The author, with his son Isaac, takes a break from jigging, or dancing, on wild rice in a wood-lined, sand-bottom pit. Jigging separates the rice hulls from the kernels.

ojibwe Lifeways

What can we learn today from early inhabitants of Minnesota who gathered and hunted wild foods to survive?

BY Anton Treuer

For hundreds of years, Ojibwe Indians thrived in the land we call Minnesota. They survived cold, harsh winters without modern inventions such as electricity, central heating, and grocery stores. How did they do it?

The secrets to Ojibwe life began with a deep respect for the land and its natural resources. Ojibwe people, also known as *Anishinaabe* or *Chippewa*, believed that every animal and plant is a being that should be treated with respect. They used tobacco as a way to show the Creator that they were not taking the life of a plant or an animal just for fun, but because they were going to use it for food, lodging, or medicine.

Ojibwe people usually did a good job of harvesting the things they needed without using them all. They took only enough fish and other animals—grouse, deer, rabbits, moose, elk, and caribou—to feed their families.

Another secret to Ojibwe survival was a strong belief in hard work. Fishing and hunting can be fun, but there is no guarantee of success. You must try and try again to catch a fish or shoot a deer or snare a rabbit. Imagine hunting and fishing to keep your family from going hungry. Ojibwe people worked hard to survive.

Over time, the Ojibwe gained special knowledge about the land and waters and the plants and animals that grow there. They learned the best ways to gather and use Minnesota's natural resources. These traditional lifeways, learned by trial and error, have passed from adults to children, generation after generation. Many people still practice them.

MADELINE TREUER

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Elias Treuer (above) *holds a jar of maple syrup. Before glass canning jars were introduced, Ojibwe people processed all their syrup into sugar* (top, right) *for ease of storage and transportation.*

spring Sugar Bush

According to Ojibwe legend, a long time ago a very hungry man was stumbling through the woods in the spring, and he grew so weak that he collapsed. Thinking that he might die, he offered tobacco and begged the Creator for help. Looking up, he saw a tall, hairy being that the Ojibwe called *misaabe*. The misaabe held a large knife and used it to cut his own leg. As the wound started to bleed, the misaabe transformed into a giant tree and his blood turned into maple sap, which began to flow from the tree trunk. The hungry Ojibwe man tasted the sweet liquid. It worked like medicine, making him feel strong again. He showed the miracle of maple sap to other Ojibwe. Everyone agreed it was a sacred gift that marked the end of starving

times in winter and the beginning of the season of new life.

The Ojibwe people learned that syrup could be made from the maple tree's sap. Maple sap must be harvested in spring when sap is going up the trunk during warm days and then back down during cold nights. Gatherers made a small hole in the bark to drain the sap and then collected it in birch-bark baskets.

In spring Ojibwe families gathered in a *sugar bush,* a forest with lots of maple trees. They needed to collect about 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of maple syrup and even more to make maple sugar. They hollowed out a log and filled it with maple sap. They heated rocks in a fire, then dropped them into the trough to boil the sap. The sap had to boil for many hours until it thickened into syrup and eventually turned into a light brown sugar. Sugar was easier to keep and carry than syrup. One family might pack out hundreds of pounds of sugar from the sugar bush every spring.

For the Ojibwe, maple sugar could mean the difference between life and death. People sometimes went hungry in winter, and maple sugar—saved from the previous spring—provided calories and nutrients.

Maple sugar and syrup have been found to be "super foods" that fight disease. Today, Ojibwe people usually use more modern equipment to make syrup, but they still see it as a gift from the forest.

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Madeline Treuer (top) *drills a hole in a maple to collect the tree's sap. Elias Treuer* (middle) *taps in a* spile, *or spout, that will drain the sap. The sap* (bottom) *is then boiled down. It takes about 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. Most of the boiling is done outside, but it may be finished on a stove.*

Isaac and Evan Treuer (left) *pick hazelnuts, one of our region's most abundant wild crops. The amazing bounty of northern Minnesota* (opposite) *includes wild grapes, cranberries, and crabapples. This batch of fruit will be boiled, smashed, and strained to make wild berry jelly.*

summer Gathering

In summertime, wild food is more plentiful and easier to find than it is during winter and spring. Animals such as bears have awakened from hibernation, and birds such as ducks and geese have returned from migration.

Fish are abundant, and the Ojibwe used just about every way imaginable to catch them—nets, spears, traps, and hook and line. They discovered that nettles could be picked and turned into strong, thin strings that they wove into nets. One net could take hundreds of hours to make, and one storm could destroy a net and all that work. But people kept making nets because the nets made it easier to catch a lot of fish. The Ojibwe took and kept all species of fish—walleye, whitefish, suckers, sturgeon, and even eelpout. They boiled some of their fish and smoked the rest to save for eating later.

Mushrooms and other forest plants become ripe and ready to harvest. Ojibwe people picked mushrooms they knew they could safely eat. They also knew which mushrooms would make them sick. The Ojibwe realized that cattail roots made great food. They dug them up, boiled them, and ate them like potatoes. They also dug wild onions and picked grapes, butternuts, hazelnuts, and many kinds of berries.

