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“LET’S
GET
TO
KNOW
THE
MICMAC”



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POLARPAM

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INTRODUCTION

The contents of this booklet is an introduction to the Micmac way of life, who belong to the Algonquian tribe. The Micmac originate from Nova Scotia and today they stretch along northern New Brunswick and on the east and south coast of Gaspé.

It is believed that the Micmac were the first Indians encountered by the Norse voyageurs at about 1000 A.D., and 500 years later by the white explorers of the northeastern area of the New World.

The Micmac were known by the French as the Souriquois and had a country of their own called Megumage, divided into seven districts. The Gaspeian Micmac speak a somewhat different dialect from the rest of the group.

As you look through this booklet, you will find interesting things about the Micmac. Their culture was somewhat the same as the other Indians of North America. The Indians hunted for food, had big feasts, and made clothes from the skins of animals: all this was common among the Indians.

LANGUAGE

Micmac is spoken in eastern Canada and is part of the Algonquian language family. A group of dialects that are related in speech in some way is a language family. The proto-language is where these dialects originate from. In some districts, the language may be different than in another. For example, if a Micmac from Restigouche were to talk with one from Cape-Breton, they would have some phrase differences, but each would still understand the other. The language in Newfoundland is very old fashioned and that of Nova Scotia is very easy to understand.

In most reserves, some of the Micmac can still read and write in their language. The hardest alphabet introduced in the language were the characters like the Chinese use. These symbols did nothing in the way of helping the Micmac learn their language but succeeded in only confusing them. Later, the teaching of Micmac was abandoned and English was taught for the purpose of obtaining employment.

Studies of the Micmac language have been made by Michelson, Mechling, Father Pacifique (who also made a dictionary), Voegelin and Voegelin, DeBlois, Fiedelholz, Perro, and Francis and Hale. Silas Rand made an English-Micmac dictionary that mostly reflected to the Micmac of Nova Scotia, Cape-Breton, and northern New Brunswick.



MICMAC LEGEND

In 1639, a party of Mohawks led by a young impulsive warrior entered the Restigouche River. At Long Island they came upon some Micmacs who were peacefully fishing. The young Mohawk had been warned by his father to leave the Micmacs alone, but he did not listen, he disobeyed his father's orders. All the Micmacs were killed then except the young Chief Tonel, who though wounded escaped. When he recovered, he with some warriors set off for the Mohawk village of Caughnawaga to avenge his dead brothers. The Mohawk chiefs readily gave up those responsible and as Tonel gave the execution order, he shouted at their leader "listogotj", meaning "disobey your father". When Tonel returned, the name of the settlement was changed from "Jigug", a place for sturdy men, to "Listogotj" in memory of the tragic events.

LISTOGOTJ

RELIGION

No race of people has ever been without some knowledge of a god. The origin of God has always been a puzzle to mankind. It could have begun when man realized that the warmth of the sun was due to "unknown magic".



The Micmac Indians were believed to have worshipped the sun. Whether this is true or not will be left to the reader's own opinion. One thing that must be kept in mind though is that every primitive race has worshipped some sort of object. According to the old people, the Sun was the Creator, but the missionaries finally succeeded in converting the Micmac to the Christian way of Life.

The patronage of St. Anne was first organized, in 1628, by two priests of Cape-Breton who promised their queen to dedicate the first chapel built in the New World to St. Anne, and at this same time the Micmac were still having their regular tribal ceremonies. St. Anne is now the patron Saint of the Micmac, and St. Anne's Day is celebrated annually on the 26 of July.



SHELTER

As known by everyone, the Micmac is a branch of the Algonquian tribe, so therefore, they used the same methods and the same material to build their temporary homes. Their homes or tents were called "wigwams". The wigwams of the Micmas were often dome-shaped. All wigwams had a hole on the top to allow the smoke to go out when cooking was done. The wigwams were made from poles and then rows of bark were usually attached so that they made a tent. A piece of bark is placed over the upper hinge of the flap to keep out the rain. When cold months arrived the Micmac lined the inside of the homes with spruce boughs, and a thick coating of the same material was put on the outside for isolation against the cold winds. The entrance is partly closed and a blanket is draped over it so that a person could pass and repass without any difficulty.



FOOD

The most desirable food has always been meat. The meat of an animal was highly prized, such as: deer, beaver, moose, caribou, and many other animals of the rugged country. Dog meat was much valued especially at a feast. The Micmac very seldom ate their meat raw, they would usually boil or roast it.

To season their food, they would use salt, which is obtained by pouring sea water on hot rocks, and when the water evaporates, a thick layer of salt will remain on the rocks.

The most common fish caught by the Micmac of Miramichi were: salmon, trout, clams, smelts, and eels. They would use a split stick to roast their fish.



