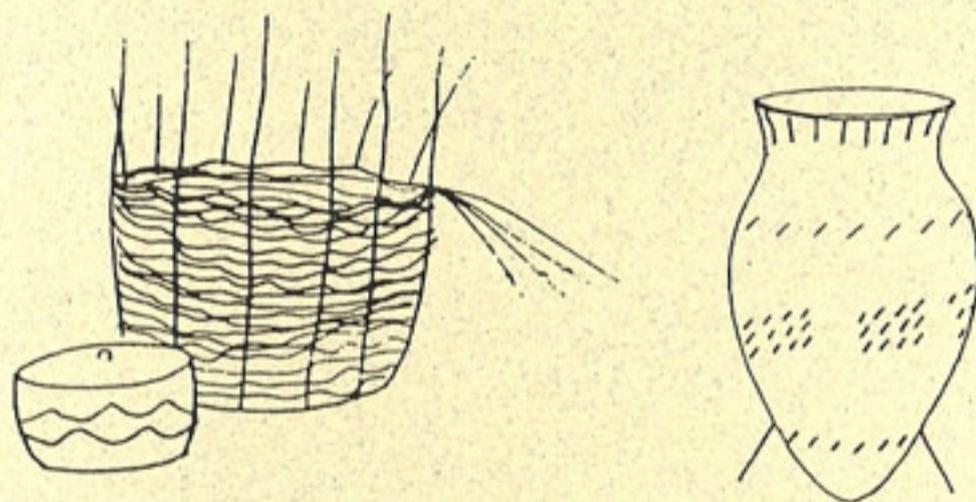


# Native Peoples of the Miramichi

by

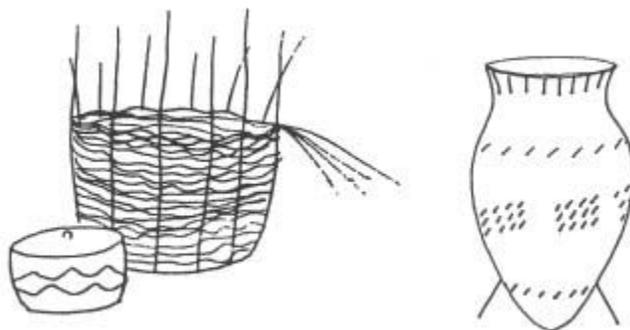
Merle Milson



Illustrations by Dawn MacLean & Merle Milson

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# THE NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE MIRAMICHI

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

It is often believed that our history on the Miramichi began when the first French settler, Nicholas Denys, arrived here about 1650. But the Micmac Indians made the Miramichi their home thousands of years before then.

The Indians of New Brunswick belong to the Algonquin Indian family. There are three tribes: Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac. The Maliseet tribe lived in Western New Brunswick along the Saint John River. The Passamaquoddy Indians lived in Southern New Brunswick around Passamaquoddy Bay. The Micmac tribe lived along the Eastern shore of New Brunswick including the Miramichi.



Each tribe spoke a different language. But all got along well with each other. The three tribes were afraid of the great warring Indian nation to the North - the Mohawks. The Micmacs used to pray to the sun because it was the giver of all life. Every morning and night Micmac fathers would pray that their children would be safe from the Mohawks.

How did the Micmacs get to New Brunswick? There have been many theories. A theory is an educated guess as to how something happened. No one knows for sure because the Micmacs had no written language to record their history. The most likely theory is that all North American Indians came from Asia. This theory states that they crossed the water from Asia to Alaska over the years. They slowly moved to all parts of the United States and Canada. They most likely did this in looking for new hunting and fishing grounds. This is only a theory. Nobody truly knows how the Micmacs got here.







Ancient Micmac Legend  
Glooscap riding the big black whale

# MICMAC WAY OF LIFE

## CHAPTER II

For hundreds of years the Micmacs were nomads. A nomad is a person who does not stay in one place. The Micmacs were nomads because they needed to follow the fish along the seashore for most of the year. In fact, it was the Micmacs who gave our river its name. They called it "Lustagoocheehk". This means "goodly little river". Later, the white man changed the name to "Miramichi" or "and of the Micmac". Other small rivers near here also have Indian names. The Napan, the Kouchibouguac, and the Tabusintac are all Micmac, names.

