

♦ Manabozho and the Maple Trees ♦

(Anishinabe—Great Lakes Region)

A long time ago, when the world was new, Gitchee Manitou made things so that life was very easy for the people. There was plenty of game and the weather was always good and the maple trees were filled with thick sweet syrup. Whenever anyone wanted to get maple syrup from the trees, all they had to do was break off a twig and collect it as it dripped out.

One day, Manabozho went walking around. "I think I'll go see how my friends the Anishinabe are doing," he said. So he went to a village of Indian people. But there was no one around. So Manabozho looked for the people. They were not fishing in the streams or the lake. They were not working in the fields hoeing their crops. They were not gathering berries. Finally he found them. They were in the grove of maple trees near the village. They were all just lying on their backs with their mouths open, letting the maple syrup drip into their mouths.

"This will not do," Manabozho said. "My people are all going to be fat and lazy if they keep on living this way."

So Manabozho went down to the river. He took with him a big basket he had made of birch bark. With this basket he brought back many buckets of water. He went to the top of the maple trees and poured the water in so that it thinned out the syrup. Now thick maple syrup no longer dripped out of the broken twigs. Now what came out was thin and watery and just barely sweet to the taste.

"This is how it will be from now on," Manabozho said. "No longer will syrup drip from the maple trees. Now there will be only this watery sap. When people want to make maple syrup they will have to gather many buckets full of the sap in a birch bark basket like mine. They will have to gather wood and make fires so they can heat stones to drop into the baskets. They will have to boil the water with the heated stones for a long time to make even a little maple syrup. Then my people will no longer grow fat and lazy. Then they will appreciate this maple syrup Gitchee Manitou made available to them. Not only that, this sap will drip only from the trees at a certain time of the year. Then it will not keep people from hunting and fishing and gathering and hoeing in the fields. This is how it is going to be," Manabozho said.

And that is how it is to this day.

Manabozho sees that the relationship between the maple trees and people is not good. The people are taking the easy path and letting the trees feed them while they neglect their hunting, fishing, gathering and farming. So Manabozho thins the sap and makes it flow only during the late winter and early spring. This way it will be appreciated, and the people will have to hunt, fish, gather and grow food to sustain themselves.

(Gitchee Manitou also appears in Chapter 10, "Koluscap and the Water Monster," and in Chapter 14, "How Fisher Went to the Skyland: The Origin of the Big Dipper.")