

Sorghum Mill

By H. V. Noble (circa 1973)

My earliest recollection of it was when I must have been around 2 years old (1909). It was made mainly by "Pickett's," about ¼ mile west of Bakers Corner (Indiana) store.

Pickett (Old John, that is – about the same age as my grandpa) was a general repair shop. He had a big forge, some saws some drill presses and I guess a wood and perhaps a metal lathe, too. I don't recall that he did horseshoeing, but he did do repair work on tools. With his forge, he could make any kind and shape of metal replacement part. He could also repair them – by splicing, fagot welding, etc, etc. I don't know how or why he got in the sorghum business. Maybe it was a cash business that brought in quite a bit of ready cash in the fall. The market was fairly stable in as far as price was concerned.

I never saw any part of the set up until 1931 – 32. I do recall that during World War I, my grandpa was quite upset with Mr. Pickett when he added glucose/corn syrup to the sorghum. The deal prior to that time was that when the local farmers brought in the cane in the fall, the juice was squeezed out by running the stocks between rollers and half of it was used to make syrup for the farmer and the other half went to Mr. Pickett. Then, he got to just dividing the syrup 50-50. Then in 1917, when he added the corn syrup, the deal worked as if the juice would make 10 gal. of sorghum. Mr. Pickett gave the farmer 5 gal. of the sorghum corn syrup mix which was about 50-50. Mr. Farmer thus got 2 ½ gal. of his sorghum mixed with 2½ gal. of corn syrup. My Grandpa said it was adulterated and a big gyp!!! The addition of the corn syrup did two things; (1) it made the final syrup less strong in taste and (2) it didn't crystallize (go to sugar) as quickly. It wasn't quite as thick as pure sorghum so when it was cold, you could pour it slowly and if you tried to dip it out of a bowl, it wouldn't quite all wind up on the serving spoon! I used to try it and got scolded for it, too!

I had little contact with the plant or its product from 1925 (when my Grandmother passed on) till 1933 when I visited Uncle Walt's place on Cicero road. In the meantime Mr. Pickett had passed on, his oldest son likewise, and young John – had been killed in a motorcycle accident about age 16. By this time another grandson, Howard (called Howie) was running the place.

At this time, a separate 50 or 100 H.P. boiler had been added in a separate building. The steam was used for most of their power, such as two 2-cylinder steam engines to run the "crushers," pump the juice upstairs over the original shop and then to cook the juice. They had two runways through which the farmers drove their wagons or trucks and unloaded the cane. The juice was drained into 3 or 4 wooden tanks at each site (about 12" wide x 12" deep" x6' long. The low ends of these tanks had a 1½" hole to drain into a juice line to a pump where it was sent upstairs to the cooking trap.

As the juice was extracted and put in the first one of these wooden troughs with a wooden plug in the drain hole and when it was filled the juice was turned into another trough. The

operator measured the specific gravity of the juice in each trough before it was sent upstairs with the operator keeping a record of the number of troughs full or gallons and the specific gravity. This latter told how many gallons of juice would be required to make a gallon of syrup. Thus the farmer could be assured of the amount of syrup he would get. In so far as I know, they still mix corn syrup with the pure stuff. During WWII, they ran the plant 24 hours per day and Picketts rented some 400 acres where they planted cane for their own use and I'd guess 400–1000 acres were planted by the local farmers.

As I remember an acre of good cane would produce about 200 gallons of syrup (pure stuff). It would also yield 40 – 60bu. Of seed which grew at the top of the stock. The stocks, after the juice had been removed, could be used to feed cattle, but only a limited amount or they'd get sick. How they loved it!

When my grandpa raised cane (literally I mean) he had to cut off the heads of seed and strip off the leaves from the stalks, cut the stalks off about 2"–4" from the ground and let them dry maybe a day or so and then take them to the mill. It was said the leaves and seeds made the final syrup bitter. Later on, they didn't bother with either. However, Pickett's' used a special machine that cut off the seeds in the field and perhaps save them. They could be ground for hog and cattle feed, or sold for perhaps \$1.00 to \$1.50 per bu.

Thus the maximum gross yield would be like: (as of 1960)

200 gal of syrup @ \$2.00	= \$400
50 bu. of seed @ \$1.00	= \$ 50
Value of stalks for feed	
Est. \$50	= \$ 50
Total	= \$500

If the farmer got only 30% after paying all costs, it would still be a good deal.

Bill Smith who lived in the first house west of Uncle Walt's place used to make sorghum. I visited his mill when I was about 4-8 yrs. old. Mr. Smith chewed tobacco had a reddish mustache and used a mule going round and round a central post to which the pole he was pulling was attached. This turned some rollers thru which the cane stalks were squeezed. The juice was drained into a metal tank about 2½ ft. wide x 1' deep x 8' long, which was over a fire for cooking the juice. He had to watch very carefully for if it wasn't cooked enough it had a raw taste and would sour or ferment. If the fire was too hot, it wasn't stirred often enough or cooked too long it had a burnt taste. My grandpa didn't buy any of his stuff when I was with him.

Picketts cooked their juice by heating the tanks with steam. Since the steam pressure could be controlled its temp. was also controlled so that the syrup didn't burn. Pickett did not permit anyone to go upstairs. The final syrup was sent down into the middle. Several women sat around this table top. One took empty cans from the cardboard box and placed them on the top spaced about 6". The top rotated and stopped so that a can was under s 2" pipe with a valve (slide valve like on my honey extractor). A second lady opened the

valve till the can was filled (the syrup was hot and flowed easily) the top was rotated bringing the 2nd can under the valve. A third lady placed the friction lid on the can of syrup with a rubber mallet pounded it down tight. The top rotated again and a fourth lady put the full can in a cardboard carton. The empty spot rotated again to the first lady who put on the fifth can, etc.etc. The slowest operation took about 8-10 sec. Thus this set up could put 6 or seven gal. cans away in one minute. A man took away the full cartons and the syrup and brought back another carton of empty cans. The same box was used for the full cans. A second man put on the shipping labels. Thus in one hour six workers could handle 360 or so gallons of syrup. If each was paid \$3.00/hr. \$18.00/360 about 5¢ each. I don't know the upstairs cost, but it probably wasn't more than 20¢. Pretty good deal? I haven't included costs of cans, fuel, taxes, interest on investment, etc. In any case, I'd guess the profit would be better than corn.