

## Sugaring Off

Until at least the mid-1800s, when white settlers in Wisconsin worked to change the culture of Wisconsin Indian tribes by forcing them to adopt white ways, Wisconsin Indians regularly made maple syrup in the spring. As winter turned to spring, many Wisconsin Indians left their villages and set up smaller camps in the forest near a stand of sugar maple trees (called a sugarbush.) They were preparing for sugaring off – the process by which the trees were tapped and sap was gathered and boiled down into sugar. In addition to their housing, the Indians set up two wigwams in the sugarbush – a large one for boiling sap and granulating the sugar and a smaller one to store the birch bark equipment.

Each person had a job to do in the sugaring off process. Men tapped the trees by cutting a horizontal gash in the bark about 3 to 4ft. up and inserting a spile (tap) at an angle into the wood of the trunk. Sap dripped into containers called makuks, made of birch bark. It was the job of young boys to guard the containers and keep pests such as squirrels and rabbits away from the sweet substance. When the container was full, women boiled the sweet sap into maple syrup by placing heated stones in the sap.

The boiled syrup was strained through basswood fiber matting or cloth and then placed into a granulating cloth where it was worked with a paddle and with the hands until it became granulated sugar. The syrup was then hardened in bark molds or eggshells or patted into little cakes. It was stored in rawhide or bark pouches for later use as a sweetener. Maple sugar seasoned foods for feasts and ceremonies and added a slightly sweet taste to a refreshing drink of water. In addition, Indians gave a small portion of the first sugar of the year as an offering in gratitude to the manido (the Great Spirit.) This offering was said to ensure good health, long life, and safety.

Some Woodland Indian people still tap maple trees using these traditional methods. Read the book *Ininatig's Gift of Sugar: Traditional Native Sugarmaking* by Laura Wateman Wittstock (photos by Dale Kakkak) to learn more about how Native people today still practice the maple-sugar making methods of their ancestors.

Taste a piece of maple sugar candy and make a list of five adjectives that describe the candy. Have you ever tried to make your own sugar? Do you think it would be easy or hard? Near the end of March, you may be able to visit a nature center where they tap the sugar maple trees. You will be able to watch the process now used to make maple sugar. It is still similar to the way that the Indians did it hundreds of years ago.

Also, use the enclosed pattern to make your own maple syrup makuk out of white construction paper or cardstock. Add lines of black to make the white paper look like birch bark.

## Make Your Own Birchbark Makuk

### Wisconsin DPI Standards Alignment:

**Math D.8.4** – Determine measurements indirectly using estimation.

**Art and Design D.4.3** – Know that the environment influences the look and use of art, architecture, and design.

**Art and Design H.4.4** – Create three-dimensional forms with paper, clay, and other materials.

**Goal:** Students will gain insight into the material culture used by Wisconsin Indians in making maple sugar.

- Objectives:**
- 1) Students will read the instructions for making their own birchbark makuk.
  - 2) Students will practice fine motor skills using scissors and a hole punch and “sewing” with raffia.
  - 3) Students will be able to describe the function of a makuk.

This activity is adapted from one found on the St. Joseph County, MN Parks Website.

Teachers: Trace the outline of the makuk pattern onto an 8 ½” by 11” piece of white construction paper. Photocopy as many templates as your class will need. Also prepare ahead by cutting enough ¾” by 13” strips of brown construction paper for your students to use in trimming their makuk.

### Supplies:

Makuk pattern on white construction paper  
¾” by 13” strip of brown construction paper.  
Scissors  
Raffia (tan or brown)  
Hole punch

### Instructions:

- 1) Cut out the makuk pattern.
- 2) Add black lines to the front and back of the white paper to make it have the appearance of birch bark.
- 3) Fold the square center tabs up to for part of the walls of the makuk
- 4) Fold the other tabs up and overlapping the square tabs to make the side wall of the basket. Staple the three tabs together where they overlap on each side.
- 5) Use the hole punch to punch holes at the top of the side wall (where two tabs overlap) and just above the bottom (where the three tabs overlap). Lace the raffia through the holes and tie the ends on the inside of the basket to secure it.
- 6) Punch holes around the rim of the container about 1” below the top, and at intervals of approximately ¾”.

- 7) Fold the long narrow strip in half lengthwise and hold it against the outside of the rim, with the folded edge at the top.
- 8) Lace the raffia through the holes to attach the strip to the rim. When you have worked your way around the rim, overlap the ends of the strip and tie off the raffia.

For the paper birchbark pattern, link to: [http://www.sjcparks.org/pdf/files/maple2\\_4.pdf](http://www.sjcparks.org/pdf/files/maple2_4.pdf)