In the winter months the Micmacs moved inland to the woods to hunt animals for food. It was also warmer in the woods.

The number of Micmacs was never very great. They had a simple way of life. They used fish and wild animals for food and clothing. They worked hard for their food, clothing, and homes. They had to be faster and stronger than the animals if they hoped to live long. Their close ties with nature are shown in how they told time. Days were numbered in "suns" and months were called "moons".

The Micmacs found most of what they needed for life in nature's forests. The forests of New Brunswick have many birch trees. The Indians used the bark from the birch trees to make many of the things they needed. The birch bark was used to make boats, homes, cooking pots, dishes, and baskets. Birch wood made great fires for their camps. Indian drums for their music and dances were also made of birch bark.

The forest gave the Micmacs many other things they needed. The roots of the trees were used for sewing. The small trees were used for smoking fish over the fires. Long forest grasses were used to make baskets. Bows and arrows were made from different trees of the forest. These bows and arrows were used to hunt wild animals. The bows and arrows were also used in Indian games of skill during the summer. Medicine was made from the bark of the forest trees. This medicine was believed to cure any sickness.

One of the few things the Micmacs grew was tobacco. The tobacco was smoked in a pipe. There were many kinds of tobacco pipes. Some of the pipes were made of sharpened stone. The tobacco was picked in the fall every year. Smoking tobacco was used as a sign of friendship.

The Micmacs got the working tools they needed from nature as well. Most of their tools were made of sharpened rock. The rocks were sharpened by hitting them against other stones. These sharp tools were used to clean dead animals. They were also used for cutting meat. Animal bones were also useful tools. These sharp bones were used for catching fish.

One of the main jobs of every Micmac was to build a wigwam. A wigwam was the name for a Micmac home. A wigwam was built from young trees. These trees were placed upright in the ground in a circle. Then they were tied together at the top. An opening was left at the top. This was done to let out the smoke from the fire burning inside the wigwam.

The small trees were covered with large pieces of birchbark. The birchbark was cut in late winter because it was smoother then. The women sewed the birchbark to the trees. The floor of the wigwam was covered with grass to keep it warm, Each part of the wigwam had its own name. Each person also had his own place in the Indian home. Unlike homes today, new wigwams could be built quickly wherever the Micmac moved.



A Micmac Wigwam

It is likely that the most important animal to the Micmacs was the moose. The moose was used for its meat. The fat from the moose was used in making a kind of bread called “cacamos”. The skins of the moose were used to make footwear, dresses, and other clothing. Even blankets and coats were made from moose skins. Today the moose is still important to Miramichi hunters.

The Micmacs studied all animals very carefully. From a young age they learned to make bird and animal calls. They had to practice hunting with their bows and arrows. If they did not do this, it could mean the whole band would die from not having enough food. When there was lots of food they ate too much. They did this because they would remember the hungry times. But the Micmacs killed animals only when food was needed.

Most travel in those days was done by canoe. The canoes were made of wood frames covered with birchbark. Travel by canoe was full of danger. The rivers often had dangerous waters. Sometimes the canoe and all it held had to be carried through the woods until safer waters could be found. The men would carry the canoe. The women and children carried everything from the boat. It would seem the Micmacs travelled overland often from the Miramichi to the Saint John River. There were five or six trails through the woods between the two rivers. Today these trails are used mainly by hunters.

Every summer the small bands of Micmacs would meet at a Grand Council of Micmacs. At these meetings, the hunting grounds for each band were decided for the next year. Great speeches were made. There was much eating, pipe-smoking, games, and story telling. Bands would travel a long way to be together. It was a special time of the year.

