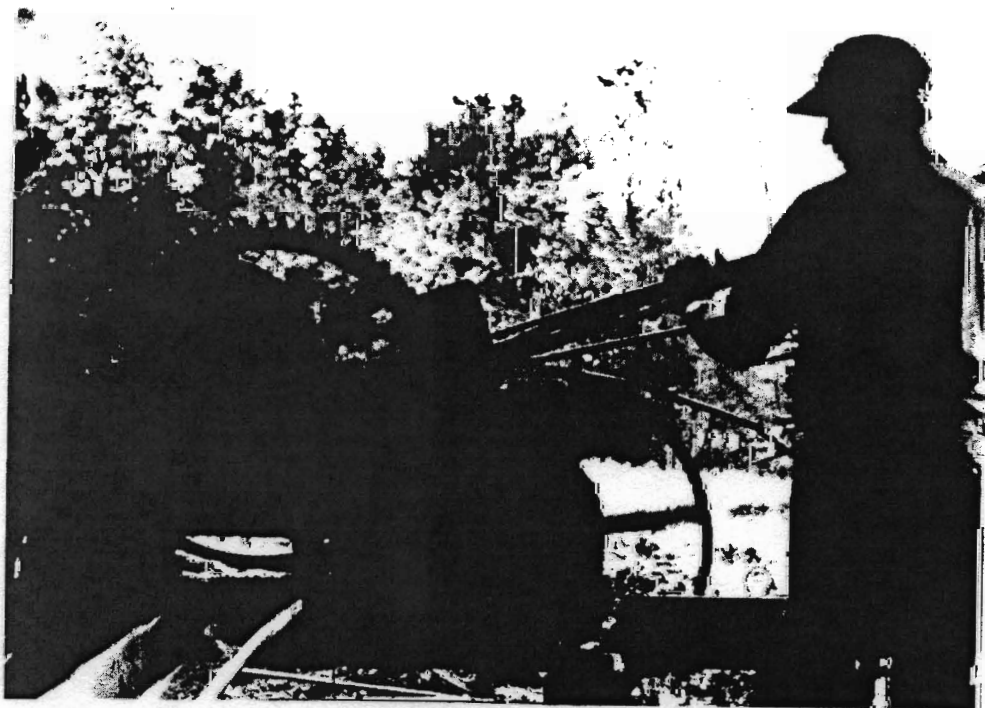
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Molasses: An Uncommon Sweetener



A tractor provides the power for the cane mill on left. Photo - PDH



Feeding the cane into the mill. Photo by Susan Sink

(continued from page 1)

As the juice cooks it travels from the firebox end of the pan to the chimney end, getting darker and thicker until it is strained out into large tin cans as fresh, hot molasses. The total cooking time is usually from three to four hours, depending on how much water was in the cane. After the molasses cools, it will be strained one more time into smaller jars or cans for storage and selling.

Mr. Moran swears that home-made molasses just tastes better than any other kind of sweetener - and few folks around Callaway will disagree with him. From father to son the tradition has continued through several generations and more than likely will not die out completely anytime soon. The pioneer virtues of self-reliance, strong community and family feeling all contribute to the survival of this time-honored skill. People such as Mr. Moran provide modern examples of living ties to our common past.

LYN WOLZ

Lyn Wolz comes out of the curriculum in Folklore at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She recently began work at Ferrum in the library. She drives a bright orange pickup truck.

