

The Story Behind The Can

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Pure maple syrup is taken for granted by most Vermonters, but in other states, and countries all over the world, someone's first taste of this luscious liquid gold was poured from a "cabin can" made in Swanton by New England Container Company.

"It promotes maple syrup and Vermont, pure and simple," said Rolie Devost, who owns the company and spent seven years bringing the can from creative concept to tangible reality.

"Your average Vermonter probably won't buy syrup in this can because it's a little more expensive, but think about the tourist trade. They're going to walk right by an aisle of maple syrup, no matter how attractively it's packaged, just because they don't know what it is, but once their eye is drawn to the unique design of the log cabin can, they'll take some home to Iowa, Florida, France or wherever," he said. "You can bet after they've tasted pure Vermont syrup, the next time they visit, they'll be buying it by the gallon everywhere! It's intended as a way to introduce the product to a new market. That's why we make it in two metric sizes, 250ml and 500ml, for legal sale on an international level."

Many syrup cans look alike. But the genesis of the log cabin can is the tale starting with Devost's first inklings of the first can in 1984.

The house-shaped container had been used in the past for coffee, and by the old Towle's company for table syrup, last sold probably around 1954. I'd been playing with the thought in my head for several years I actually began working on it. I finally went with an artist named Jay Walbert from Barton who seemed the best one to put it together the way I'd conceived it. It all had to be artificially constructed, you see, none of these pictures (on the can) are actual complete photographs. They're made up of composites of photos and drawings, and it was a very long process."

Walbert is a graphic artist who runs Creative Image, and he fondly recalled the intricacies of creating the log cabin can for Devost. In fact, he said, it became somewhat of a launching point for his career, in that he's now sought out specifically to design packaging for Vermont specialty foods, with unique, picturesque eye-catching containers.

"My niche," he said, adding, "I'm more of an artist than a photographer. The log cabin can was a challenge; it was all 'cut and paste' in those days. I do it all on computer now."

From the front, the scene is a simple log cabin with a young boy standing on the steps next to a snow-covered woodpile on which sits a cat. All illusion, both Devost and Walbert said.

Walbert constructed a "cabin wall" from a set of toy Lincoln Logs and photographed it. Another photo made the door and window.

"We needed a boy of a certain age and look. At the time, I was doing some work for Walter Cronkite's son, and Walter's step-grandson Morgan Barber became our boy."

The boy was tall for his age, so they had to "cut him off a little at the knees," Devost said.

Of course, there weren't really any steps to his cabin's facade, so Walbert photographed a mock-up of them too, using the same toy logs. These were all black and white photos, superimposed on top of each other, then in the end, I colored them all in. I had to photograph Morgan from the right perspective, so he'd appear to be standing on the steps, so we took him down to the park and stood him on a rock. The photo of the woodpile is real, but the snow is colored in. That was my old cat Fatman sitting on it. Then

Rolie wanted a collie dog for one of the other panels, so I just drove around until I found a suitable one and photographed it."

The dog looks at a man pouring sap. His identity is unknown, as Devost explained the shot was an old black and white from 1921. "The man was wearing a leather cap with a snap-brim popular in those days, but I wanted something geared more for the present market, so we colored that in green. Then we put in a shamrock for good luck." The shamrock can be seen by closely inspecting the ox yoke hanging high on the cabin wall.

Pictured on the other side panel are two girls and a horse. One is seated bareback on the horse while the other is holding the lead rope. The picture is from a photograph taken specifically for the can in 1982.

The girls are Devost's daughters. In his Jonergin Drive office, Devost proudly showed off the framed graduation pictures of Kristie, now 21, who was the little girl standing next to the horse, and Tiffany, now 19, who had been sitting on the horse, Maryah, a 3/4 Arabian palomino mare who was ten years old at the time.

Mike Martel of Swanton, still has Maryah amongst his herd.

Devost opened drawers and files of his original drawings on graph paper and the contact sheets of the roll of film taken of his daughters with the horse.

Devost said that the horse Maryah was chosen by chance. It could have been any of the Martel's herd to earn eternity on Devost's can.

"I knew Mike had some horses and I just rented one for an hour," he shrugged. Maryah was the mount and companion of Debra Bovat, daughter of Larry and Betty Bovat of Swanton, until she "traded up" for one of Martel's registered Morgans.

Ideas progressing to fruition; photography, colorization, and artwork completed, the log cabin can still hadn't come to life. "It was more expensive than the normal average can everyone was familiar with," admitted Devost. "In the beginning I had a hard time selling it -no was willing to take a chance. Finally I produced 50,000 cans with the trademarked name 'Crawford's,' loaded them up, and drove all over New Hampshire and Maine, selling them out of my truck to every little gift shop I came across. Then they caught on like wildfire, and suddenly everybody wanted in."

Devost has every right to claim pride in his product," as he describes it. The artist Jay Walbert said an architect friend traveling in St. Petersburg, FL, was startled to see Devost's log cabin can as part of a display in a packaging museum there. "It's all around the world now, all over Europe, and especially popular in Japan," he said excitedly.

To Devost, the can is his "baby." "I had enough foresight to make it metric, so it could be sold internationally," and he pointed out that the can is dually labeled in French and English, for sale in Canada as well. "It's become a real collectors' item."

Who'd have ever thought about so much time, mental and physical energy, and artistic creativity, going into a simple, familiar-looking maple syrup container?

And even though she was chose purely at random that day, old Maryah (now 24) was one of the stars who'll be nostalgically remembered in future years when Devost's log cabin will itself have become an antique.