

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By Matthew Thomas (UW-Madison graduate student researching the maple syrup industry)

The naming of a place is an important way to differentiate between areas and tell one another, in as few words as possible, a great deal of information, such as what a place looks like, where it is located, and who lives there. There is also nostalgia to place names, telling of people's use of the landscape in the past. Maple sugaring is one such activity that has not escaped the attention of place-namers and mapmakers. Within



the states where maple syrup and sugar are or were made, the naming of places after maple sugaring appear most common in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

In Wisconsin,

place names containing the words maple or sugar are found across the landscape. With our tradition of naming high points and low spots, we have landforms such as Maple Hill in Sauk County and Maple Bluff in Dane County; and Maple Dale in Vernon and Sugar Grove Valley in Sauk County. The name Sugarloaf is found on high places in La Crosse, Green Lake, and Jackson Counties, and Maple Ridge is a popular name in the southwestern counties of Crawford, Pepin, Richland and Vernon. Sugar Camp Hill in Douglas County is named for a prominent stand of maples tapped in the past, while Sugarbush Hill near Crandon continues to be tapped by members of the Forest County Potawatomi Indian Band.

Townships and villages with names like Maple Grove, Sugar Island, Maplewood, Maple Heights, and Maple Plain are scattered across the state. Too numerous to name are the roads and lanes containing the title maple or sugar. Every community has a few, and a few more are added every year. Less known, but locally very significant are off the beaten path places, such as the Sugarbush Bar located east of Park Falls in Price County, named for the nearby location of a former Ojibwa sugaring site.

Rivers and streams such as Maple Creek, Sugar Creek and Sugar River often refer to maple sugaring that took place on their banks in the past such as Sugar Camp Creek in Oneida County and the Sugarbush Creeks of Vilas and Ashland County. Maple Lake, Sugar Maple Lake and Sugar Lake are found in the northern counties of Vilas, Oneida and Rusk, but it is the lakes with the names Sugar Camp or Sugarbush that tell us the most about the history of maple sugaring on the landscape. Be they the Upper, Middle, or Lower lakes of the Sugarbush chain on the Lac du Flambeau reservation, or the Sugarbush Lakes in Bayfield, Washburn, Polk, and Ashland Counties; their names reflect the importance of the maple history in those places and

the historic connection many Native Americans have to the lands of northern Wisconsin. To this day, just as previous generations have every spring, Ojibwa Indians tap the maple trees around Sugarbush Lake on the Bad River reservation in Ashland County and in the area of Upper, Middle and Lower Sugarbush Lakes on the Lac du Flambeau reservation.

When the place name mentions the camp or bush, we can be confident that the origins and meaning behind a that place name really refers to the making of maple sugar and is not only a reference to the species of trees in the area. For example, the village and Township named Sugar Camp in Oneida County received their name from the former Ojibwa village in this area. Early townfolk from Rhinelander were known to travel to the Indian settlement to purchase maple sugar made nearby by the Ojibwa residents. As a result, the name Sugar Camp stuck. At the turn of the century, newly arrived white residents established a town site named Robbins in the same location, but the long held traditional name of Sugar Camp hung on, even though by the 1930s all of the Ojibwa residents had moved to the reservation at Lac du Flambeau.

Sometimes, the place names come from the words for maple sugaring in Native American languages. Such is the case in Minnesota with the community of Chanhassen, a suburb of the Twin Cities. Chanhassen comes from the Sioux Indian word of "canhasanpaha", meaning hard maple hill. The Ojibwa Indian word for maple sugar "ziinsibaakwad" a name found on two lakes in Minnesota on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation.

While the state's Indian population has played a prominent role in the naming of sugaring locations in Wisconsin, not all maple related place names are named for Native American maple sugaring activity. In particular, the village of Sugar Bush in Brown County was named for the maple sugaring activities of local Belgian settlers.

Not surprisingly, the places with names that are clearly identified as former (and in some cases current) maple sugaring locations are most commonly in the northern half of the state. Likewise, most of these places are within or very near to the state's present Native American communities, attesting to their continuous use of the same sugarbushes and long-standing tradition as practitioners and originators of the art of maple sugaring. Perhaps, in the future many of the sugarbushes of today's non-Indian maple producers will be remembered by their own place names on the landscape? ☺☺☺