Food

The "wild potatoe", more properly the "wild carrot", had the shape and flavor of a carrot. It grows in marshes and along the edges of the woodland. This was boiled and eaten as a vegetable.

Berries such as cranberries, huckleberries, and blackberries were gathered and then boiled three or four hours, compressed into dice-shaped cakes and dried in the sun on pieces of birch. They were kept three or four days after which they were put in a large birch box with other meats and provisions.

Bread was very uncommon to the Micmac. When bread was finally accepted, it was cooked in the sand. The dough was put in the hot sand and left there for about an hour. As late as 1890 many old people refused to eat bread unless it was cooked in this fashion.



UTENSILS AND TOOLS

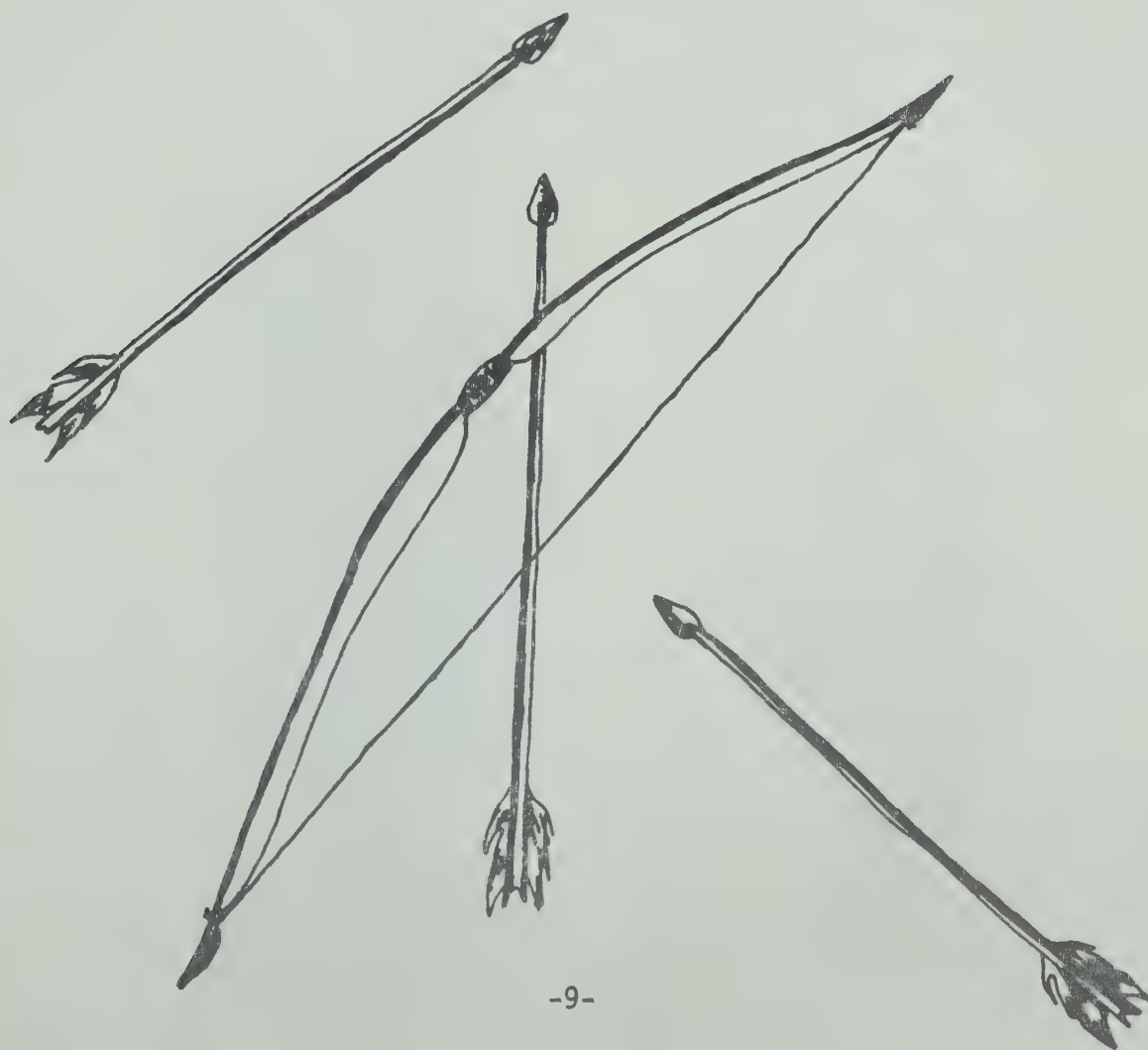
The cooking vessels were simple. They were made of tree trunks formed into wooden kettles. The method used in making them was to take a tree stump and hollow it out by burning the centre. Along with the fire, they used stone axes, made by tying a stone to the end of a forked stick, to do the job. After they had burnt it to about four inches in depth, they would take the fire out and enlarge the cavity by using bone tools. They would repeat this procedure until their kettle was big enough for their use. The kettles were stationery since they didn't have the tools to cut them down and no way of moving them.

