

When Birch Oil Was Distilled in [Columbia] County

Introduction: "When Birch Oil Was Distilled in [Columbia]County," appeared in the Bloomsburg newspaper, *The Morning Press*, in a column entitled "The Passing Throng, on November 28, 1941. It described the process of getting "birch oil" near Pine Summit in Pine Township. Today, it is unlikely that many readers would be familiar with this subject. The oil came from the North American birch, a large tree native to Pennsylvania, with a fragrant inner bark having a wintergreen-like scent. "It is the real source of the 'wintergreen' essential oil used for chewing gum, breath mints, and many medicines because true wintergreen is much more expensive." The oil can be clear, pale yellow, or have a reddish appearance.

Birch oil – there's scarcely an older man who remembers it from his school – is a Columbia County produce.

But the birch oil under immediate discussion is not that variety with which the boy, and particularly the boy attending the county school, had knowledge when he was asked to go out and cut a nice, long birch limb to bring back to the teacher who then applied it in a manner that indicated there was no occasion to spoil the child by sparing the rod.

The birch oil which was manufactured in Columbia County had another application, and it was not applied to the rear of the boy's anatomy. Shipped to the cities it was sold as high as \$12 a pound as an extract used in anything that had a birch flavor.

Up in the hills back of Pine Summit it was not an unusual sight to find located in the woods where the black birch grew the thickest, a distillery, crude in construction but nevertheless producing the goods. These distilleries were easily made. Several square iron boxes, a few coils of pipe and plenty of cold spring water and the work started.

First, the black birch trees were felled and all pieces over four inches in diameter were cut into four foot lengths, just the size to fit nicely in the boxes. The boxes were then covered and placed over a hot fire, while on the birch sticks was poured a quantity of water so that the birch might be steamed until all the juice was extracted. Then the distilling process started with the juice and the oil secured in this manner. The oil was then placed in jugs and was ready for shipment to market.

Years ago, it is said, a number of parties set up these distilleries in the mountains in Lycoming County and hundred of gallons of birch oil were secured but after a while the authorities received word of large amounts of liquor in that section which evidently was being made by "moonshiners." A couple of detectives was called in to investigate and soon located the source of the liquor. After the birch had all been secured by those operating the distilleries, they transformed them into "moonshine" distilleries and soon

flooded the section with illicit whiskey. The men operating them were never caught, for they learned they were being watched and left before the officers arrived.

The distilling of birch oil has long since ceased on any extensive scale in this section.