

The dogs and the sugar bush

by KEITH SCHELL

Our late Father owned a piece of bush property several miles away from where we had our home in the country. It is still in our family today. Every spring, he and his dog would go up to the bush property and spend a few weeks there making maple syrup. The property was commonly referred to in our family as the 'Sugar Bush.'

Having been raised on a farm, this was Dad's special time. Making maple syrup was usually a labour of love for him. He had acquired a deep respect and reverence for nature while growing up on the farm and he enjoyed the opportunity to immerse himself in it whenever he had the opportunity to do so.

When spring finally began, Dad and his dog would head to the sugar bush to begin their preparations for making maple syrup.

Further up the road and across from our sugar bush property was a house, and the people had a dog. Because they were so far out in the country, they would regularly let their dog outside off-leash without any issues. The friendly dog would regularly explore the surrounding countryside, usually coming back home whenever she was called.

Playing outside one early spring day, and hearing activity across the road from their house, the neighbour's dog came down the road to investigate the commotion coming from our bush lot.

As she entered our property, she came face-to-face with Dad and his dog. Because the neighbour's dog was friendly, Dad and his dog struck up a friendship with the newcomer right from the moment they met.

The neighbour's dog followed Dad and his dog into the sugar bush, curious as to what they were doing and eager to play with her new-found friends. She happily stayed with them for the whole day until Dad and his dog finally had to leave to go home late that afternoon.

From that day on, the neighbour's dog was a daily visitor at the sugar bush. Looking forward to spending every day that spring with Dad and his dog, it got to the point where the neighbour's dog would patiently sit at the end of her driveway every morning and when she saw Dad's truck coming down the road, her tail would start wagging and she would immediately trot down the road to join her friends for a day of fun at the sugar bush.

Because his dog was constantly disappearing for most of the day that spring, the neighbour started to wonder what was going on with his pet. When he finally met Dad and learned what was happening, he just smiled and was quite happy to let his dog enjoy the company of her new-found friends.

Dad's dog and the neighbour's dog became the best of friends, running around and playing for hours on end in the snow on our sugar bush property. Dad would tend the sap boiler fire and watch the dogs for hours, never tiring of the spectacle of the two happy dogs having fun together. He would often bring treats for the two dogs or give them part of his lunch whenever they came to him.

Whenever it came time to leave, Dad would always tell the neighbour's dog to 'go home' and come back again tomorrow. Not wanting to leave, it would take considerable coaxing from Dad to get the neighbour's dog to go home. She would finally trot down the road, tail wagging, already looking forward to the next day's adventures in the sugar bush with her new friends.

That spring, I had the pleasure of meeting the friendly neighbour's dog when I accompanied the rest of our family to the Sugar Bush during boiling season to help make maple syrup. After we gathered the sap, we would sit by the warmth of the fire as it boiled down. We would watch the two dogs happily playing together in the snow, enjoy the crisp winter quiet of nature, and wish those Norman Rockwell moments in the sugar bush would last forever.

These days, our Father, his dog, and the neighbour's dog have all been gone long enough now for their memories to finally bring joy to our family instead of sadness.

I take comfort in the thought that somewhere out there in the great beyond, Dad and the two dogs are back together, happily playing, and finally not having to worry about what time they have to go home.