



News from Vermont # 180 -- "Old Kentucky Home"

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February 27, 2009

Hello again Maple People,

Betsy and I got on a plane a few days ago and headed out for Bowling Green, Kentucky. It was only a three-day trip and, in spite of chilly weather and troublesome airline delays, we chalked it up as a great time. I was asked months ago to be the keynote speaker for the "Kentucky Farms are Fun Convention" there at Bowling Green. I felt honored to be asked but viewed the task a bit daunting, thinking of vast rolling fields, million dollar horses, and miles of white board fences.

It all started with a visit by a couple gals from the Kentucky farm community two years ago. They stumbled across our place while on a fact finding trip to Vermont and asked for a tour of our sugarhouse. I remembered talking to them about their state's special agricultural problems. It seems the flame went out a while back on Kentucky's tobacco economy, leaving tobacco farmers with sagging markets and the need to quit. Vermont, they knew, was a front runner in this sort of thing because its dairy industry started drying up like a sagging udder many years ago. They were impressed with the array of agri-tourism ideas that had sprung up in little old Vermont and were apparently convinced that I had something to offer because of my experience at Morse Farm.

Recently they put me in touch with Stephen Yates, Director of Agri-Tourism at the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. Stephen and I emailed back and forth about the logistics of my visit and I soon learned that this guy was a bureaucrat with a farmer's work ethic. He asked me to kick off the convention on its opening morning with high motivation, using my talents in marketing and syrupy PR...when I said that my talents were more restricted to "BS", he seemed OK with it. Through my dealings with Stephen, I knew that my reception in Kentucky would be with a "Y'all come on down" style of friendliness.

After our grueling trip to Nashville on cramped and tardy airplanes, we finally arrived in Bowling Green at midnight the night before my presentation. A few hours of shut-eye brought us, sleepy-eyed, to the Sloan Convention Center and the 2009 Kentucky Farms are Fun Convention. We were royally greeted by Stephen and given a few minutes to mingle with the attendees before I was ushered to the rostrum. After a few words by Kentucky agriculture officials and a very generous introduction, I took my place in front of 80 farm folk who I would soon find to be the friendliest and most receptive crowd I've ever spoken to.

The true satisfaction for us, however, was at the noon hour when Betsy and I "broke bread" with individual Kentuckians. One man, Lee Blythe, greeted me with a small glass jar of 2009 crop,

**Kentucky maple syrup! I was amazed that maple syrup could be made in Kentucky and, thinking of the frigid temperatures back home, a little jealous that Lee had already had the thawing weather necessary for a sap run. His family runs a bed and breakfast close to Bowling Green and Lee taps 15 maple trees. My thoughts went back to a trip I had made to Cedar Bluff, Iowa a few years earlier where I was equally amazed to find maple syrup being made. I returned home from that trip joking that I had found "the last sap bucket west". Suddenly another sweet milestone added to my library; I had now found "the last sap bucket south" in Auburn, Kentucky!**

**Another man explained the demise of Kentucky's tobacco industry. I was struck by his positive attitude when I asked if there was any bitterness among the farmers. His answer was clipped, more like a long word than a whole sentence... "Weget t'use ah tobaccabahns f'somethin' else now." Betsy and I met apple and peach farmers who give orchard tours, dairy farmers who make ice cream, fish farmers and goat milkers, all with their own unique spin on the concept of "value added". We left knowing that these farmers would not only survive but they would eventually find their way into a thriving "farms are fun" market on old Kentucky tobacco land.**

**The flight home, once again, brought the disappointment of late airplanes and long airport stays. It was well after dark when we finally reached the East Coast. The night was perfectly clear and our pilot had pointed out landmarks along the way. When we flew over Philadelphia, I remarked to Betsy about the vastness of the city which seemed to go on forever. Our approach to Newark International Airport, in fact, confirmed that thought; I suddenly realized that Philadelphia had never "ended" but had just merged with New York's metropolitan area! When our jet banked and turned sharply a few times, I assumed it was to accommodate the dozens of other jets that dotted the sky like lightning bugs in July. On our final bank, I gazed vertically down on the lights of a world that may have overstepped environment's welcome. My thoughts went back to Bowling Green, Kentucky and those farmers who I knew were doing it right.**

**Gotta rush...sap'll be running today! Today is our second day in a row that's thawing and we've got more work to do before our tanks will start filling. Very soon we'll have fresh, 2009 maple syrup available at [www.morsefarm.com](http://www.morsefarm.com)! How about going there right now for a look at the sizes and grades of our world's best Vermont maple syrup.**

**Sweet spring to you!**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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