

# Minnesota Maple News

Newsletter of the Minnesota Maple Syrup Producers Association

First / Spring Quarter

<http://www.mnmaple.org>

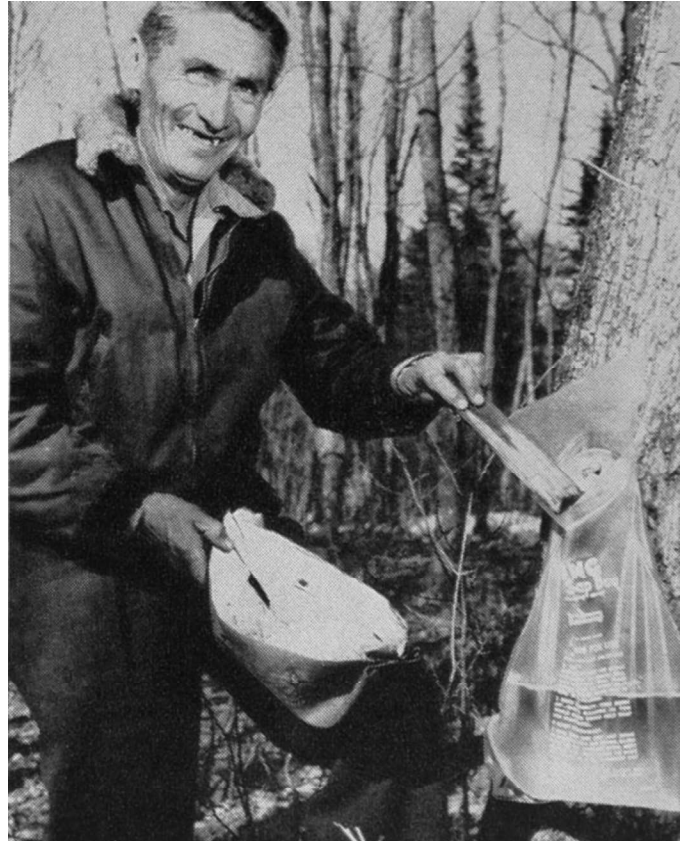
March 2021



## The Grand Portage Band and Maple Syrup on the North Shore in the 1950s & 1960s

Matthew M. Thomas

The Grand Portage Ojibwe Indian community in far northern Minnesota has a long history of making maple sugar and maple syrup, dating back to the fur trade era and earlier. In the late 1950s maple sugaring at Grand Portage took a turn towards commercial production when the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Commission (IRRPC), in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, financed the construction and equipping of a state-of-the-art maple syrup processing plant on the Grand Portage Reservation. Wanting to provide work opportunities and economic development projects in northeastern Minnesota, the IRRRC focused its attention on the large and rich maple stand on the Grand Portage Reservation. The IRRRC helped form the Chippewa Products Association in which the 37 families of the Grand Portage Ojibwe made up the owners and members of a maple syrup cooperative to produce maple syrup and other products from the sap gathered on the reservation.

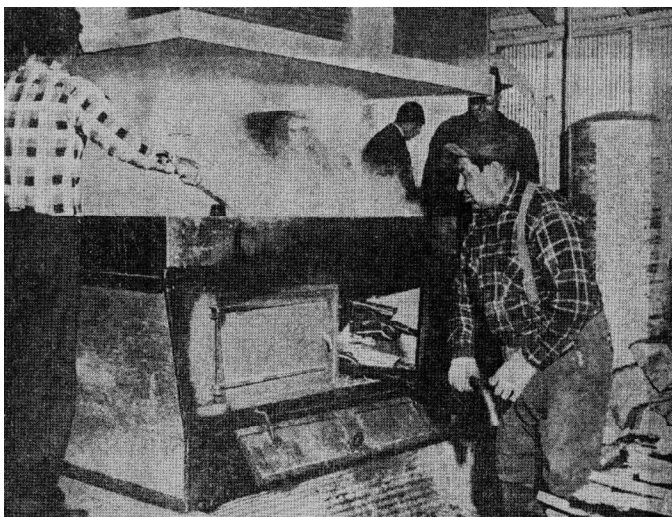


*Figure 1. Tribal Secretary Paul LeGarde showing the replacement of the old birch bark sap collection trough with the modern plastic sap bag (photo courtesy of Midland Cooperator – April 21, 1958).*

Wisconsin. Trees were tapped with a King gas powered tapper from the G.H. Soule Company and sap was collected in clear plastic King sap bags fed by modern metal sap spouts.