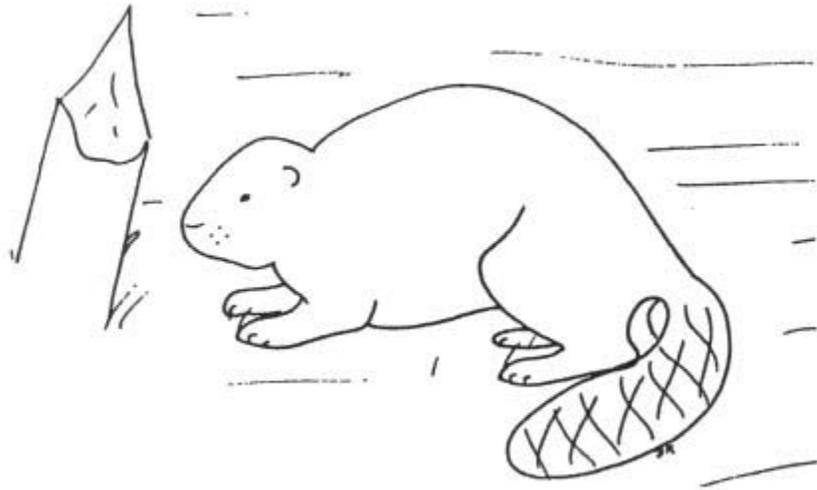
Story telling was a well-liked pastime of the Micmacs. Their best known stories were about Glooscap. He was a kind of God. He looked like an Indian, but was much bigger and stronger. Glooscap could move hills and rivers. He could change people into animals. He could travel across the skies and seas. If the Micmacs were good, Glooscap would help them. Indian history has it that one day Glooscap left his people, never to return. Before he left he warned his people that strange white men would come to their land. This was the way the Micmacs lived before the first white men arrived here about 1650.

# CHANGES IN MICMAC WAY OF LIFE

## CHAPTER III

After the white man arrived it did not take long for the Micmac way of life to change. They soon began to wear some European clothing. They began to hunt animals, not for the food, but to trade with the white man. The animal fur most wanted was that of the beaver. The beaver has a heavy, rich fur. Beaver hats were very well-liked in Europe at the time.

In Micmac stories the beaver was a very important animal. The Micmac people even gave a small place north of Newcastle the name of Beaverbrook. It was from this place that a famous Canadian, Lord Beaverbrook, took his title. The Micmacs had lived there for thousands of years. They thought there would always be lots of beaver. Within two hundred years the beaver was almost gone from the face of the earth. This is just one example of how the Micmacs' beliefs about nature had been upset.



The Micmac way of life changed when the Europeans came. They brought many new ideas to the Micmacs. It was the Europeans who first brought alcohol to the Micmacs. Alcohol was traded for furs. Most Micmacs had never had alcohol before. They were not used to the way it made them feel. Throughout their history the Micmacs had always been careful in their thoughts and actions. They found that drinking alcohol made it hard to be as careful.

The European white man also brought with him many diseases. The Micmacs had no medicine to cure these diseases. Even in the best of times, there were not many Micmacs living along the Miramichi. Those awful new diseases killed many of them. For a time it looked like those diseases would wipe out the Indian people completely. These were just some of the changes the Europeans made in the Indian way of life.

# FIRST WHITE SETTLERS ON THE MIRAMICHI

## CHAPTER IV

It would seem that there were no Indian settlements where Chatham and Douglastown are found today. But the Micmacs did travel and hunt near these places which were just woods at the time. Most Micmacs had settlements downriver near present day Burnt Church. Other settlements were found upriver above Newcastle.

The first white settler on the river was Nicholas Denys, a Frenchman. When he died in the 1680's, his son, Richard Denys, stayed on. He brought more French settlers out to the new land. Denys wrote that there were about 500 Micmacs living in about 80 wigwams at that time.

Richard Denys built a small fort near Burnt Church. It is likely that there was no real need for a fort. It seems that the French got along very well with the Micmacs. In fact, the word "Micmac" is a European word meaning "allies". Allies are people who are friends. People who live together and go to war on the same side are called allies. The French used this word as a way to meet their Indian friends.

