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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to examine the social ideas that surround sorghum syrup in far North-East Georgia, from the cultivation of cane to its processing and distribution as refined syrup. Sorghum syrup represented a strong economic factor for a majority of the history of Georgia; as first a colony and later a state. By establishing a historical backdrop, modern interpretations of sorghum syrup and its production can be understood and analyzed as a symbol of a cultural identity.

Participants were selected through non-probability purposive sampling in order to gain the most information from a few individuals. These individuals were selected to represent individuals with a family history that incorporated sorghum syrup, as well as individuals that have recently gained interest in sorghum syrup. Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Through analysis of these interviews, sorghum syrup, in the opinions of the individuals interviewed, is a symbol of community and a reminder of an idyllic past coveted by many Southerners. Individuals with a family connection to sorghum syrup not only see it as a symbol of community, but also a symbol of social capital and prestige. Sorghum syrup is one of many symbols of a "lost" Southern past. By exploring the importance of sorghum syrup, larger ideas about this Southern history and ideology can help develop a better understanding of the modern Southern Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past few years, I have started to better appreciate the things that represent the history of life in the South, most notably the production of sorghum syrup. My family has been involved with sorghum syrup production for generations.

Until the last 50 years, processed sugar was too costly for most rural southerners to afford. Early in American history, before it was known as such, sweet sorghum cane (Figure 2) came to the south through contact with Central Africa. Due to the natural human urge for sweets, sorghum syrup became a staple in the diets of most Southerners as well as a major commodity in local markets.

In modern times sugar makes up a large percentage of the American diet, however many Southerners still see sorghum as a link to the past. These attitudes are what I hoped to better understand.



Figure 1. "Cookin' is a agitatin' process, hot and tiring. You've got to relax... before you get goin."



Figure 2. "Stripping the seeds and the leaves is vital, if you don't you'll end up with real bitter syrup."



Figure 3. The cane is next pressed to remove the sweet juice that is cooked into syrup.



Figure 4. "Skimmin' the pot is a nasty job... you have to wait till it clumps or else you'll just mix it back in."



Figure 5. The syrup is removed from the pot too cool for the jar.



Figure 6. These jars will be either given as gifts or sold.

FINDINGS

I set out to interview two main types of people, those that have family history that involves sorghum syrup, as well as those who have recently come to appreciate the importance of sorghum. I started out with the first group and came to appreciate their love of sorghum as a symbol of the past, as well as a way to make some extra money, *"The syrup is goin for a good price these days too, not the volume, but there are plenty of people still buying."* The production of sorghum syrup involves a long cooking process that is done in a large pan or pot, usually holding at least 50 gallons (Figures 1 & 4). This cooking process involves many people doing many jobs; due to this, these cookins' are social events that often bring people from all over the community (Figure 1). *"You never knew who would show up to a cookin' we had all sorts of people come to the house, folks you'd never see otherwise."* This sense of community is cherished by many people as a small reminder of the community bonds that hold rural America together.

When speaking with individuals who recently came to appreciate the historical place of sorghum, I came to realize that they too have many family ties to sorghum, they just didn't know it till recently! *"I first learned about sorghum from going to the festival in Hiawasse, never even heard of it before. Once I asked some of my elderly family members I came to realize that my grandad use to cook, in our own back yard!"* I was surprised that their views on sorghum were very similar to those of the "old timers". *"Sorghum represents a way of life that we have lost here in the South. I hope by reviving it in my family I can bring to light some of our family history."* The only real designation between the two that came up continually was that they never addressed profit, where as this came up with every "old timer".

I expected to discover a romanticized view of sorghum when talking to the "sorghum new comers" as compared to the "old timers". I can't say with certainty how much romanticism either group held, but however much is present, it is expressed equally by both groups.

CONCLUSION

Sorghum syrup played a vital role in the lives of many people in the rural south for over two centuries. Although it no longer has the prominence it once held, sorghum still represents many things to many people in the South. Sorghum is community, it is history, and it still represents profit.

Sorghum is a symbol of the Southern past, be it sopped up by biscuits or baked in a batch of gingerbread cookies. If you haven't ever had sorghum syrup, or even heard of it, go out on a quest for a mason jar full of thin dark syrup, and after that go and bake up a batch of biscuits. I bet you will thoroughly enjoy this exquisite taste of the South!