

ISKIGAMIZIGEDAA

Lets Boil Maple Sap



The Akawe Biindaakoojigen series
(First You Offer Tobacco)

written by Erik Redix
illustrated by Wesley Ballinger

Pronunciation Guide

Ojibwe words are written in double vowel system (or Fiero orthography) that is most commonly used by Ojibwe speakers in the United States. Consonants in the double vowel system sound roughly like their English equivalents. Vowels, however, have the following pronunciations:

Vowel	Sounds like
a	the “u” in sun
aa	the “a” in father
e	the “ay” in day
i	the “i” in sit
ii	the “ee” in teeth
o	the “o” in go
oo	the “oo” in tooth

Glossary of Ojibwe words

asemaa: tobacco; traditionally tobacco is sacred and used to show thanks

baapaase: red headed woodpecker

biskitenaagan: birch bark container to collect sap folded and tied together with spruce root or basswood twine

iskigamizige-giizis: maple sugaring moon; April

ininaatig: maple tree

mewinzha: long ago

omakakiig: frogs



Today Awanikwe and Aanakwad were visiting their grandparents. “*Ho-wa!* It’s getting to be that time of year,” Mishoomis said, “*Iskigamizige-giizis*; maple sugaring time.” “How do you know?” Awanikwe asked. “Because the days are getting warmer,” Mishoomis said. “We collect the sap from the maple tree. The sap is a liquid, so for it to run it has to be above freezing outside.” “It usually starts at the end of March or the beginning of April,” Nookomis added. “Are we going to go today!?” Aanakwad asked. “*Gaawiin*,” said Nookomis, “it’s takes a few warm days in a row for the sap to start running in those trees.”



“*Mewinzha* (long ago) they didn’t have weather forecasts so they would start to move into their camps at the maple sugarbush when they would hear *baapaase*,” Nokomis said. “They could also look at the base of the maple tree. If the sap is getting ready to run there will be a ring around the bottom of the tree where the snow has started to melt away,” Mishoomis added.



It was a beautiful sunny day, but still a little chilly. “It was a long winter and it feels good to get outside now that it’s getting warmer and the days are getting longer!” Mishoomis exclaimed. The first thing he did was to place an offering of *asemaa* next to a maple tree and a small birch bark plate of deer meat, wild rice, and blueberries. Nookomis explained, “First we always make an offering to the spirits whenever we take something. This is spiritual food this maple syrup, and we need to treat it with respect. We even offer the spirits a small plate with our most important foods on it.”



“We put the tap about four feet above the ground on the South side of tree because that’s the side that gets the most sun,” Mishoomis explained. “We drill about two inches into the tree and the hole should be slanted down so the sap can run out.” As soon as he drilled, the sap dripped down the bark. He then lightly tapped the metal tap into the hole. Aanakwad tasted one of the drops. “It tastes sweet!” he said. Nokomis hung a metal holder with a blue bag on the tap. “You can help with the next one,” Mishomomis told them.



“These trees are living beings like us and we need to respect them,” Mishoomis said. “The Ojibwe word for maple tree is *ininaatig*. ‘*Inini*’ means man, so it really means ‘man-tree.’ “How do you tell it’s an *ininaatig*?” Aanakwad asked. “It has grayish brown bark and the bigger trees have furrowed bark that has these plates.” “How big do they have to be?” Awanikwe asked. “We tap trees that are larger than ten inches in diameter,” Mishoomis answered. “We look for trees with a nice spread out crown because the tree will produce more sap to get to all those branches.”



“*Mewinzha* they didn’t have metal taps. One of the ways they used to make taps was they would take branches of a sumac tree and make a hole in the middle,” Nookomis said. “These still make good taps,” she added. “Would those sumac taps work with the blue bags?” Aanakwad asked. “Oh, there were no blue bags back then either. Instead, they would make *biskitenaagan*, a folded birch bark basket and place that under the tap,” said Mishoomis.