From the beginning the Micmacs got along much better with the French than the English who came here in the 1760's. In wartime the Micmacs took the French side. One reason for this might be that the French were more interested in the fur trade. Also, the French and Indians travelled and hunted together. The English were more interested in building towns and starting farms. This took away some of the Indian hunting grounds. As well, the English settlers came in much greater numbers than the French. This made the Micmacs uneasy and afraid of their future. The French used these fears to get their allies in wartime to turn against the English settlers. An example of this was the Indian raids on William Davidson's settlement near Newcastle In the 1770's. The Micmacs caused him to leave the Miramichi for a number of years.

The French brought missionaries with them to the new land. Missionaries are men of God. These church people tried to make the Micmacs become Christians. There were missionaries on the Miramichi long before 1700. At that time the Miramichi Indians were using the sign of the cross. But it had no Christian meaning. The Missionaries began calling Micmacs like Cross-bearer Indians. The missionaries were able to make some of the Indians become Christians.

As far back as 1660, Father LeClercq made a kind of picture, writing to help the Indians understand the Bible and become Christians. This kind of picture-writing is still used by the Micmacs today.

English missionaries tried to work among the Indians as well. A mission school was opened in 1788 by the Protestant missionary, Reverend James Fraser. But the French Catholic missionaries were better liked. Today most Micmacs are Roman Catholic, mainly because of the work of these French missionaries.

When Richard Denys died about 1720, all white settlements on the Miramichi ended. The next settlement to grow was at Beaubear's Island about 1755. The next year the Seven Year's War broke out between England and France. The Micmacs remained allies of the French. In 1758, the English sailed up the Miramichi on their way to Quebec. They burned down a Micmac settlement. They also burned a large stone Catholic church on the North side of the river near Miramichi Bay. From that time on this place was called Burnt Church.



# INDIAN RESERVES

## CHAPTER V

Between the years 1758 and 1810 the New Brunswick Executive Council began to reserve land for Indian use only. In all, some 62,000 acres of land was reserved for Indian use. In a short time white men bought about 15,000 acres of this land from the Micmacs. Soon it became law that the Micmacs could not sell this reserved land even to pay bills.

On the Miramichi the Micmacs settled on three main reserves. The Red Bank Reserve and the Eel Ground Reserve are about eight miles above Newcastle. The third reserve was at Burnt Church. This is about twenty-five miles downriver from Newcastle. Burnt Church is the oldest and second largest Indian reserve in New Brunswick.

But giving the Micmac people land was not good enough. Their way of life slowly continued to die. By 1841, there were only 1377 Indians still living in New Brunswick. Many had died from European diseases. Those left lived very poorly. In 1844, the New Brunswick Legislature finally saw how bad things had become. In that year they passed a Bill for the Management and Disposal of the Indian Reserves. The Bill saw the need for schools and jobs on the reserves. But very little was done. Some people at the time thought the Micmacs should become part of the white world. Others were happier to see the Indians living away from white settlements. Because they were so few in number the Micmacs were soon forgotten. In 1867, when Canada became a country, the Indian problem was passed into the hands of the Canadian government in Ottawa. Today, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs in Ottawa looks after most Indian problems.

# CHANGES ON THE RESERVE

## CHAPTER VI

When the Canadian government took over, some things changed on the reserves. For example, education changed. An Indian school was begun at Burnt Church in 1879. By 1900, there were six Indian schools in New Brunswick. By 1920, all New Brunswick Indian children had to go to school. But many children didn't go to school.

Most Micmacs were happy to have Indian schools on the reserve. From a young age children are permitted to make their own decisions. The older children who remain in school go to high school in nearby towns.

Another big improvement on the reserves was made in housing. By 1900, most Micmacs still hunted and still knew how to build wigwams. But most were living in wood-framed houses on the reserves. During the Depression Years of the 1930's many of the Micmac homes were made better. Also many new homes were built by the government. In the Eel Ground Reserve these homes were built along the highway, not near the river where the Indians had lived long ago. By 1950, electric power was put into the reserves.