The Micmac cleaned their kettles before its first use. If they scraped the grease off the kettle, they believed that the germs would eventually develop and they would be transmitted to the food during the kettles next use and cause illness. Another reason for this is that they think that when the grease is removed, they are losing a lot of good material.



BOW AND ARROW

Bows were usually made of these three kinds of wood: fir, spruce, or maple rock. Many of the old Micmac favored using fir because it was the most flexible wood. Fresh white maple was better to use for arrows, then when it was dry, and to increase flexibility, the ends were usually dampened. Deer or caribou thongs, tied around notches made at the tip of the bows, were used as bow strings. Rubbing the thong back and forth made it a little more elastic.



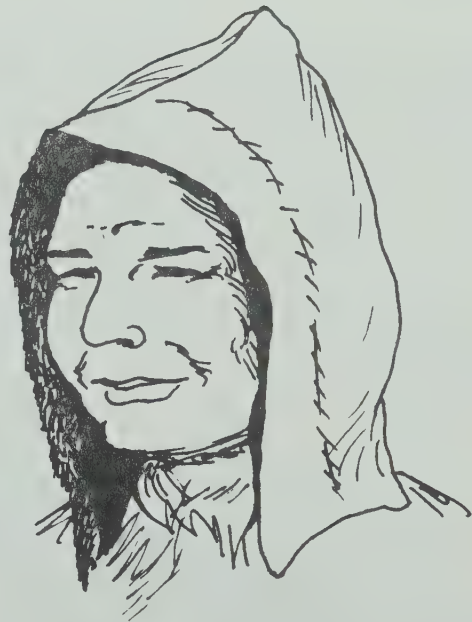
FOOT COVERING

The skin of muskrat, rabbit, or woodchuck was used for socks. Leggings for adults were made from shanks of moose, and children's from those of a deer; because the latter was small and light. These leggings were warm and waterproof. The moccasins were made by folding a piece of deer skin and sewn at both ends. Leather thongs were used to hold the moccasins snugly to the feet. Since the heel and the toe were the same shape, the tracks made by a man did not reveal the direction that he went. Old mooseskin robes were used to make moccasins. In the winter the moccasins were lined with moose skin to keep the feet warm.



CAPS

The skin from under the moose's neck was used to make caps and hats; and also the skin of a deer or the fur of a mink was used. Women's hats were much higher than those of the men which were pointed in front, but the men's hats were lined with fur inside because this kept them warm when they went out hunting or fishing during the cold months. A cap called the "conical cap" was worn by a chief or councilor.



DANCES

Dances were used to celebrate war, victory, entertainment to visitors and a feast of any sort. The instruments used were the drums, rattle and trumpet.

The dances are done by forming a ring and dancing around it without moving away from the dancing position. The arms are held in the air, feet are struck on the ground, and sometimes leaping into the air is done. The singing is done by one person only, while the others chant a single word over. At the end of a song a long and loud exclamation is made by the dancers.

The dances of the women are very different than that of the men, because they made more horrible gestures than the men, and they will never give up until they are full of perspiration. Their chanting is a sort of a hissing sound made by the lips while the chanting of the men is forced from the stomach.

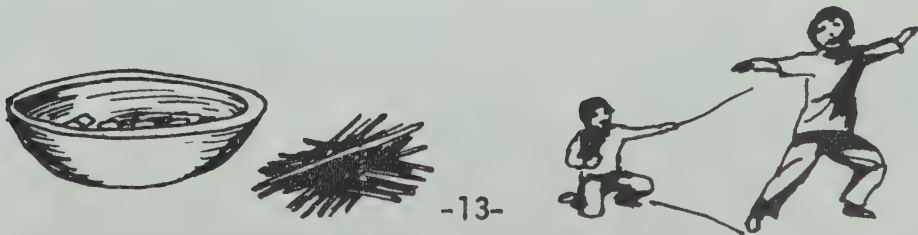


GAMES

Gambling games were the most popular games that were played by the Micmac. One of these games was the "waltes", where a bowl, six bone dice and thirty eight sticks, for keeping score, were used. The usual number of players is two to four, playing as a single or with a partner. Anything may be put up as the stake.

Another dice game played was called "the white dice game". It was played with eight dice. This game was played so seldom that a complete description of it is unknown.