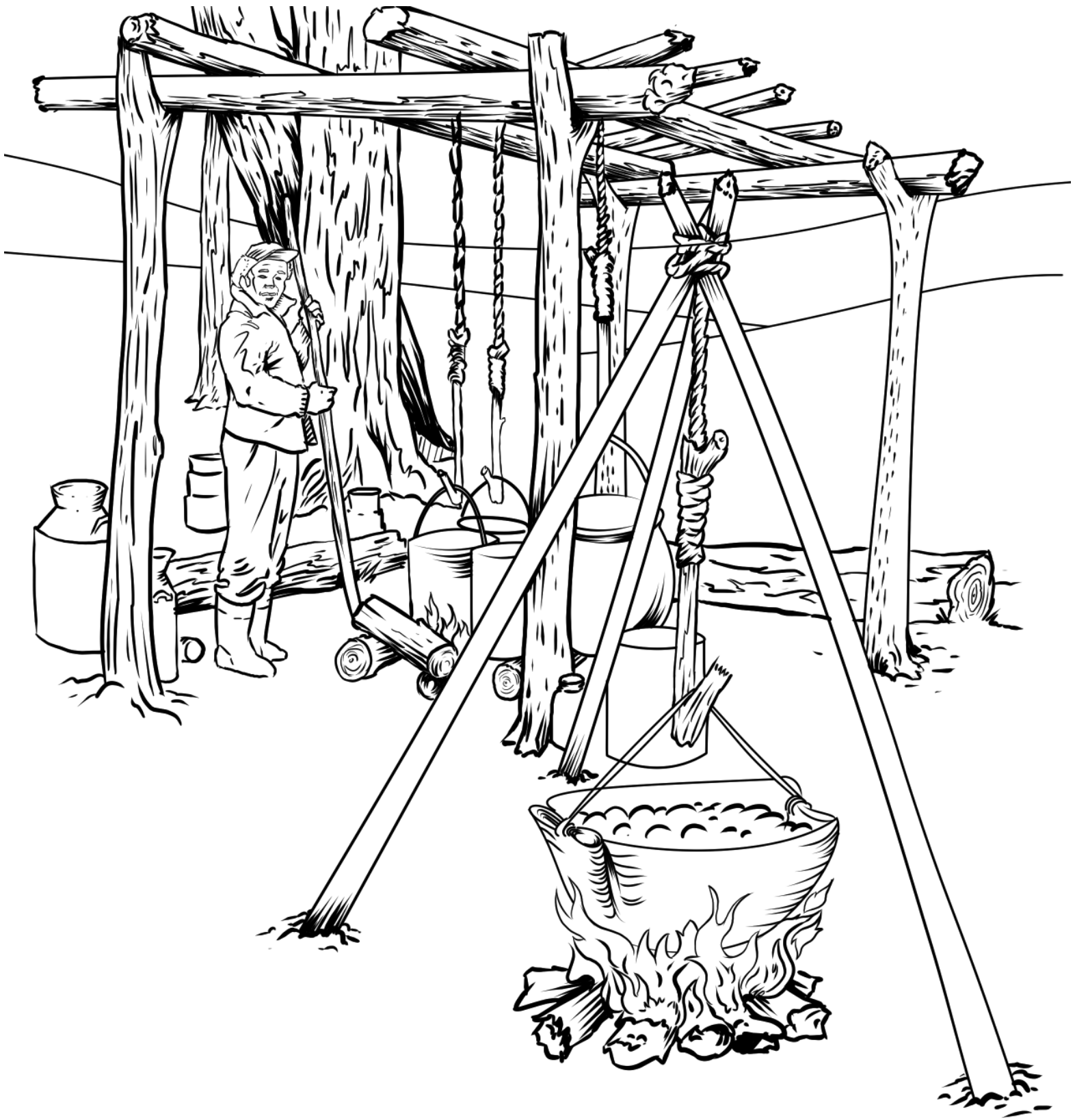
They tapped about fifty trees that day. The snow was still very deep and sometimes they sank through the snow even with their snowshoes on. It was hard work! “This should be enough for us and so that we can share the syrup with our relatives who can’t go out and tap trees,” Nookomis explained.



The next day they all went back to the sugarcane and collected all the sap there was in the blue bags even though there wasn't very much yet. Mishoomis explained, "We're going to boil up this small amount of sap and eat all of it up at a ceremony. We do this to show the spirits that we are thankful that they provide for us." "This is how we do it in our family," Nookomis added. "Different families and communities may have different ways of doing things but that doesn't mean they are wrong."