Most Indian bands across Canada have treaties with the Canadian government. The Micmacs of New Brunswick do not have any treaties. Treaties are agreements between two groups to settle a problem. In most cases the problem was over ownership of land. Today, many of these treaties have gone to court for settlement. Since the Micmacs have no treaties the new agreements will be of no help to them.

# TODAY'S PROBLEMS

## CHAPTER VII

The Micmac way of life is very different today than it used to be. Some of the changes have been good ones. But some traditional skills have been lost. Today, few Micmacs know how to make a wigwam or a birchbark canoe. Still, some traditional skills have been kept over the years. For example, Red Bank and Eel Ground Indians can still make Indian footwear and baskets. The traditional Micmac beliefs in the spirit world are gone. Almost all Indians today are Christians. The traditional art of story telling is no more. This is a big loss because story telling was very important in the traditional way of life.

Traditionally older people were important on Micmac Band Councils. The older people were highly honored. Today, however, most Micmac chiefs are young men. The chief is the leader of an Indian band. In olden days, a man became chief if his father before him was chief. Today, the chief has to be elected. Elections are held every two years. Since 1951 Indian women have had the right to vote. Elections for chiefs and band councils are a white man's idea.

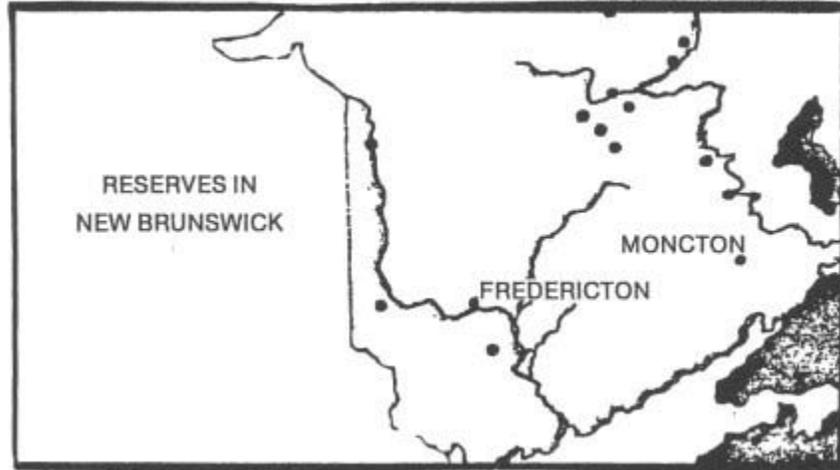
Traditional Micmac life has been changed. Some Micmacs do a bit of farming. Unemployment is very high on all the reserves. Because of this the need for government help is ongoing. Other Micmacs work in the forests cutting wood for the mills. Still others act as guides for fishermen and hunters.

Many young Indians leave the reserve to find work. Some have become teachers. Some hold government jobs. Some have become famous in sports.

The number of Micmacs continues to grow. For example, in 1971, there were 207 people living on the Red Bank Reserve, and 330 at Eel Ground. In 1987, there were 276 people on the Red Bank reserve, with 323 Micmacs living on the reserve at Eel Ground. The number of Micmacs on reserves in New Brunswick was 5,266.

Many more Micmacs live off reserves as well. In 1987, there were 70 Micmacs living in Red Bank off reserve, with 247 living off reserve in Eel Ground. A total of 2,445 Micmacs live off reserve in New Brunswick.

Today, Micmacs are trying to relearn the traditional skills. Many use the Micmac language. They are a people who are holding on to the best of their past in a fast changing world.



## NEW WORDS

alcohol	disease	spirit
allies	forest	theory
arrows	moose	tobacco
beaver	nature	tool
birch	nomad	traditional
bows	pipe	treaties
burial	reserve	tribe
canoe	settlements	wigwam
chief	sharpened	

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9. Dept. of Indian Affairs (Statistics Fredericton, N.B., Dec. 31, 1987)