



## Harvesting Rubber Trees

Dr. Allan Tiarks spoke at the Treynor Optimist Club on January 31, 2015. He has been recognized with the Emeritus Scientist Award in recognition of his significant research contributions during his 30-year career with the USDA Forest Service. He has a Doctorate in Forestry and has been to China, South America, and Africa. He also spent two years in Tanzania in the Peace Corps.

Dr. Tiarks mainly talked about when he visited Liberia in April 1979 to see rubber production. Thailand is the leading rubber production country with 3.5M tons/year. Indonesia is second with about 3M tons and Liberia is 14<sup>th</sup> with 64,000 tons/year. Firestone started rubber plantations in Liberia in 1926.

To harvest rubber, workers cut off a small slice of bark off every few days to get the sap. The real skill lies in cutting as small of slice as possible to keep the sap running. A single worker will do 500 trees a day, covering 1000 trees every two days and then repeating. Other workers pick up the latex sap every day. The latex will spoil if left out very long. The latex is put to milk cans, then moved to a truck.

All rubber trees are grafted to get the same quality of product from them. The trees will last 60 years.

Some people outside the plantation produced dried latex and sold it to Firestone, since they didn't have the capability to keep it good in liquid form.

The tappers lived in small mud huts. As a side job, they made rum out of sugar cane.

Rubber production in Liberia ended in the early 1980s, due to the civil war. It began again in the 2000s.