The opening of the sugarhouse was a big event with representatives from the Governor's office, the heads of two state agencies and the governor's human rights commission in attendance. Tapping began in 1958 and the cooperative was equipped to tap 3,000 trees with expansion planned as markets were developed. A label was developed for Grand Portage Maple Syrup, as well as a blended table syrup with 15% maple and 85% cane sugar. Then Tribal Secretary and later Tribal Chairman, Paul LeGarde served as the President of the Chippewa Products Association and local Trading Post operator James Hull, as the secretary of the association.

Excitement about the partnership with the Grand Portage Band and the hope that the plant would become important in the economy of Grand Portage was short lived. The plans and expectations of the IRRRC and the state department of



*Figure 2. Tribal Chairman Paul Cyrett firing the evaporator in the Grand Portage sugarhouse (photo courtesy of Midland Cooperator – April 21, 1958).*

In 1957, a 24 by 40-foot metal sided, wood framed sugarhouse was built approximately one mile north of the now abandoned village of Mineral Center along old Highway 61, where the community's extensive sugarbush ran along the ridgeline above Lake Superior. The sugarhouse featured a cupola, a tall metal smokestack, and a large 6 x 16-foot Leader brand wood fired evaporator installed by Paul Anderson of Cumberland,

agriculture to establish an Indian cooperative that would create fourteen full-time jobs proved too ambitious. Although the association provided part-time employment for 23 tribal members, 1958 turned out to be a warm spring and much less syrup was made than was anticipated. The project never worked out as planned and ultimately was an economic failure. The first year of operation its revenues never matched its labor costs and the plant was idle in 1959 and 1960, after which the Association was formally dissolved. The project suffered from planning problems, such as securing a regular labor force, having high transportation costs in the sugarbush from building the sugarhouse too far from the trees that were tapped, and not having a good marketing program.



*Figure 3. The Chippewa Products Association new Grand Portage sugarhouse in 1958 (photo courtesy of Midland Cooperator – April 21, 1958).*

Although built on tribal land leased to the state, the state's contribution was not unconditional assistance. Instead, the

state technically owned the sugarhouse and equipment. Wanting to recoup some of their contribution, in 1961 the IRRRC contracted with non-tribal member Ray Cash of Onamia, MN to operate the plant. Cash paid the state \$290.25 that year for use of the plant, based upon an agreed \$1.00 per gallon fee to the state for syrup produced.

The state agreed to allow the operator the first fifty gallons at no payment to the state, with the idea that this would help offset their cost of insurance. In 1962 and 1963, Paul LeGarde was again contracted to operate the Chippewa Products Association; however, in the end, he did not tap trees or make syrup those years. In 1964 the state contracted with Ira Van Gorden of Hinckley to run the plant, paying the state \$52.00 from his profits. In 1965, tribal member James Hendrickson ran the plant paying the state \$85.00 and in 1966 Noble Carlson of Hovland ran the plant paying the state \$17.00. The state realized they were never going to recoup the \$12,485 they spent to build and equip the operation, and the IRRRC transferred ownership of the maple syrup plant from the state of Minnesota to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Grand Portage Band as a gift.

Interestingly, this was not the first effort at trying to establish a commercial syrup operation on a reservation in the region. In 1946 the Menominee Tribe in Wisconsin purchased two large 6 x 18-foot Vermont Evaporators and supplies for 10,000 taps. Like Grand Portage, it was also unsuccessful, and discontinued after a few years of operation.

Production at the plant continued in later years under BIA ownership. In 1969, the tribe's Community Action Program repaired winter damage from several years of non-use and the plant operated under the direction of tribal member Ronald Scherer the following year. Tribal member Nick Jacobson recalls working on the tapping and gathering crew in 1970 and 1971, using snow shoes to pack trails through the deep snow at the beginning of the season, and later walking on the packed snow to collect sap from a few thousand sap bags. Operation of the plant by the Grand Portage Band ceased around 1972 and the equipment and evaporator were sold to a local non-Indian family that lived north of the plant along Old Highway 61 near the U.S. – Canadian border.

*Originally from St. Cloud, Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a historian of the maple industry who shares his research and writing at the website [www.maplesyruphistory.com](http://www.maplesyruphistory.com). He is the author of the recent book "A Sugarbush Like None Other: Adirondack Maple Syrup and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company", available for sale on eBay and the book "Maple King: The Making of a Maple Syrup Empire," available on Amazon.com. He can be reached at [maplesyruphistory@gmail.com](mailto:maplesyruphistory@gmail.com).*