

A Sweet Story and a Gift Forever

By Julia Pferdehirt

A Readers Theater script to accompany chapter 1 (Saenomehsaeh Finds A Way) of the historical fiction book [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#).

Author Julia Pferdehirt wrote this Readers Theater script as a way to introduce chapter 1 of the [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#) book and give students an opportunity to read aloud with classmates. Students take turns reading at each asterisk (*) within the script.

A Sweet Story and a Gift Forever

* Today we'll hear a story from the Menominee Indian people. The land called Wisconsin has always been their home. The Menominee people live with the land, the forest and the animals.

* When you think of Native Americans or American Indians, what comes to your mind? Drums and dancing? Eagle feathers and deer skin clothes? Some people think all Indian people are alike. That is far from the truth.

* Each Indian tribe has its own traditions. Foods, houses, clothes, games, and ways of living are different.

* Storytelling is a Menominee tradition. Long ago, stories were like school lessons for Menominee children. There were stories about dancing and stories about how to live together. They learned to hunt or spear the sturgeon fish by listening to stories and watching the older men.

* Mothers, grandmothers, and older women told stories to the girls. Through stories, young women learned to prepare food, make clothes and many other things like birch bark trays for maple syrup.

* Some stories are about nature and creation. Stories tell how the Creator gave the sturgeon fish and wild rice as gifts to the Menominee people.

* Another gift from the Creator is still gathered by Menominee people and others in Wisconsin. It's sweet, thick and golden-brown. In fact, Wisconsin is one of the top makers of this food. Here is a sweet story of maple sugar from the Menominee people of Wisconsin.

* This is a story about a hero. The Menominee people have many stories about him. But, the Menominee language uses some sounds that English doesn't, so you must be clever to pronounce his name!

* The name sounds like **Ma** nuh pos. It is spelled *Maeqnapos*. The first syllable has a surprise ending. Say "mah." Now, close the back of your throat at the end of this sound. You'll hear a soft "uh" sound. You'll say **Ma**-uh nuh pos. You may have to practice saying the name of this great Menominee hero.

A Story of Maple Sugar from the Beaver Clan

* Every Menominee family is part of a clan. Each clan has its own responsibilities in the tribe. The Wolf clan remembers the stories and traditions about hunting. The Thunderer clan is responsible for fire.

* Members of the Loon clan pass on the knowledge of canoe making. Other clans know about wild rice, fishing, war or making bows and arrows. The Muskrat, Otter and Mud Turtle clans know how to get maple syrup from trees. They remember the stories that tell how the creator gave maple sugar to the Menominee people.

* Maeqnapos and his grandmother had lived on the land for moons and seasons and years. Maeqnapos was a great hunter. He always brought meat to keep Grandmother's cooking pots full and furs to cover their beds.

* One morning at sunrise, Maeqnapos set out to hunt. He carried his hickory wood bow. His arrows were trimmed with beautiful feathers. But that night, he returned empty-handed.

* The next day he hunted. And the next and the next. Every day he carried his bow and arrows into the forest. Every night, he came home without meat for Grandmother's cooking pot.

* "The deer and bear have gone," Maeqnapos said. "The wild turkeys and even the rabbits have left the land. If we want to live, we must find them."

* Maeqnapos owned his arrows and bow. The fishing nets and traps were his. But everything in the house belonged to Grandmother. She packed up her cooking pots and woven mats. She tied her furs in bundles and gathered every tool for making clothes and preparing food.

* The young man and the silver-haired grandmother set out to find food.

* Maeqnapos knew most of the world because he had helped the creator make it. He was there when the world was built. He remembered the lakes and rivers. He knew the hills and rocks. But Maeqnapos saw a tree he didn't know in the forest. Its bark was dark and rough. Its leaves looked like paws with three fingers.

* "Maple trees," Grandmother said. "They're a gift from the creator. You'll see. We'll use them later."

* So Maeqnapos and Grandmother gathered bark and poles. They cut branches and vines. The forest gave them everything they needed to build their home. The forest gave them food, too. The young man hunted and soon Grandmother's cooking pots were full.

* Winter passed. Spring came. The days grew warm but the nights were still cold. Squirrels began to scamper in the trees. "It's time for the maple trees," said Grandmother. She led Maeqnapos into the forest where the maple trees grew. This was called the sugar bush.

* They carefully peeled bark from birch trees. They cut spruce branches. Grandmother folded the birch bark into trays, stitching the corners with long roots from spruce trees. Maeqnapos carved the branches into small, flat boards with pointed ends.

* Maeqnapos cut into the rough, brown bark of each maple tree. Into the cut, he pounded the pointed end of a spruce board. A birch bark tray was set underneath. Then, Maeqnapos and Grandmother moved on to the next tree. And the next. And then, they waited as the sun moved across the sky.

* “Now you’ll see what the maple tree gives us,” Grandmother said. They walked through the cool forest to the first maple tree. The birch bark tray was filled with thick, brown syrup.

* Maeqnapos dipped his finger into the syrup and tasted it. Sweet! Maeqnapos had never tasted such a treat. First he smiled at the sweetness. Then the smile melted away like snow in the sunlight.

* “This will never do,” Maeqnapos said. “The maple tree gives the sweetest food without any work!”

* Maeqnapos frowned. “People won’t want to hunt and fish if they can eat sweet maple syrup without a bit of work. They will become lazy and forget how to work.”

Lazy people will soon become weak and unhappy. Something must be done!

* Maeqnapos scooped water from the river and carried it carefully to the tallest pine tree.

Then he climbed the tree, slowly pulling himself from branch to branch. Higher and higher he climbed until he reached the sky.

* At the very top, Maeqnapos could see the whole sugar bush. With his strong arm, he threw the water into the air. Drops of water sprayed over the maple trees like a fountain.

* Maeqnapos climbed down to the ground and hurried to the nearest maple tree. He smiled. The water had done its job.

* Drip. Drip. Drip. A thin trickle of watery, gold-colored liquid dripped into the birch bark tray. The thick, brown syrup was gone.

* Maenapos dipped his finger into the sap and tasted it. He smiled again. Only a tiny hint of sweetness was on his tongue.

* “This is better,” Maeqnapos said. “The people can still have the gift of maple sugar, just as the creator planned. But, if they want it, they’ll have to work for it. The sap will drip slowly. The whole village will work together, gathering wood, building fires, and boiling the sap into thick, brown syrup.”

* So, every winter the Menominee people wait for spring. When the squirrels begin to scamper in the trees, the days grow warm, and the nights are still cold, it is the month of the Maple Sugar Moon. Then, everyone gathers firewood and birch bark trays. They carve spruce branches into thin boards with pointed ends.

* The whole village walks to the sugar bush. And, everyone works together collecting sap, building fires and boiling the sap into sweet syrup.

* No one is lazy. Working together, they are happy and strong. Then everyone eats sweet maple sugar all year long.

* Maple sugar was given by the creator to the Menominee people. It was their gift forever.

How did that happen? Well, that's another story!