

The Iroquois Origins of Maple Syrup

The Maple Moon or Moon of the Worm

Roger Chambers
Feb 23, 2010

March is a month of transition between winter and spring, often with an unpredictable season almost all its own. The temperatures in Upstate New York can range from an unusually warm 80 F down to sub zero Fahrenheit. This pulsating tension between the cold winter and warmer weather patterns and increasing daylight coincides with the vernal equinox, the Pascal Moon, and the Easter season to the European mind.

Before the French explorers of the 16th century and English, French, and Dutch settlers of the 17th century, the indigenous peoples knew the full moon near the equinox as the **Worm Moon**. This was when the worms started bringing castings to the surface, and robins started to reappear after their winter's absence.

There were other names for the moon by some tribes. **The Crow Moon** honored the late winter flocking of crows. In the far north, the **Crusty Moon** recognized the particular hard crusting of snow in late winter. Some tribes came to call it **Sap or Maple Moon**. This latter name evolved from the rising flow of the sap as days start to warm and winter changes to spring in fits and starts.

Early origins of Maple

The exact origins of the discovery of maple sap and its distillation, or processing, into syrup is impossible to determine with any firm historical accuracy. While a few authorities think the processing of the sap was taught to the Indians by the Europeans, they are in the minority. Most historians believe that various indigenous tribes had a knowledge of this sweet prior to contact with the Europeans. Lack of firm archeological proof and a lack of written records from the various tribes leave the debate open to conjecture and dispute, though there is much to support that the Indians did know about, and use this sweet, albeit in a much cruder fashion than is common today.

Maple trees observed during his explorations of Quebec were written about by Jacques Cartier in 1540. Recognition of the Indians using the refined sap as sugar and syrup dates from about 1557 in writings of Andre Thevet. Details of collection and distillation of sap by the Micmac Indians of eastern Canada were noted by Marc Lescarbot in 1606.

Before the Europeans came, the eastern woodlands were populated by numerous tribes with similar customs. From eastern Canada, Quebec, and New England to the Great Lakes states, they celebrated many of the same moons and seasonal festivals, and ate mostly the same types of game. These varied but slightly from region to region. They often, however, spoke distinct languages in various language groups.

Indian Legends on the Origins of Maple Syrup

There is a common myth, with many tribal variations, that the Creator originally made life too easy for his People, with maple trees having a syrup that flowed year round. One day, **Glooskap** (this name has many variations) arrived at a village and found it strangely quiet. No children or dogs came to greet him, the gardens were over grown with weeds, and the cooking fires were dead. He found the villagers lying in the maple grove, with the delicious sap running into their mouths from the trees.

Glooskap had special powers. Using a birch bark bucket, filled with water from lake, he rose above the trees and filled the trees with water until the sap ran thin. Then he encouraged his People of the village with a fiery speech. In this exhortation, he berated them for being lazy, and said as punishment the Creator was going to have the sap run only in the late winter. But, he urged them to take heed that when this happened, they would still be able to enjoy this special sweet, though only at this special time of year.

Another legend tells that an Algonquin or Iroquois Indian chief, **Woksis**, discovered this sweet sap in the following manner. One day, at the time the time of the melting snow, as he prepared to go hunting in a meager season of want and little game, he took his ax out of a maple tree where he had struck it a few inches into the bark the night before. His squaw happened to have a wooden or birch bark basket underneath, which collected the sap. Thinking that her warrior husband had filled it already with water, the

squaw Moqua used the sap to cook some meat, most likely venison, though one source says moose meat. Upon his return, he was surprised by the sweet odor of the cooking meat. When eaten, the meat was sweet. They soon realized that this sweetness came from the sap of the maple tree.

While details are sketchy, this evolved into an annual festival of sorts, celebrated in traditional ways by the Onondagas in Central New York as recently as the 1940s. While this time of year was usually called the Worm Moon, some tribes began to call it the Maple Moon.

Soon they began to have a maple festival to celebrate this sweet that was available only during this time of change from winter to spring. Maple sap and syrup became a major source of sweetening, rivaling honey. Both of these sweets were an important food to the Iroquois., comprising about 12% of their diet.

Indian Methods of Sap Collection and Syrup Production

Lacking metal working capabilities prior to the European contact, the Iroquois methods of obtaining and evaporating the sap were crude. They hacked or gouged the tree with hatchets or axes, which often killed the tree. They used bowls, of ceramic or white birch bark to collect sap. Different bowls of pottery or wood, usually troughs of hollowed out trunks, were used for boiling the sap. They placed hot stones from the fires into the containers of sap. This brought the sap to a boil. The hot stones were periodically replaced to continue the process. Occasionally, if conditions were ideal, they froze the sap, peeling off the frozen surface daily. They threw away the ice and ate the residue underneath.

Maple season was fleeting and unpredictable, and it remains so to this day. High quality syrup production requires warm days to about 45 F or so alternating with nights below freezing. If days are exceptionally warm, or too many nights remain above freezing, the quality of the sap collected and the syrup produced suffers. There are large variations of the sap run, from nine days to 57 days, the average being 37 days of collection.

European Adaptations and Expansion of Maple Production

During the almost two centuries of contact the Iroquois and Algonquins had with the French, English, and Dutch, the Europeans learned about this maple production, and started to make improvements with their superior technologies. The fickleness of nature cooperating by providing sufficiently warm days and sub-freezing nights resulted in the attempts at moving maple syrup production into Virginia by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush, among others, to be modestly successful at best, and finally abandoned. Maple production was much better quality and more reliable in New England, New York, and Quebec. While maple syrup production has occurred at one time or another in some 30 (present) US states, it was, and is, more common and of better quality in the north.

By the time of American Independence and subsequent dispersal of most of the Indians from the northeast, the Europeans had evolved methods of improved production of the maple sap and its sweet products that only very gradually changed over the next century and a half. It became a northeastern tradition of the short transitional season between winter and spring that provided a sweet loved by most Americans to this day.

The Maple Weekends in March in New York that have become increasingly popular in recent years owe their existence to the accidental discovery of this tasty treat by an Indian chief several centuries ago. As such, it is an important part of our historical heritage, as well as the specific natural conditions in our region that make it possible.

References - Books

Lawrence, James M., and Martin, Rux. Sweet Maple: Life, Lore & Recipes From the Sugarbush. Shelburne, Vermont: Chapters Publishing Ltd., 1993. Co published by Vermont Magazine, Montpelier, Vermont, 1993.

Klees, Emerson. Legends and Stories of the Finger Lakes Region. Rochester, NY: Friends of Finger Lakes Publishing, 1995

Schery, Robert W. Plants for Man. Englewoods Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., C.1952, 4th printing 1959.

The Old Farmers's Almanac, editions for 2008, 2009, 2010. Yankee Publishing, Dublin, NH.