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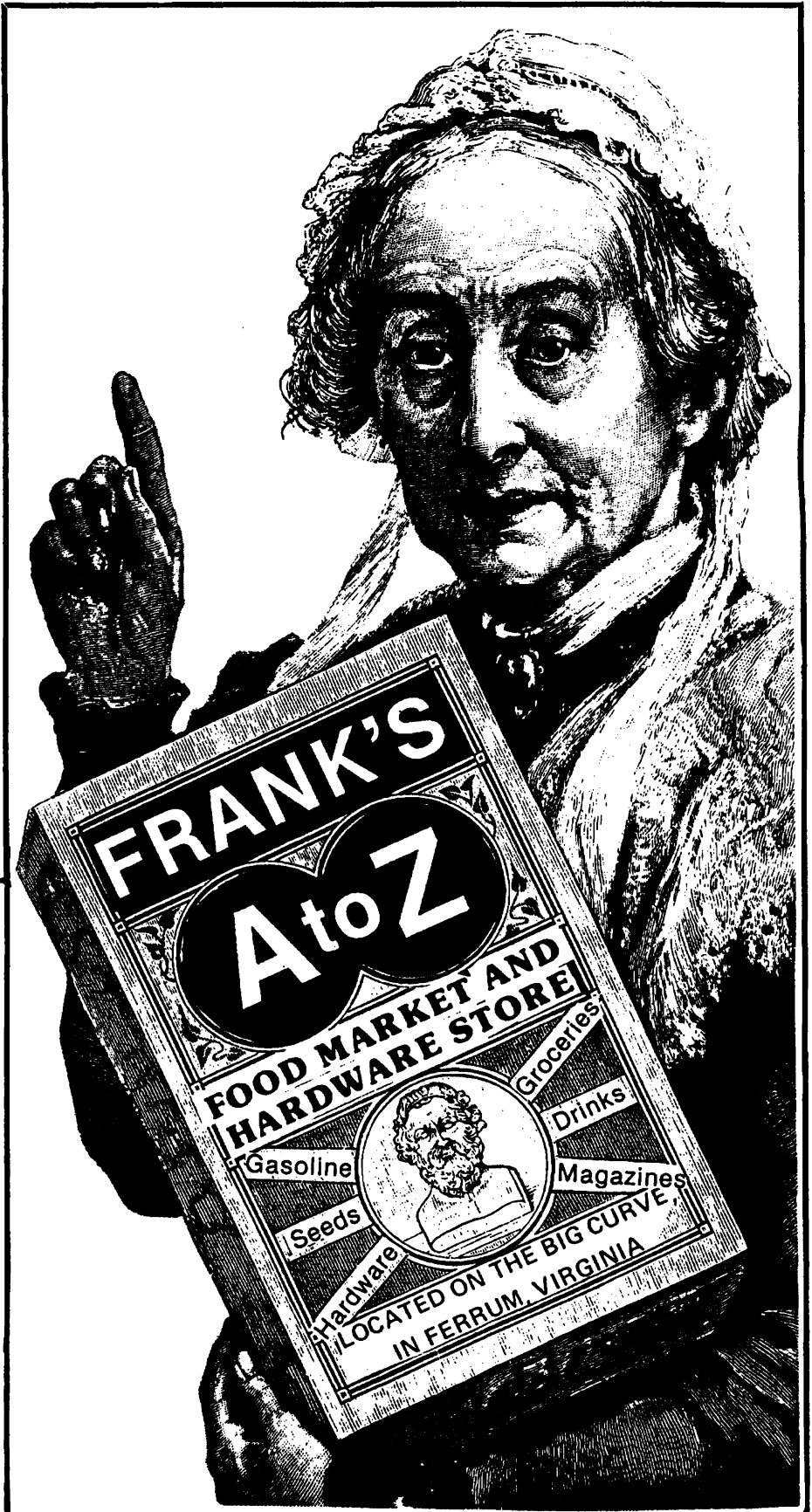


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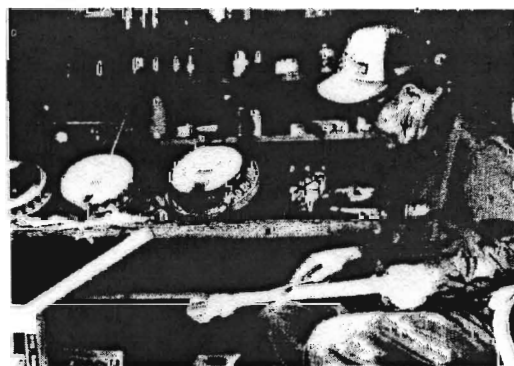
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