

Chicog-Then and Now for May, 2025
JoAnn Malek

Spring can be a dangerous time. Fire spreads quickly through dry brown foliage. Sudden snowstorms catch people unaware. Strong winds take down trees and the dangling limbs dubbed “widow-makers” by loggers. In spring, the fourth moon of the year, the ‘moon of boiling’ is the time for sugaring.

Indigenous peoples call maples the leader of trees because they’re the first to wake up as days warm. Sap that has been stored in the roots begins to move again. Sap is water containing sugar and nutritious minerals including phosphorous, magnesium, potassium, iron, calcium. Using energy from the sun, deciduous trees make this liquid in the leaves by a process called photosynthesis. Sap feeds the tree, helps it grow and bear new leaves, keeps the tree healthy. Sweet sap turns bitter after tree buds begin to swell.

At the time of the maple moon, Anishinabe tribes of the midwest would move to sugar camps. Maple syrup was an important part of their diet. It was also used as sweetener for bitter medicines, to cure meats, and as an anesthetic. Maple sugar slabs became a trade item.

Spiles made from elderberry or sumac stems were hammered into the south side of maple trees, then sealed with spruce pitch. Sap flows best on warm, above-freezing, sunny days following below-freezing nights. Sap that dripped from the spile was collected in birchbark baskets and stored overnight in clay pots. Lighter water in the sap would rise and freeze, to be skimmed off in the morning. Rocks were heated red-hot in the fire and dropped into the sap to bring it to a boil. As the rocks cooled they were replaced with others, causing water remaining in the sap to evaporate.

Tapping is the word that means cutting the tree. Tapping does not harm the tree if done carefully. When trees larger than ten inches in diameter are tapped less than one-tenth of the tree’s sugar food is removed. This year I gather sap daily from the maple trees we have tapped. Each tap hole will provide approximately one quart of syrup. My son is cooking in a large flat evaporator pan over an outdoor, enclosed fire. I remember the year we tapped boxelder trees in our small northeast Minneapolis yard and cooked the sap in the kitchen. Nearly forty parts water in the form of steam must be removed from sap to make one part maple syrup. I don’t remember the copious amounts of sticky steam the boiling produced, but I do remember scrubbing the burnt syrup from the bottom of the pot.



Boiling sap must be tended so it doesn't burn. A wooden paddle is used to stir occasionally and to lift out pieces. As volume decreases more sap is added. Boiling temperature increases slowly at first, very quickly toward the end. Suddenly foaming bubbles of syrup come together and the whole batch rises up in the pan. Boiling will subside if snow is shoveled directly into the firebox or if the surface of the syrup is touched with a bit of butter or bacon. Underboiled syrup feels watery and is more susceptible to spoilage. To remove impurities called sugar sand, hot syrup is filtered through white flannel, then poured into sterilized jars. This syrup is germ-free and will keep indefinitely when stored in a cool, dark place.

An Anishinabe elder describes the end of the sugar moon: "When we've collected enough sap and return safely, we fulfill our promise to the trees to express gratitude for this sustaining gift from the Creator."

IMPORTANT MAY DATES

Wednesday 5/14, 6pm, monthly Chicog meeting

Wednesdays 5/14&28, Namekagen Transit Service

Thursday 5/8, 11-1, Bibliodragon, town hall

Saturday 5/24 9-3, Craft Fair, town hall

Monday 5/26 Memorial Day Ceremony, Chicog Cemetery

Wednesday 5/28, 10:30-12, Books&Bread, Beaverbrook

Town Website: www.townofchicog.com

CHICOG FUN FEST: Save the date-Saturday, August 23.

Contact Darcie with ideas: townchicogmail@yahoo.com

Thank you for reading Chicog-Then and Now