

A Mohawk Legend: The Origins of Maple Syrup and Sugar



Making syrup and sugar is an Indigenous effort that goes back hundreds of years where-ever you find Maple trees. Here, in this historical photo and Ojibwe couple are making sugar as the final process from a wooden dish, stirring very quickly to granulate the thickened syrup.

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Long ago, when human beings were new in the eastern part of Turtle Island, they barely lived through the long winters, their bodies and spirits weakened by the cold and dark. Though they worked to gather and preserve enough food for the winter it was not enough to keep them well and strong. The Creator saw the sadness of the people so he decided to ask the tree nation if there was something which could be done to restore their happiness. The leader of the trees, the maple, offered to give its blood to the people so they may be restored to good health. So it was that at the end of the winter months the sap flowed freely from the maple. The sap was dark and sweet, a syrup which the people drank after putting basswood tubes into the trees so the precious fluid went into their pots almost without effort.

Satisfied that the people were once again happy and strong the Creator left to attend to his duties in other worlds.

Some time passed before the Creator was able to return to this world. It was once again the end of winter with snow still on the ground. He went to one of the villages only to find it empty, the long-houses cold with only ashes in the fire pits. He saw that there were tracks leading into the nearby woods which he followed. Soon he came upon a maple bush and there, scattered about on the ground were the people, with wooden tubes connecting the maples and their mouths. They were drinking the syrup from the trees until they could no longer stand. Even their dogs were laying on the ground, their paws raised to the sky with their own tubes into the trees. The Creator saw that the people were ragged and the children uncared for. He was very upset. He aroused them from their slumber and said that he would change the way in which the syrup was to be taken from the trees. No longer would it flow brown and thick but he people would have to make offerings to the maples, tap its sap and then work to make it into syrup and then sugar. By doing so they would come to appreciate this great gift.

Since that time the Mohawks watch the maples and when they notice the sap is flowing during the last weeks of winter they will gather at the longhouse to celebrate this great gift which renews their bodies and lifts their spirits. In Mohawk, maple sap/syrup is called wahta ohses. The people are glad when this happens for they know spring is returning to the earth as the eldest brother (the sun) brings the warmer days