A few days later in the sugarbush Aanakwad noticed there was a little less snow than there was before. It was easier to walk around too because the snow had hardened. They all helped collect sap by pouring out each blue bag into a bucket. As they collected, Mishoomis started a fire in a pit enclosed by bricks, "it's time to boil down." On top of the bricks, he put a shiny stainless steel pan. "Come over and pour the sap into the pan."



“*Mewinzha* they would use a frame built out of logs and boil the sap in cast iron kettles,” Mishomis said. “Our pan boils a little faster since it’s thinner so it doesn’t take so long to heat up. Before they had kettles they used a birch bark pot. We Ojibwe have a long history of adapting to new technology to make our work easier and quicker.”



The sap took a long time to boil. While Mishoomis tended the fire, Aanakwad, Awanikwe and Nookomis kept collecting sap from the trees further away and adding it to the pan. “Be careful - try not to spill any,” Nookomis said. Awanikwe was worried when she heard that. “What happens if we do?” she asked. “Don’t worry, we’ll have a ceremony with *asemaa* and ask the spirits for forgiveness so they know we didn’t mean to waste what they gave us,” Nookomis reassured her.



“*Mewinzha* everyone in the family would go out and camp at the sugarbush,” Mishoomis said. “They tapped a lot of trees and so they would have to boil all day and all night. Back then they didn’t have all the technology that we have to make things easier so it was really hard work! Everybody in the community helped out. All the children would be out there so they gave them maple candy in the evening to relax them so they could sleep. You’d think it would make them hyper, but actually it calmed them down.”



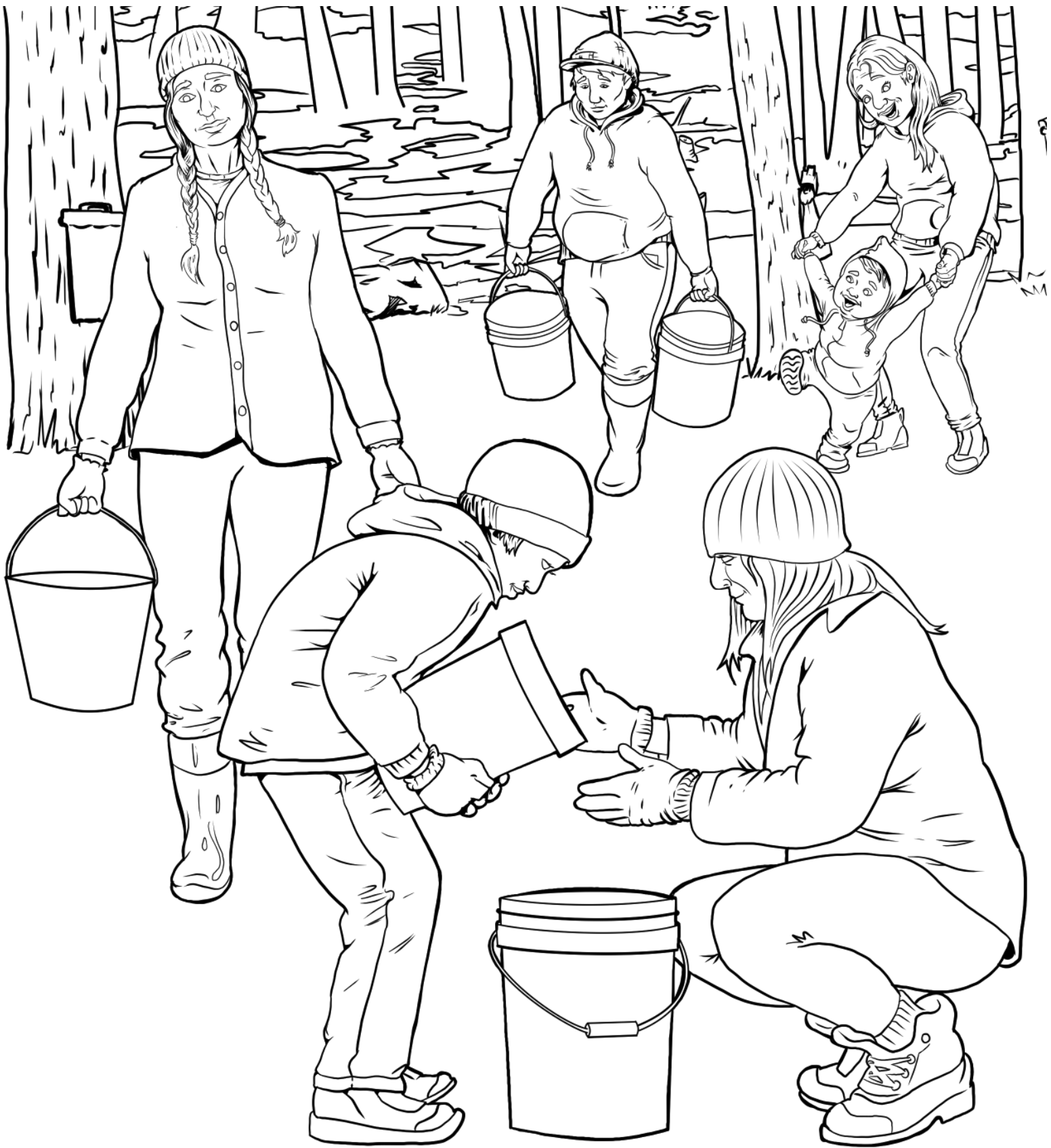
They boiled the sap for many hours. “It takes about 35 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup,” Nookomis told them. Finally, Mishoomis pulled the pan off the fire. “It’s finally thick enough to be maple syrup!” he said. “Now we can it.” Nookomis carefully ladled the syrup over cheesecloth and into mason jars. “When we get home I’ll boil these jars so that they seal and the syrup will stay fresh.”



