

**N**ative American tribes are very diverse. Cultural teachings, philosophies, and social dynamics differ greatly from one tribe to another. Even within one tribe, stories and teachings may vary from region to region.

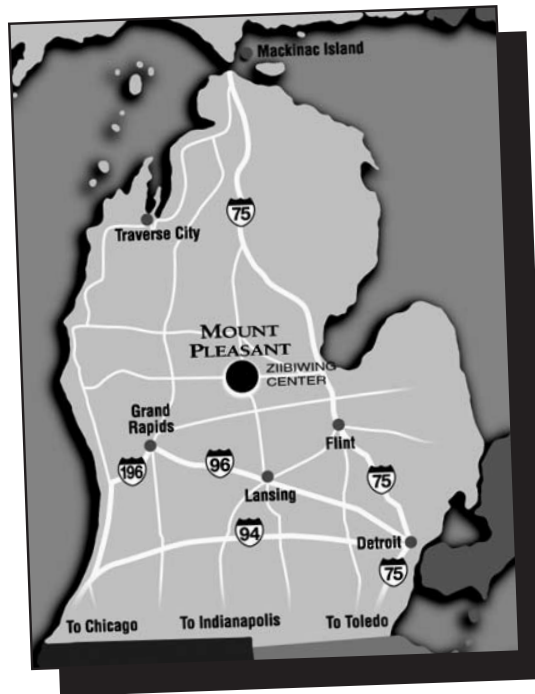
The teachings shared in our *Kinoomaagewin Mzinigas* (Little Teaching Books) may be presented differently in other areas.



**ZIIBWING CENTER**  
*of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways*

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## Ziisibaakodokaaning

(The Sugarbush)



Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Part 3 of a series of  
*Kinoomaagewin Mzinigas*  
(Little Teaching Books)

## Nenaboozhoo and the Maple Trees

Anishinabek stories tell us of a time long ago when Nenaboozhoo found all of the Anishinabek lying around in a grove of maple trees, just laying on their backs while sweet maple syrup dripped from trees into their open mouths. The Anishinabek were not doing other work like tending their gardens, gathering berries, fishing, or hunting.

Nenaboozhoo came up and scolded them “This will NOT do,” he said “you are going to become fat and lazy if you keep living this way!” Nenaboozhoo then quickly gathered water and climbed to the tops of the maple trees and poured the water over the trees. This thinned the syrup into sap that came out watery and just barely sweet to the taste.

Nenaboozhoo told the Anishinabek that when they wanted to have maple syrup they would have to boil the sap down. “This will require a lot of work” he said, “and then you will appreciate the maple syrup that *Gitché Manido* (Creator or Great Mystery) has made available to you.” From that time on, the sap only drips from maple trees at certain times each year, so that it would not keep the Anishinabek from taking care of their other responsibilities such as hunting, fishing, and working in the gardens.

## Ziisibaakode Giizis (Sugaring Moon)

Maple sugar is likely the oldest agricultural product in North America. For many generations the Anishinabek have been gathering to make maple sugar during the time of the year when *boon* (winter) gives way to *mnookimi* (spring). Warm days that follow the winter cold trigger the process when sugar maple trees produce sap. The duration of the sugaring season and the amount of sap that the trees will produce depends on many factors, but it seems that cold nights accompanied with warm days make the sap run well.



Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Making sugar and syrup from the sap required hard work and skill. Hundreds of *wiigwaas* (birchbark) containers had to be constructed for sap collecting and maple sugar/syrup storage. During sugar making, a fire would burn for many days, so a stockpile of wood had to be gathered for these fires. *Mitigonaagan* (large trench-like bowls) had to be carved out of logs. These bowls were used to work the syrup into granulated sugar.



Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Knowledge that was passed down through the generations was essential to producing good sugar and syrup. It is not as simple as boiling the sap down. Sap had to be strained and initially warmed before being cycled

through a series of boiling containers — eventually being transformed into syrup or sugar. If the process was not done correctly, the whole batch could be ruined.

*Boon* (winter) was often a lean time for the Anishinabek, so sugar making was a time of celebration for our people. Families reunited and welcomed the coming of warmer weather and the time of gathering what they needed to survive throughout the year. Maple sugar was an important part of the diet of our ancestors. It provided a healthy source of energy and a delicious sweetener for foods. It was also an important trade item. When the maple sugar was finished and candies were shared, it was much like a holiday celebration that our ancestors looked forward to throughout the year. Today, we still make syrup here on the Isabella Reservation in our sugar-bush near the pow wow grounds (on the hill).



Photo courtesy of the Tribal Observer