

Student Page: How the Anishinaabe Overcame Difficulties Long Ago

Shared orally by Amik (Larry Smallwood) and originally published in *Dibaajimowinaa*¹, by the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Council

Explain: Anishinaabe means “original people.” It is a collective name for groups of people who live in the U.S. and Canada. The group of Anishinaabe who live in Minnesota are the Ojibwe people. Anishinaabe still live in Minnesota today and carry on both old and new traditions. The Ojibwe told stories in the oral tradition, and did not write them down. Amik, the narrator, tells the story in his own voice.

Long ago there wasn't any work, not like there is today for the Anishinaabe, to make his living. Those ones that raised me were always busing doing something. You see, they say we were poor. But I didn't know that we were poor; we always ate. We were never in need of food to eat or clothes to wear.

Oh, that old man that raised me used to do all kinds of things. I would go with him in the woods; I must of been five years old, maybe four, or six. When fall came around he would be out trapping. He did all sorts of stuff. Also he would find work cutting timber once in a while. That is one thing the Anishinaabe was good at; long ago they always cut timber. They were paid real cheap for cutting timber, .06 cents for each 8-foot log that was given, that were stacked up when they cut timber. Even the women all worked too, going around making money, supporting their children well. That's what they did all winter long, cut timber. They went all over to various places to do it. You see, some of those Anishinaabeg from Lake Lena even went to Montana to go around logging. At that time, indeed it was very far; it is very far to that place called Montana. That is what some of them did that over here, some of them went up north to the place called Ely to cut timber over there. They made their little villages around there like that all winter.

And then again when spring came around, that's the time they started boiling sap. Those

Anishinaabeg also used to trap. I can barely remember that old man that raised me, Biidaanimad. When he was trapping, it was beavers he trapped. All around my house (outside) is where those beaver hides would lay as he dried them there. I don't know how much he was given for each beaver hide. But it was a lot; he was given a lot of money, also mink hides, chipmunk hides, everything. That's how he made money. And also when spring approaches, that is when the people go in the woods making sugar. Some would move into the woods and camp there while they made maple sugar. They always used to have a lot of maple syrup and maple sugar. See, some they gave to some of their relatives, and they saved some for themselves as much as they would use in a year. What was left over, they would sell to the white man who would pay them for it. That is also how they made money. See it was hard long ago when there was no work. That's why those Anishinaabeg sold syrup and what they trapped. That is how they were able to support their children.

Some had a lot of children. Indeed, some had to work a lot to support them. But the Anishinaabe was never in need of something to eat you see; he was always out hunting. The Anishinaabe always had deer meat, partridge, and rice sugar, maple sugar and maple sugar candies. Also, they always had fish. They only had to buy lard and salt, and maybe tea. We didn't know that

¹ [Ojibwe People's Dictionary](https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/dibaajimowin-ni): Dibaajimowinan (plural of dibaajimowin) <https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/dibaajimowin-ni>

we were poor. And we were never hungry either.

And then in the summertime, before the summer, when the ice would leave, that's when they would go out spearing again on the lake, and they set nets also. They got a lot of fish from netting. Over in Mille Lacs Lake, over there that is an especially big lake where they set nets. They made their nets carefully. See, the Mille Lacs Anishinaabe always say, "You don't let your net touch the bare ground; treat your net with respect." That's why they always hung up their nets carefully and checked their nets right away, put their nets in a box and also their fish so that they wouldn't drag them on the bare ground. As for today, you see Anishinaabe from different places dragging their nets around on the road and the bare ground, going around disrespecting their nets. It is from there that we get our food from setting nets.

And when summertime came around again, they would again go around logging, and they were given a little more when they peeled it those little poplars when they were gathering poplars. Maybe a dime, no maybe not, twelve cents they were given for eight-footers that they had stacked up. Indeed they worked hard and many of those Anishinaabeg didn't have chain saws, they only had cross-cut saws to use. Indeed they worked hard every day. And they women helped out as well. Even the children around 8 years old so that they were able to drag those logs, that is when they started working, those Anishinaabeg. There were a lot of mosquitoes as well and flies, horseflies, too many of them.

And then when things began to ripen you see, that's when they would help the farmers gather hay. And they would gather beans also. I hardly remember that. When I was 13 years old, I can remember them going around camping, those farmers. When they grew beans, a lot of

Anishinaabeg went there to pick beans. Maybe for one bag only, maybe only 50 cents they were given per bag. I don't remember what they were paid, but I know it was cheap.

And when it was finally ricing time, again they would harvest wild rice and move around again to wherever they wanted to rice; they moved all over to various places camping around there when they riced. After all, at that time the Anishinaabe knew when the lake would be opened for ricing. The Anishinaabe estimated when the rice would be ready. But not these days; it is a warden, a white man, that opens up the lake before the rice is ready. And some go around knocking rice without waiting for it to ripen. I can barely remember those wardens long ago used to ask those old Anishinaabe men, "Is it time to open up the lakes?" the Anishinaabeg were asked long ago. Then when those old men had finished looking at the lakes, "Not yet, maybe three or four more days until the rice will be ripe enough." They used to listen to those Anishinaabeg, but not these days. They riced there and made a little money from it. You see at that time, there was a lot of rice. Many finished enough rice to eat for the whole year, many did. And some saved some to give to their relatives, maybe some went to the cities. They save some for them, to feed them as well. And they would sell what was left over and get paid well then. And this was also when they would buy what they would use again all winter long. Their tools, their clothes, everything they would buy even stuff for their cars to last all through the winter. First of all they would save enough to eat and to give away to their relatives, then from there (what was left after that) is where the money would come from.

In the summer again they would go around picking berries; they made all kinds of things, going around picking all different kinds of berries, which they would use all winter. They would sell what berries that were left over. And

after ricing, when they were done ricing, then again they would go around helping the farmers gathering potatoes and rutabagas; long ago a lot of Anishinaabeg were hired to do those things. That is how he made his living, where the money came from for the Anishinaabe to use. We didn't know we were poor. The elders were always working, always doing something,

having ceremonies, and dances, always using their tobacco. They didn't forget to pray to the spirits properly when they were in certain places, in order to live a good life and to be shown compassion by the spirits. That is how the Anishinaabe overcame the obstacles long ago.



Amik (Larry Smallwood), passed away in 2017