“*Mewinzha* they boiled the syrup down even more and made sugar to season their food,” Nookomis said. “They would work the thickened sap with a wooden stick in a wooden trough until it became sugar. Sometimes they would put the sugar into molds and make sugar cones and other shapes. That maple candy would give the Ojibwe energy for all the hard work ahead in the spring, summer and fall. It was also a food that wouldn’t go bad before the Ojibwe had refrigerators.”



The next few days were cold. “Is sugarbush over?” Aanakwad asked. “*Gaawiin*,” said Nookomis, “we’ll get more sap once it warms up. We usually have our taps out for about three weeks. When the sap run slows down like this we have to get ready for the next time we boil. We have to get more firewood and wash our buckets. It’s important that we follow through and do all the work so that we are ready and so that none of our sap goes to waste. If we don’t have the time to do all this work or have people to help us do it, we shouldn’t tap trees.”



Sure enough, Nookomis was right. It warmed up and they all went out to collect the sap and boil again. This time, their parents and a few cousins joined them. It was just like Mishoomis described in the old times when everyone would be out at the sugarbush. After that, they went out and collected and boiled a few more times over the next few weeks.



Then one day they they went out again and they heard frogs peeping in the distance. “Do you hear that?” Mishomis asked. “It’s *omakakiig*. It means we start pulling our taps and boil what we have. It’s warmer now and the sap is done running for the year.” They went around and collected all the taps and bag holders at their sugarbush. “We have to be sure that we gather everything and put it away for next year. We have to be respectful and can’t just leave things lying around in a big mess,” Mishoomis said.



A few days later Nookomis made pancakes for breakfast. Together they all sat down at the table and poured the delicious maple syrup over their pancakes. “Sugarbush is a lot of work, but it’s worth it when we have this good food to eat,” Awanikwe said.

Teachings

The *Akawe Biindaakoojigen* (First You Offer Tobacco) series seeks to create better understanding of Ojibwe seasonal activities in the 1854 Ceded Territory of Northeast Minnesota.

The series emphasizes traditional cultural teachings that should be followed for all harvest activities:

- 1) First we always offer *asemaa* because we have to show respect for the things we are taking.
- 2) Have a feast and eat all of the first harvest to show the spirits we are thankful for what they have provided.
- 3) Make sure that you have the time to complete all the work when you harvest. For example, if you go out and tap trees make sure you have the time to gather, boil, and preserve your syrup so no sap gets wasted. If you don't have the time to run your own sugarbush go out and help at a sugarbush in your community: there's always work to do at the sugarbush.
- 4) The Ojibwe have always adapted to new technologies that helped us to do things easier and quicker.
- 5) Different communities and families may have different ways of doing things: that doesn't mean they are wrong. If you have a question make sure to offer an elder some *asemaa* and ask about the teachings in your family and community.

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For more information on Ojibwe maple sugar

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1854
TREATY
AUTHORITY

• BOIS FORTE
• GRAND PORTAGE