

# A 1952 Visit to an Indian Sugabush

by Matthew Thomas

In the late summer of 1951 while working as a forester for the Northern Highland State Forest in Vilas County, a young Ted Peterson discovered a maple sugaring camp in an old growth forest of sugar maple and yellow birch on what he thought was state forest land. Noting a large flat pan resting on a sturdy stone and earth arch and a very old upside-down copper kettle sitting inside half of a birch bark covered wigwam, Peterson made a note to himself to come back the following spring to find out just whose sugarbush this was.

Returning the following April with his camera in hand,



*Pete Johnson tending the fire and watching the boil on his flat pan and stone arch (Photo Courtesy of Ted Peterson and the Lac du Flambeau Tribal Historic Preservation Office).*

time the sugar camp was in full operation with steam



*View of the half wigwam structure for sugar making at the Johnson's Partridge Lake sugarbush (Photo Courtesy of Ted Peterson and the Lac du Flambeau Tribal Historic Preservation Office).*

Not seeing any thermometers or hydrometers, Peterson asked Pete how he knew when the syrup was done. Johnson replied that it was finished when it tastes right and when it feels right.

A short distance away was the half wigwam where Peterson found Rose Johnson tending a small fire under the old copper kettle.

The Johnsons often set as many as 500 taps each spring, and Peterson soon realized that in addition to making syrup, the majority of the sap they gathered ultimately went into making maple sugar. As much as 160 pounds of sugar was made every

spring in the large copper trade kettle, handed down from earlier generations.



*Rose Johnson spooning warm soft maple sugar in metal sugar molds (Photo Courtesy of Ted Peterson and the Lac du Flambeau Tribal Historic Preservation Office).*

In observing Mrs. Johnson boil the syrup for sugar, Peterson noted that she would rub the inner rim of the kettle with deer tallow, and each time the bubbling mass of thick syrup foamed

up it would touch the grease near the rim and settle back down. Traditional defoamer! When the syrup has thickened to the right consistency and bubbles, the kettle was taken off the fire and the maple molasses was spooned into metal sugar molds to cool into sugar cakes.

Not having electricity or an icebox in their cabin, the Johnsons kept most of the more easily stored sugar for home consumption. But they also made 150 gallons of syrup, much of which they sold in stores in Eagle River, Star Lake, Rhinelander, and Lac du Flambeau, providing much needed cash to an otherwise subsistence lifestyle.

Pete Johnson came to the Partridge Lake settlement in 1914 when he married Rose Escanaba, where along with Rose's mother Mary, they raised their family. Although they maintained their traditional religious beliefs and a traditional gathering, farming, and hunting lifestyle, the Escanabas and Johnsons did not necessarily shun technological improvements.

Sometime before the 1920s, they stopped boiling sap in kettles and began to boil sap in a large iron flat pan. They also abandoned the use of wood taps and birch bark containers, shifting to metal taps and sap cans. Every few years they would move their camp to another location in these woods to allow some of the trees in their sugarbush a rest and they only removed the non-maples and the sick and damaged for firewood.

Pete Johnson died in the 1960s and Rose in the 1970s, but not before the family obtained title to their home and traditional sugarbush. The family continues to own and occupy the homestead and sugarbush and has made syrup in the woods as recently as the early 1990s.

Ted Peterson later went on to become an extension forester with the late Fred Trenk at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he spent many years as a conduit to Wisconsin maple producers for new information and technology on syrup making. But it was his 1952 encounter with a Potawatomi family in the woods of Vilas County that Peterson received his one of his first lessons on maple syrup production.

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