Why Does Maple Matter? Page 14

The Art of Noticing Page 25

A Bottle of Syrup Page 35

Place Imaginarium

Maple: The Ecology of Meaning



Nineteenth-Century First Nations Maple Sugaring Through the Eyes of an Indigenous Artist

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In eastern Canada and the adjacent United States, Indigenous peoples have a long history of making maple sugar and maple syrup. Indigenous maple sugaring in the Upper Great Lakes region was at its height of production in the middle of the nineteenth century. Over the previous century, European and North American fur traders encouraged First Nations people to make maple sugar, trading for valuable goods in exchange. With the decline and end of the Great Lakes fur trade by the mid-1800s, commercial traders stepped in to provide a new market for maple sugar produced by Great Lakes tribal peoples.

The Anishinaabeg people of Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron were fully engaged in maple sugaring at this time, particularly the community of Wiikwemkoong. One newspaper reported from 1849 noted that over 100,000 pounds of sugar made on Manitoulin Island was sold or exchanged with Michigan merchants. A later missionary report emphasized that in the community of Wiikwemkoong "the quantity of maple sugar made in one year by the Indians for sale is stated to have amounted to 350 or 400,000 pounds."[1] Indigenous maple sugar making on Manitoulin Island at that time was captured in a little-known unsigned and undated drawing attributed to Wiikwemkoong Anishinaabe artist Michael Metosage. This drawing deserves further consideration.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, First Nations maple sugaring in the Great Lakes region was relatively well-known to the non-Native world, thanks to numerous written descriptions from Euro-American and Euro-Canadian travelers and scholars, like Henry R. Schoolcraft and Thomas L. McKenney.[2]


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Sugar camp.



"Sugar camp" - a drawing of an Indigenous maple sugaring camp on Manitoulin Island, Canada, attributed to Anishinaabe artist Michael Metosage, circa 1870 - The Archives of the Jesuits in Canada.

"Works describing Native sugaring from the hand of Indigenous authors or witnesses are unknown from the nineteenth century."

Many of these accounts are based on scenes witnessed by the author, while others are based on scenes described to them. However, works describing Native sugaring from the hand of Indigenous authors or witnesses are unknown from the nineteenth century. Visual depictions from the nineteenth century and earlier that might augment the written record to provide additional details and insight into the practice of Indigenous maple sugaring are limited to a few stylized engravings based on the descriptions of others. The one exception is the detailed watercolor painting made in 1850 by then Colonel Seth Eastman, later Brigadier General.[3] The Eastman image is best known from its conversion to a commonly reproduced engraving that was included in Schoolcraft's six-volume study of the Indians of North America. Eastman was an officer stationed at Fort Snelling on the Minnesota frontier, where he observed and painted a wide variety of scenes of Indigenous life of the nearby Dakota and Ojibwe peoples. However, even the original Eastman watercolor was created from memory in a studio in Washington, DC, after he had left Minnesota. Photography was still in its infancy at this time and there are no known accurately dated examples of photographs of Indigenous maple sugaring before the late 1880s.[4]

One of the reasons the drawing by Michael Metosage is important is that it was created by a native artist from a community known to have an extensive history of maple sugar making and almost certainly illustrates maple sugaring activities as he witnessed them and maybe even participated in them. It is interesting to consider the possibility that the drawing is in part autobiographical and that one of the figures in the scene is Michael Metosage himself. It is true that it is not known if the drawing was made from memory of real experiences, like the Eastman painting, or created en plein air from real-time observation in the sugar bush.

The unsigned drawing is, in fact, a mixed-media work of pen and ink and watercolor on paper measuring 15.5 x 11.0

inches (39.3 x 27.9 cm). A title or caption of "Sugar Camp" can be seen in the lower left. The reverse side contains an additional illustration attributed to Metosage depicting the church, mission school, and houses of the village and shoreline with a title of "Indian Village of Wikwemikong – Great Manitoulin Island." Today this two-sided drawing resides in Montréal in the Archive of the Jesuits in Canada.[5]

Michael Metosage had a short life, being born at Wiikwemkoong in 1856 and dying in 1874, which suggests that his "Sugar Camp" drawing dates to the late 1860s or early 1870s, when he was a teenager. His father was Francois Metosage, a Catholicized Odawa Anishinaabe who came to Manitoulin Island from Michigan in the 1820s.[6] Manitoulin Island in the 1820s and 1830s was known to be a welcoming refuge for displaced Anishinaabeg like the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi of the Upper Great Lakes region. The village of Wiikwemkoong was the site of the Holy Cross Jesuit mission and its associated industrial school for First Nations children. It was likely at the mission school that Michael Metosage was given the opportunity and materials to make this drawing and a small number of other drawings attributed to him that show local scenes or Indigenous peoples and activities.[7] Being created within the mission school context and possibly at the direction or encouragement of the Jesuit instructors may explain how this and a few others of his drawings found their way into the Archives of the Jesuits in Canada.

