

Crowd recollects, learns

'Sugar bush' still produces

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For some older Champaign County residents, it was a chance to remember a activities of their younger days.

For younger residents, it was a chance to observe and learn about a small slice of life as it was in earlier days.

The learning and the remembering was part of Sugar Maple Days, the first of a series of programs this year at Salt Fork River Preserve, near Homer.

The program, organized by forest preserve naturalist Jackie Worden, attracted several hundred people both Saturday and Sunday.

The major feature of the program was to be the production of maple syrup from sap or sugar water drawn from trees in the forest preserve, which surrounds Homer Lake.

The weather has been less than perfect, however, for the

sap to flow from the trees.

There were small scale demonstrations of turning the sugar water into syrup.

The sugar water also was used with sassafras to make sassafras tea, reputed to be a remedy for colds and a "spring tonic."

At the forest preserve's Trailside Visitor Center, there were demonstrations of quilting, caning of chairs, candle-making and other crafts, as well as a display of equipment used in the making of maple syrup.

The sugar water being used in the sassafras tea was drawn from the remnants of a maple grove in the forest preserve.

The maple sugar grove, also known as a sugar bush, was used to produce maple syrup commercially for more than half a century.

Tom Richards began the syrup production in the early 1890's. His son-in-law, Fred

Umbanhower, took over the production from 1926 to 1928, with several different area residents renting the property after that, until the land and farm equipment was auctioned off in 1942.

The 1942 auction notice, on display at the visitor center, includes a listing for "sugar camp equipment including two kettles — one jacketed — 15 gallons and 48 gallons."

Only a portion of the maple grove remains today. According to maps and sketches prepared by residents of the area, the original grove extended to about the middle of Homer Lake, which was created by damming the Salt Fork River.

The flow of sap or sugar water from sugar maple trees is heavily dependent on weather conditions in the spring.

Worden said the best conditions combine freezing nights with thawing days.

The season can come to an abrupt end. Two to three days with temperatures of 65 to 70 degrees will halt the flow.

The Maple Sugar Days program was the first of a series of weekly programs planned for the preserve near Homer.

With the opening day program at the Early American Museum at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve next Sunday, there will be no program at Homer Lake.

Beginning April 2 the programs will start at 2:30 p.m. each Sunday at Salt Fork.