

The Pommey Pile

Katherine Buxbaum

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Buxbaum, Katherine. "The Pommey Pile." *The Annals of Iowa* 38 (1966), 309-312.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.7796>

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THE POMMEY PILE

BY KATHERINE BUXBAUM

The business of molasses-making in Iowa still exists in Kalona and a half-dozen or so other locations. The Yoder family of Kalona does a thriving business every fall, turning out a product desired by customers from miles around.

Different from these modernized kilns of today is the one I remember as a child of 12. Ben Beitel's "lassy kill" (our term for "molasses kiln") at Gracehill was operated by horse and man power in the late 1890's and was as efficient as every other enterprise Mr. Beitel undertook. He was a carpenter, master truck-gardener, and blacksmith. In addition, he farmed a few acres, completing his harvest in time for the seasonal business of making molasses. The kiln was operated mostly at night, when his tall sons, home from a day's work, could help their father.



BEN BEITEL

Those were nights of enchantment for the children of the neighborhood. We came and went, mingling freely with the Beitel children, a sizable brood. We were never made to feel that we were in the way. Some magic drew us to the open door of the kiln shed, where huge iron pans holding molasses in varying stages of ripeness set over the fire of the brick stoves. Stationed by the pans were Beitel's sons, armed with long wooden paddles, stirring the thickening syrup, skimming the "greenings," testing the product, and comparing notes on the quality.



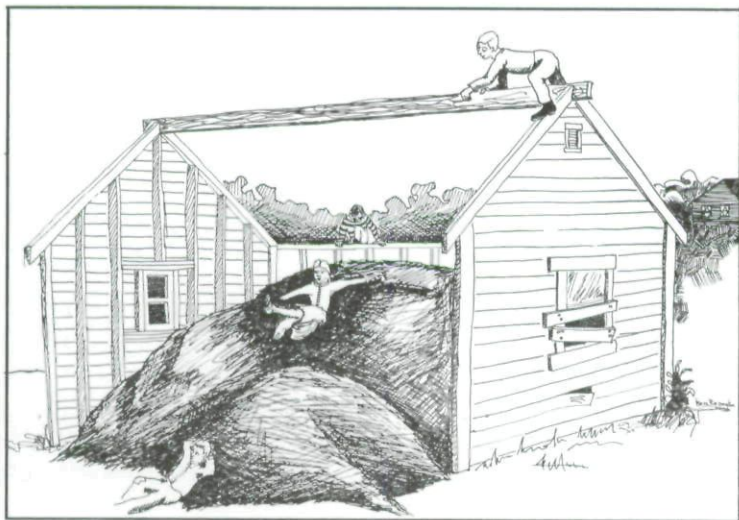
KATHERINE BUXBAUM AT AGE 12

We stepped across the threshold from the slight chill of a September night into warmth, fragrance and Rembrandt tones of color. There we watched the red of the flames darting from the open stoves, the flickering of light from kerosene lamps hung here and there on the walls, and the advancing and retreating of the fitfull gleam of shadows. The whole place had a dream-like quality. The rhythm of the paddles as they moved to and fro through the rich brown syrup made a kind of wordless music. There was the murmur of voices, too, spurts of talk from the men outside the shed. Farmers who brought their sugar cane to be processed lingered awhile to talk crops or to swap stories.

Interesting as all this was, it was not the scene itself that had brought us there. The charm, the lure of those autumn nights was the experience yet to come, the fun of jumping on the pommey pile when it should be ready for us. A pommey pile can only be explained by those initiated into its custom.

"Pommey" comes from the word "pomace" meaning "the substance of apples crushed as in making cider; the substance of anything crushed into a pulpy mass." The discarded cane stalks crushed to a pulpy mass were *our* pommey.

The pommey pile came from the sorghum mill just behind the kiln shed. Here patient horses went around and around while heavy rollers crushed the cane for the juice which was processed into molasses. When the pile of stalks accumulating at the horses' feet became too dense they were carried to an empty, roofless shed and were thrown on the earthen floor. This shed was the scene of our evening's fun. By scrambling barefoot up an improvised ladder, or by giving each other a leg up, we climbed to the ridge pole of the shed, where we stood victorious, balancing precariously on this slender support. Then with cries of "Look! Look at me!" we would take the dizzy plunge down, down into a swamp of fragrant green—our pommey pile!



Drawn by Ben Redington

THE PLUNGE INTO POMMEYS

Again we climbed, balanced, plunged, just for the pure pleasure of sensation. A tame sport? Perhaps, but we made as much drama of it as we could. To prolong the jump the

boldest of us walked the pole nonchalantly before taking off. The pommeys pile, yielding deliciously to the impact of our bodies, charmed every sense. Besides the exciting sense of smell and touch, there was the sight of greenish-white cane stalks shimmering under a harvest moon, and the sound of the pommeys sighing and rustling as we tossed them about, our laughing mouths finding their sweetness.

When at length we tired of our play—and this was only temporary for tomorrow night we would be back—we went again to the shed, where work was going on at an increased tempo. Somebody was taking skimmings from the rapidly boiling syrup; the boss himself was testing and tasting. Already in our imaginations we were sitting down to winter breakfasts of griddle cakes with cries of "Pass the 'lasses, please!" or "Mo', mo' lasses!" (a favorite witticism) which would enliven the table talk as the syrup gurgled from the pitcher.

MUSEUM NOTES

BY JOHN PHIPPS
MUSEUM DIRECTOR, HISTORICAL BUILDING

A report of discovery of human remains was made to the Department of History and Archives on Sunday, February 27, 1966, at approximately 7:30 p.m. by Mr. Lester Van Buskirk of Des Moines. The location of the find was reported to be on public property in Jester Park near Granger in Polk County, Iowa.

The site was investigated the next morning. The tract of land on which the site was located is adjacent to park property adjoining the park at the northwest corner (Jefferson Township, Section 29, Range 13000 north—12400 west in Polk County, Iowa). The land is owned by Peters Construction Company of Des Moines and has been used as a source of gravel

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