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Uncovering the History of a Collection of Ojibwe Maple Sugaring Tools – by Matthew M. Thomas

In the December 2022 issue of the MMSPA newsletter there were a number of photographs of a collection of wooden Native American maple sugaring tools that were on display at the fall meeting at the Tamarack Nature Center, northwest of White Bear Lake. Included in the collection were a wood trough, three long paddles, two spoons, two tubular sumac spouts, and three small nested birchbark baskets (**Figure 1**). Seeing such a great collection of maple sugaring antiques I was compelled to want to know more about their origins and discover from where they came. As a result, here is the back story of these items and their connection to the Tamarack Nature Center.

The Tamarack Nature Center came into being in the late 1970s as part of the Ramsey County Department of Parks and Recreation and in 1978 began offering a wide variety of public programs including maple syrup production from maple trees at the Nature Center. From the day the Nature Center opened, White Bear Lake resident Harold Holzheid took daily hikes on the Nature Center's trails. Harold loved the Nature Center, and as a retired fire-fighter, was a regular volunteer, especially with the maple syrup making program. Harold died in 1994, but before he passed on, Harold donated to the Nature Center a small collection of old Native American maple sugaring tools that he had acquired years before.

When I consulted with Shannon Stewart, the Nature Center's staff naturalist and lead maple syrup maker, about the history of the sugaring tools, she shared that it was their understanding at the Nature Center that Harold had discovered the items in the woods somewhere north of Tamarack in Ramsey County. I followed that lead but found nothing in my research to suggest that Harold had owned a farm or forested land in that part of Ramsey County. However, I did discover that

years old and living in California. Mrs. Laughlin was able to confirm my suspicions and tell me much more. It turns out Harold discovered his love of the woods in Pine County as a young man in his twenties when friends took him to their camp on the west shore of Tamarack Lake. Wanting to stay in the area, Harold tried his hand at farming with little success, but in the process met his future wife Ruth Ogg and her parents, Frank and Grace Ogg, who had a small farm across the lake on the east

shore of Tamarack Lake. As a wedding gift in 1932, Harold's in-laws gave he and Ruth a small adjacent parcel of land to the north of their farm where Harold built a simple cabin. Over the course of his life, Harold

came to spend many days at and around Tamarack Lake hiking and hunting the forests.

Approximately one mile north of Harold's cabin and his in-laws farm on the banks of the Lower Tamarack River was a village of the St. Croix Ojibwe known as Gibaakwa'iganing, which means the place of the dam, due to the presence of an old logging dam at this spot of the river. Harold's daughter Lana recalled that during the warmer months the Ojibwe family of Pete Nickaboine and Mary Clark Nickaboine, and the many children they raised, would stay in a small house on the land between her parents' cabin and her grandparents' farm. As a result, the Holzheid, Ogg, and Nickaboine



Figure 1. Two images of the Holzheid collection of Ojibwe maple sugaring tools at the Tamarack Nature Center. Photo Courtesy of Matthew Thomas.

Harold loved to go hunting on land he owned seventy miles north along the shore of Big Tamarack Lake in Pine County. Moreover, the Pine County land was in the area of a number of old villages of the St. Croix Chippewa or Ojibwe Indians. Could it have been that Harold acquired the items from Ojibwe neighbors during his time at Tamarack Lake? This would provide an explanation to the story of the items coming from somewhere near "Tamarack." It was correct that it was near "Tamarack," it was just not the same "Tamarack" that the Nature Center staff were led to believe.

The discovery of Harold's connection to Tamarack Lake led me to contact his only daughter, Lana Laughlin, now 85

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families became good friends and regularly helped each other as neighbors would. Lana played with the Ojibwe children her age and the families bartered, traded, or gifted things to one another without any exchange of money. Harold was even given a name in the Ojibwe language of Waskish, which roughly translates to deer.

Each spring residents of the Ojibwe village would open their maple sugaring camps in the maple woods east of Tamarack Lake. Harold's daughter Lana told me of how she fondly remembers visiting these sugar camps of their Ojibwe friends and neighbors, just a short walk from their cabin through the woods. Lana also remembered some of the maple sugaring tools and sugar molds that her father had acquired in trade and as gifts. When asked about the story that Harold had found an abandoned cache of sugaring tools, Lana agreed that it

was possible that an item or two in the collection was found abandoned by Harold on one of his many hikes and rambles in the woods near his cabin. Lana herself had a number of birch bark cones filled with maple sugar that were given to her by their Ojibwe neighbors.

The items in the Holzheid collection at the Tamarack Nature Center are a great sample of the handmade wooden tools commonly used in an Ojibwe maple sugaring camp from at least the 1700s to the 1950s. In fact, this collection is a near perfect match for the wooden sugaring tools illustrated in the 1928 book, *Uses of Plants by the Chippewa Indians*, written by the famous Minnesota anthropologist Frances Densmore.

Most prominent is the large trough carved from a single log, most likely basswood, called a naseyaawangwaan or mitigonaagan in the Ojibwe language. This trough would have been used to finish or granulate maple sugar. After boiling maple sap in an iron kettle past the point of syrup to the consistency of pudding, the thick syrup was poured into the trough and then vigorously stirred and worked back and forth until crystals formed in the cooling sugar, taking on the consistency of dry brown sugar. Granulating was done with the back of the curved spoons, called mitigwemikwaan, carved in the style like we see in the Holzheid collection. **Figure 2** shows the use of a similar trough and granulating spoon is shown in this 1948 image of Mary Day working at an Ojibwe sugarbush on the shores of Lake Mille Lacs. **Figure**

3 shows use of a similar spoon to scoop hot maple sugar into a metal mold.

The three long thin wooden paddles in the Holzheid collection, called gaashkakokwe'igan or ah-bwiss, would have been used to stir the sap in the kettles as it became syrup and then sugar for pouring into molds or for granulating. It is fascinating to see the grease marks and patina on the handles of two of the paddles, residues of the many years and hands that held them in the sugar camp. **Figure 4** is a photo of an Ojibwe woman stirring boiling sap with a paddle of this nature. The Holzheid collection also includes two hollow tubular wood spiles or sap spouts, probably made from sumac branches, known as negwaakwaan in the Ojibwe language.

It is believed that Harold donated the items to the Nature Center in the 1980s for use in their education programs on the history and manufacture of maple syrup. The Holzheid and Ogg families sold their land on Tamarack Lake around the time of Harold's passing and no longer have a connection to that corner of Pine County. (*continued on page 4*)



Figure 2. Image from 1948 of Mary Day of Mille Lacs Ojibwe community using a granulating spoon to make maple sugar in a trough with a spoon and trough like those in the Holzheid collection. Photographer Monroe Killy – Photo Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



Figure 3 (above). Milles Lacs Ojibwe member Martin Kegg scooping maple sugaring into a tin mold in 1946 using a carved wooden spoon. Photographer Monroe Killy – Photo Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



Figure 4. (right) Image from around 1935 of Ojibwe women sugaring. On the right, stirring maple sap in a large iron kettle using a long stirring paddle like the spoon in the Holzheid collection. The figure on the left is holding a wooden spoon used to scoop finished maple sugar.

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Likewise, there are no more residents living in the Ojibwe village of Gibaakwa'iganing, and the lands that were once the sugarbush of this Ojibwe community are now part of the St. Croix State Forest.



Fun fact – the author, Matt Thomas, and fellow MMSPA member Shannon Stewart are old friends from the same

high school class in St. Cloud and even attended their senior year homecoming dance together.



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. 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

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