

Ingenuity and Tradition: The Common Wealth of Massachusetts

by Betty J. Belanus

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Massachusetts, like the rest of the United States, is a complex place where old and new stand side by side on the landscape and where tradition and innovation combine in people's lives to make them whole. Take, for instance, the case of Julie Brown and Burney Gifford, a young married couple from a section of South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, known as Allen's Neck. The Giffords have made a commitment to stay on Burney's family farm, even though the land, located as it is near Horseneck Beach, is coveted by developers. Catering to trends in urban gardening, they turned the former chicken farm into an herb-growing facility and, with the help of family and neighbors, they converted one of the old chickenhouses into modern living quarters. This year, when they attend the 100th anniversary of the Allen's Neck Quaker Community Clambake, Julie and Burney can celebrate the persistence of their community and its adaptation to modern life.

The ingenious combination of old and new is repeated throughout Massachusetts by people as varied as Black blues musicians, Cambodian craftsmen, Finnish cranberry farmers, Portuguese fishermen and Chinese computer assemblers. The common response to radical change has been a reassessment and readjustment of traditional patterns of life. The change may have come in the form of relocation: a group finds refuge from hostile government or extreme poverty by seeking new opportunities in Massachusetts. The response may have been engendered by a confrontation between "natives" and "outsiders" of all kinds: Yankees versus immigrants, commercial fishermen versus tourists, textile workers versus computer technicians. Or, the change may represent adverse effects of "modernization": the dissolution of established ethnic neighborhoods through gentrification, the demise of farmland through development, the pollution of the waterways from the toxic residue of factories, or the decline of local eating establishments and musical entertainment in favor of fast food restaurants and television.

In examining Massachusetts traditions for the Festival program, scholars found that change, no matter what its cause, challenged individuals and communities to find creative ways to maintain traditions. In Boston and



Joe Gelowski in his East Cambridge backyard garden.
Photo by Laurie Minor

New Bedford, people who had grown up on farms or in villages made themselves feel more at home by recreating a little bit of countryside in empty lots or backyards. Growing fresh tomatoes, peppers, beans and squash for their tables, creating shade (and homemade wine) with lush grape arbors, and nurturing symbolic plants such as fig trees, they created oases of peace and production in the midst of the concrete desert of the city. Former factory workers in Gardner took skills learned on the job and opened their own shops when the factories closed down; some, like silver worker George Erickson, have passed these skills on to a new generation. Grandson Peter Erickson has inherited George's tools, patterns and style, making elegant flatware and intricate jewelry, but he is wise enough to have added engraving and jewelry repair to his skills to supplement his income. In



Silversmiths George and Peter Erickson, Gardner, MA.
Photo by Heidi Gitelman

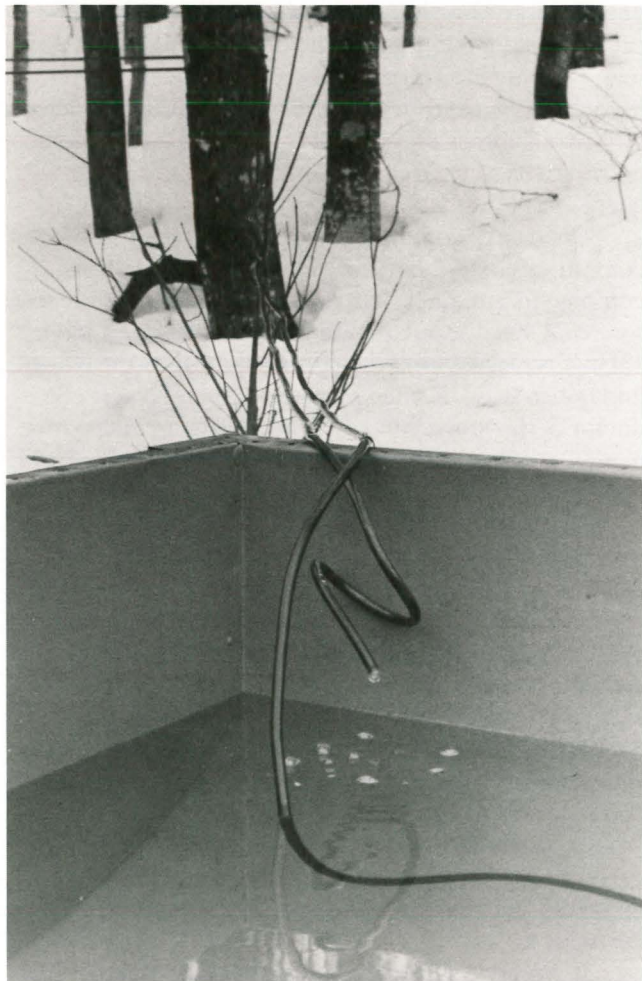
Berkshire County many maple syrup producers continue family traditions spanning three or four generations. Within this time, sap collection has progressed from oxen-drawn sled to tractor-drawn wagon, from wooden spigots to plastic hosing, which pumps the liquid directly from the trees to the sugarhouse. The producers take innovation into their stride, considering the practice no less traditional for the technological improvements – just more practical.

The Festival program and articles in this program book offer many more examples of tradition responding





Methods of maple sap collection, 1920-1988. Historic photos courtesy Linwood Lesure; 1988 photo by Ellen McHale



to change. These examples prove that, like the great transformations that have shaped Massachusetts and the country as a whole, traditions can undergo change and emerge transformed but still recognizable. Puerto Rican singer Felix Luna of Lowell applies the traditional *decima* song form to new lyrics about the Challenger disaster. Gospel singer Napoleon Stovell of Springfield directs his southern-born quartet to enunciate their words more clearly because the New England audiences like to understand what is being sung. Mario Picardo of Boston incorporated traditional Italian architectural features to make a bandstand but used plywood, foam, tin foil and cardboard ravioli boxes to erect his towering confection on the streets of the North End as part of an annual saint's day feast. These individuals and their communities remold traditions into usable form because these traditions add meaning to their lives. That's what folklife both in Massachusetts and in the modern world is all about.

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