# Pioneer Pursuit of Something Sweet
## By Jill Mulvay Derr

***Editor's Note:*** *This fun excerpt was taken from* Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers. *This highly informative book from BYU Press allows readers a glimpse of what early Pioneer life was really like. From the clothes they wore to the food they ate, their schooling, their relationship with Native Americans, their furniture, and their communities, all is covered in this Pioneer Day book. Following is a description of how the Pioneers satisfied their sweet tooth despite very limited resources.*

Wild berries could be dried or made into preserves for winter use. Carl Evirt Jensen of Manti remembered gathering berries in a large bucket all summer long. His mother used molasses to make them into preserves. "Lots of times," he said, "we would have thirty gallons of molasses and preserves, in the cellar for winter use." At first, sweet syrups were made by boiling down squash and beets. "We used to raise beets and made beet molasses for a sweet," Mary Stapley Bringhurst recalled, remembering with fondness the vinegar pies made on special occasions with a savory filling of vinegar, beet molasses, and flour.

Provo pioneers recorded washing sweet sap off the leaves of cottonwood trees along the Provo River — "sugar the thickness of a knife edge" — and boiling it down into syrup and sugar. Juice also could be squeezed out of cornstalks and boiled down into syrup.

Sugar was the one item that pioneers consistently mentioned as unavailable or terribly expensive. One or two pounds of sugar would be made to last a family one year. "It was used only as medicine for the babies," Isaiah Cox explained. Jane Sprunt Warner Garner recalled her mother returning from a three-day journey to Salt Lake City to get the family's "first sugar. It was brown sugar and carefully hoarded in a sugar bowl with a cloth tied over it, to be used only on special occasions, generally when company came and we children got very little of it." Although scarce, brown sugar was cheaper and more readily available than white.

In the early 1850s, instead of importing large quantities of expensive sugar, Brigham Young and Church officials imported sugar-beet seed and machinery in hopes of setting up a sugar works in the area south of Salt Lake City — now known as Sugar House. While the cultivation of sugar beets was no problem, the imported machinery could not be made to produce sugar, and by 1856 the enterprise was decidedly a failure.

Still intent on minimizing imports, President Young advocated production of sorghum cane, which settlers in several areas succeeded in raising. Syrup extracted from sorghum stalks (termed by some settlers "sugar cane") could be boiled down to thick molasses, and sorghum seed could be used as grain. "Many of the farmers made their own pure molasses from the sugar cane they raised," Alma Chambers remembered. Fannie Ellsworth Greenwell described how "the juice was squeezed from the sugar cane by running it through large wooden rollers. The juice was then boiled in the large vats of tin. My father had three of these vats and the juice was boiled first in one and then in the second and then into the third vat for the last boiling. He had large homemade wooden spoons to stir the molasses with and wooden dippers to dip it with." Fannie's father may well have been the owner of a sorghum mill, one powered by water, perhaps, or one with power "furnished by a boom pole, pulled with one horse." Such mill owners often took every tenth gallon for their work.

Molasses was used in fruit preserves, pies, cakes, cookies, and candy. James J. Adams, who went to Parowan in 1851, said his family used molasses and "a little honey, when we got bees. I remember the first cake mother made out of sugar, we wouldn't hardly taste it, as it looked so different from what we were used to." Until a sugar-beet factory was successfully established at Lehi in 1891, molasses "remained the principal source of sweet in the territory."

*The proceeding excerpt was taken from Jill Mulvay Derr's article: "'I Have Eaten Nearly Everything Imaginable': Pioneer Diet." The article can be found in Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers. published by BYU Press.*