My generation: John Thueys of Sugarbush talks with his granddaughter, Laura Van Ess, 2, at the 80-acre farm of Laura's parents, Joe and Clara Van Ess in Sugarbush.

Sugarbush's roots inspired

Entrepreneurial spirit thrives in Belgian farm community

By Lisa Sumter
Press-Gazette

SUGARBUSH — Don't let the serenity of this community fool you.

Business is booming in Sugarbush.

The roads aren't lined with fast-food joints or department stores, mini-mart gas stations or supermarkets. The pursuit of income is less flashy, with business sites often based on homesteads.

People like being their own boss in this Brown County community of about 70, residents say. Farming is a primary force and many people have embarked on other small business ventures.

Sugarbush, on County Highway N about 5 miles east of Green Bay, boasts two construction companies, a furnace business, a milk hauling business, restaurant, tavern and an excavating firm.

Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church and St. Hubert's Cemetery also are here.

The details are a bit murky, but local history has it that Sugarbush, or La Sucerie as it was called by its Belgian founders, was established around 1854.

It is the independent, hard-working spirit, derived from generations of farmers, that inspired many entrepreneurs here, residents say. The need to bolster a farming income also is an influence.

"Lots of people run their businesses at home," Lynn Whipp says. "Those who were in farming at one time were very independent and when they got out of it they still wanted their own business."

Whipp and her husband Leonard own Davister-Whipp Bar and Food, 5970 Humboldt Road.

The restaurant, with its rustic wood exterior and homey country decor, is known throughout the area for its family style meals, especially the broasted chicken.

Lynn Whipp has lived all of her 37 years in Sugarbush. She says the community is home to many established families that have lived here for generations. Her parents and three brothers all live in the area. Large families are common.

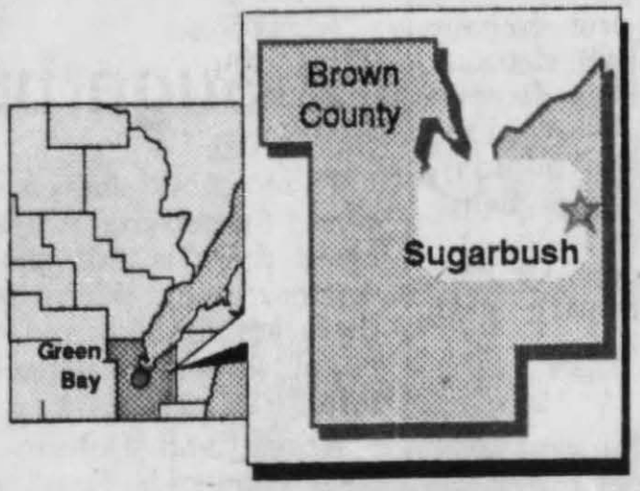
Sugarbush residents even lean toward working hobbies. The Whipps operate a 120-acre farm they call "The Ranch."

"That's what we do in our spare time," she says.

Residents say favorite pastimes include snowmobiling, pool, bowling, baseball and darts at the local taverns.

Please see **Sugarbush/B-2**

Press-Gazette photos by Ken Behrend



The Sugarbush file

☐ **Population:** 70, as estimated by residents Leonard and Lynn Whipp.

☐ **Organic origins**: Sugarbush got its name from the "sugar bushes" found in the area.

A historical account says the sugar bushes were actually an oasis of hardwood trees, including maples, that grew in an area of pine forests.

☐ **Festive tradition:** Community participation is a given during the Kermiss, or Belgian fall festival, in Sugarbush.

It is held the second weekend in October. Residents say almost everyone in the community takes part in the parade — from baseball teams to businesses.

☐ **Ethnic identity:** There is a mix, but old-timers in Sugarbush remember when each community in the area had a distinct ethnic makeup — Belgians in Sugarbush, Germans in New Franken and Luxemberg, and Poles in Eaton.

Horsing around: Dolores and Ardeal Davister show one of the Belgian horses they raise in Sugarbush. The couple's horses often appear in area parades and other events.

☐ Sugarbush

The Catholic church is another center for activity. A baseball diamond there is full almost every summer night, Whipp says. "And there are dinners and white elephant sales and pancake breakfasts."

Ardeal and Dolores Davister, 6090 Humboldt Road, are Lynn Whipp's parents and are the original owners of her restaurant. The senior couple remember Sugarbush when it was entirely a Belgian community.

A Green Bay man owned the restaurant then and approached Ardeal about renting it.

"I was Belgian and Catholic and local," Ardeal says. "That's the way they thought it should be at that time."

Now the couple, like their daughter and son-in-law, raise horses, mostly Belgians. They also own carriages and appear in parades or rent their services for weddings and other events.

Joe and Clara Van Ess, 5981 Humboldt Road, own an 80-acre farm. They also rent and work another 50 acres. The couple and their nine children share the farm with cows, chickens, pigs, sheep and rabbits.

"It's a small farm by today's standards," Joe says.

Many small farmers have sold out to larger operations, residents say. But small farmers like the Van Esses wouldn't trade their life.

"I like the work — being my own boss," he says. "I worked out and that wasn't real great."

Working out doesn't mean going to an aerobics class in Sugarbush. It means working off the farm. Van Ess tells a story of sitting in a cold shed, eating a cold lunch on a farm where he worked years ago.

"My uncle told me this is what you have to look forward to for the next 40 years," he says. "That made up my mind right there to go on my own."

■ **Next week:** Kewaunee