Stylistically, the drawing is simple and reminiscent of Indigenous Plains ledger art where everything is the same scale with a flattened perspective and lack of depth. Some might assign such labels as folk art, untrained art, outsider art, or naïve art.

The drawing has a childlike quality to it, which makes sense since Metosage could best be described as a young adult when he created it. A handwritten title of "Sugar camp" is found in the lower left, inside a thin inked lined border. One wonders if the line border and title words were added later by a hand other than the artist.

Looking closely at the details of the drawing, the central focus of the scene is the sugaring camp and bark covered maple lodge, along with a pair of metal kettles, a wooden sap storage tank and extra firewood. Nearby men and women on snowshoes with shoulder yokes and bark collection pails bring sap from the tapped trees to the lodge. Men, who are presented most prominently with six figures, are designated by brimmed hats and pants while the two women are presented with longer uncovered hair and long dresses. A man is chopping wood to the left of the scene while on the right another man brings a load of firewood to the camp. Two dogs appear as well, with one assisting a man with a bow and arrow hunting squirrel. No horses or oxen appear in the drawing. In the background, large-diameter maple trees are shown with every illustrated maple tree exhibiting a long, wooden tap dripping sap into collection containers made from a folded sheet of birchbark resting on the ground at the base of each tree.

One of the most important components of this image is the bark lodge. With its frame of vertical walls made from cut saplings covered with sheets of bark and its straight gabled roof ridge line, this form is not a common style of Anishinaabeg bark-covered lodges. However, it was occasionally seen in Anishinaabeg maple sugaring camps in Minnesota, where it was sometimes referred to as a sugaring lodge. Maple sap was boiled on

an open fire in the center of the lodge with sap kettles suspended from a heavy wood frame. A central opening in the bark roof above the fire and kettles, visible in the Metosage drawing, permitted the escape of steam and smoke. Other domestic sugar camp activities, like cooking, sleeping, and socializing, occurred around the fire inside the lodge.

Twentieth century photographs of Anishinaabeg maple lodges are found in Densmore's "Use of Plants by the Chippewa Indians," as well as a number of historical collections and archives in the Upper Great Lakes region.[8] It is notable that there is a lack of steam or smoke coming from the lodge. With the kettles resting in front and a man pulling a load of firewood, there is a sense that the drawing captures a scene where the figures were opening the camp and just getting started, and boiling has yet to begin.

In its simplicity, the drawing carefully and accurately illustrates the known technology and material culture of Great Lakes Indigenous sugaring in use at that time and is consistent with other descriptions and illustrations of Indigenous sugaring. Yet, at the same time, it is different in composition and detail from works like Eastman, further emphasizing its instructive value. As a work created from the hands and eyes of an Indigenous artist, it provides an important Native voice to the historical record of maple sugaring.

[1] The Daily British Whig, April 7, 1849; "Appendix 21" in *Appendix to the Sixteenth Volume of the Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 25th February to 16th August, 1858 (R. Campbell, 1858).

[2] Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Information Respecting the History, Conditions and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, Vol 2 (Lippincott, Grambo and Company, 1852), 55-56; Thomas L. McKenny, *Sketches of a tour to the lakes : of the character and customs of the Chippeway Indians, and of incidents connected with the Treaty of Fond du Lac* (Fielding Lucas, Jr. 1827), 194.

[3] Matthew M. Thomas, "Minnesota's Most Famous Maple Sugaring Painting," *Minnesota Maple News* September (2021): 1-2.

[4] Matthew M. Thomas, "Nineteenth Century Native American Sugaring Photographs," *Maple Syrup History*, published September 8, 2019, https://maplesyruphistory.com/2019/09/08/nineteenth-century-native-american-sugaring-photographs/

[5] Special thanks to the Archive of the Jesuits in Canada for their interest in this history and for permission to reproduce Michael Metosage's "Sugar camp" drawing.

[6] Alan Corbiere, "Socio-cultural history of Niinatigwaaboo: MAPLE WATER," *Ojibwe Cultural Foundation Newsletter* 6, no. 4: (2011): 1, 5-11. Thank you to Wiikwemkoong historians Alan Cobiere and Steven George for sharing their knowledge of the life and history of Michael Metosage and his drawings.

[7] Jennifer N. Harvey, "Landscapes of Conversion: The Evolution of the Residential School Sites at Wiikwemkoong and Spanish, Ontario" (MA Thesis, Laurentian University, 2019).

[8] Frances Densmore, "Uses of Plants by the Chippewa Indians" in *44th Annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnography*, (United States Government Printing Office, 1928).