Since they didn't have freezers or refrigerators, they dried and stored most of their foods. A family would often pick hundreds of pounds of blueberries, cranberries, choke-cherries, and other wild fruit and then lay them in the sun to dry. They stored their dried food in deep pits in the ground to keep it away from wild animals. The pit bottoms were lined with rocks to drain away water.

The Ojibwe worked hard in the summer when it was easiest to get food because they knew it would not always be plentiful in other seasons. As with their harvests in all seasons, they offered tobacco as a sign of respect and as a spiritual offering for the food. They were careful not to take too much, so there would be more for later.

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fall Ricing

Wild rice was probably the most important food of the first Ojibwe in Minnesota. Tribal elders tell legends about a time more than a thousand years ago when their prophets told the people to travel west from their ancestral homelands on the Atlantic Coast to "the land where food grows on water." That land was the wild rice country of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ontario, and Manitoba. The Ojibwe discovered how to harvest and process wild rice.

Here's how this amazing discovery worked and still works today. Wild rice grows in shallow water near shore. People wait until the rice is very ripe before they gather it, because then it yields the most food. But a bad storm or strong winds can blow the ripe rice into the water, so people work hard to gather it.

A two-person team goes on the water in a birch-bark canoe. One stands and uses a long push pole to propel the canoe through the tall rice stalks. The other person uses two knocking sticks: one to bend stalks over the canoe and the other to tap them so that the rice falls into the canoe. When the canoe is full of rice, the team comes ashore.

Before the rice is ready to cook, it must be processed. First, it is spread out to dry. Next the rice is roasted, or *parched,* over a fire. The parched rice is placed in a wood-lined pit and a person *jigs*, or dances, on the rice to separate the *hulls* (outside cov-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTON TREUER

Ojibwe people (top) *gather rice on Lower Rice Lake on the White Earth Reservation. More than 200 people collected 50,000 pounds of rice by noon on the Aug. 15 opening day of the 2011 rice season. Isaac Treuer* (below) *parches, or roasts, rice over a fire to dry it for storage* (bottom).

erings) from the *kernels* (seeds or grains of rice). Then someone fans, or *winnows,* the rice into the wind so the hulls blow away from the edible rice. In the past, most families processed hundreds of pounds of rice every year. The Ojibwe made tobacco offerings before and after the rice harvest.

Great rice beds like Lower Rice Lake on the White Earth Reservation still attract hundreds of ricers and their families. Men, women, and children rice. And in the evenings, the rice camps ring with the sound of people singing and playing moccasin games.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTON TREUER

winter Snaring Rabbits

Ojibwe families came together for the wild rice harvest and ceremonies in the fall. But in the winter, they spread out again to make it easier to get food during the cold, hard months. Ojibwe people fished through the ice, trapped beaver for both meat and pelts, and used their stored wild rice, berries, and maple sugar to survive. They invented many techniques for hunting, trapping, and snaring wild game.

A favorite food of the Ojibwe was the snowshoe hare. Although they were happy to shoot rabbits, it could be hard to do with a bow and arrow, or even with a gun. Because snowshoe hares are predictable creatures and their tracks are easy to see in the snow, the Ojibwe found the best way to capture them was snaring. A small fiber rope was made into a noose about the size of a human fist and placed on the rabbit trail. When a rabbit came down the trail, its head would go through the noose and it would become trapped. Today, Ojibwe people often use wire snares rather than rope made from natural fibers.

When Ojibwe people killed a rabbit, they offered tobacco to the animal, thanking it for giving its life to provide food. They used all parts of the rabbit. The meat was eaten along with the heart and liver. The stomach contents were saved and used for medicine. The hide could be used for lining moccasins. Or they might cut the rabbit skin in spirals, so the long, thin strips curled into fur "tubes" that they wove together to make double-sided fur blankets.

Isaac Treuer (left) *shows a snowshoe hare he caught in a snare. The killing of a rabbit by a boy or girl is an introduction to the basic Ojibwe teachings of food and survival.*

When an Ojibwe boy or girl kills his or her first rabbit, family and friends hold an elaborate feast. The rabbit is roasted or boiled, and the hunter is offered a spoonful of the meat. But the hunter has to refuse the first bite, saying, "No. I am thinking of the children who have nobody to provide for them." Then a second bite is offered and again refused, as the hunter says, "No. I am thinking of the elders who cannot get into the woods to hunt for themselves." A third bite is offered, but again the hunter refuses, saying, "No. I am thinking of my family, my community, and the people who came here today to support me." The hunter is offered a fourth bite and then he or she can eat.

The killing of a rabbit marks the first transition from childhood to adulthood, from someone who only eats food to one who also provides it. It's an introduction to the basic Ojibwe teachings of food and survival.

The Ojibwe survived in the Minnesota woods for countless generations because they developed a very special knowledge, culture, and respect for the natural world. And in spite of many changes in our modern society, a lot of Ojibwe people still carry on those teachings.

If you want to learn more about Ojibwe culture and history, you can look for books like *Ojibwe in Minnesota* or *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask*. You can also attend a traditional skills workshop at your local community education program, tribal college, or university, or visit any of the great displays at Minnesota's historic sites or your local historical society. V

During downtime between harvests, Caleb, Elias, Robert, Evan, and Isaac Treuer (clockwise from top left) *love to play moccasin games. The members of one team sing while their opponents search under moccasins for hidden musketballs or marbles. The sticks are used for keeping score.*

Note to Teachers

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