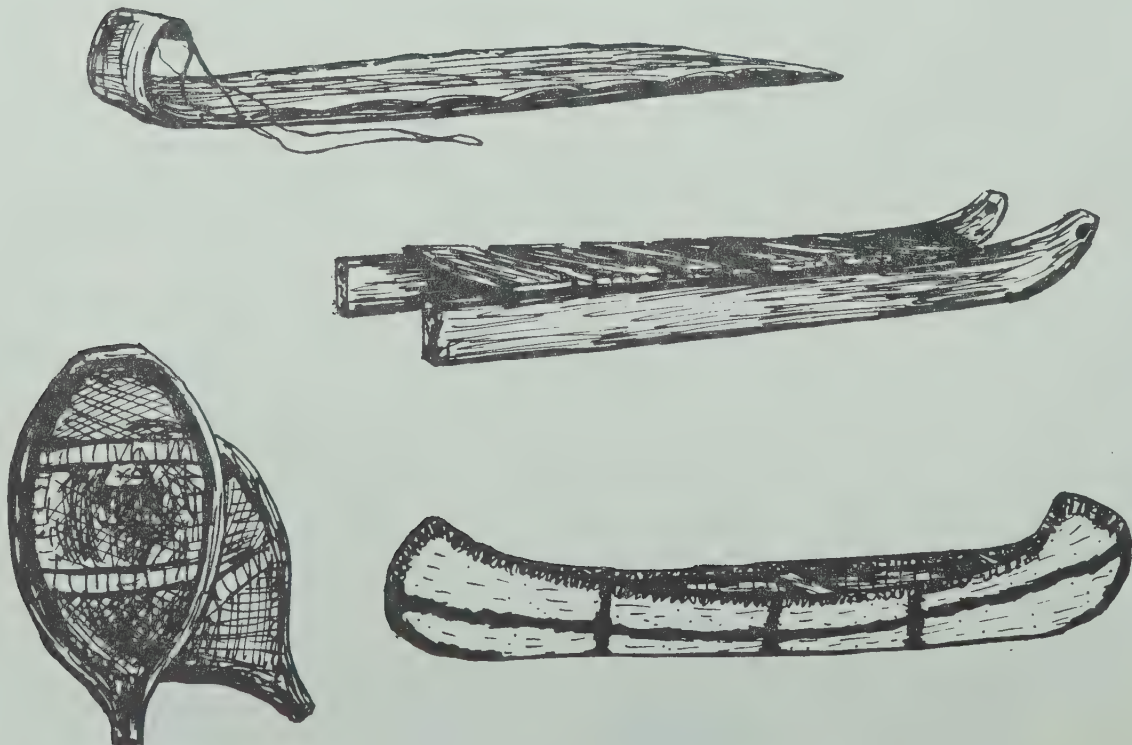
The game "ghost" was played by the boys. Each with three lines, they sit in a circle in front of the "ghost". The lines represent: brook, path, and soul in this order. The ghost sings a song in Micmac using these three words mentioned above in that same order, and is sung until the game is over. As the singer chants he draws a line from each player as his hand goes around the circle. The one whose line is drawn last runs away while the "ghost" tries to hit him with a pebble or stick. If he is struck, then he becomes the "ghost". Like the white dice game, it is also played very seldom.



MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION

There were four kinds of transportation for the seasonal migrations: the Micmac used toboggans, sleds, snowshoes, and canoes. The Micmac used canoes constructed of birch bark which is laid along the gunnels, the upper edge is higher than the levels to which the ends of the ribs will come. The making of a canoe takes strong material, a lot of time, and especially skilled hands for they were made to last.

Canoes are made by big construction companies today. They are not as good as the ones made by the Micmac, but very much similar to them.

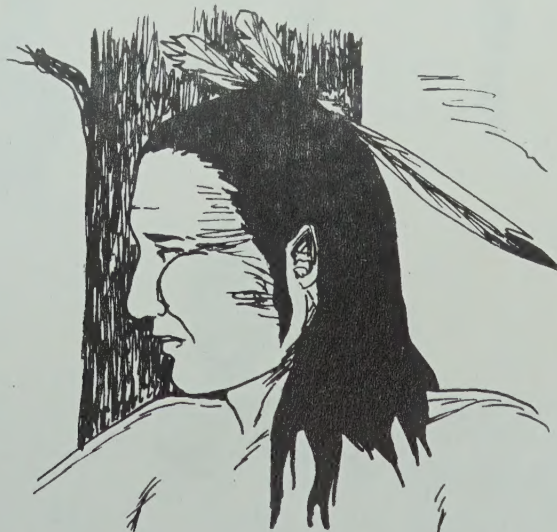


SONGS

There are three classes of songs: the first class is not danced to, and is sung in big festivals; the second class is sung at a festive occasion for dancing; and the last class is sung by a lone singer sometimes dancing to it.

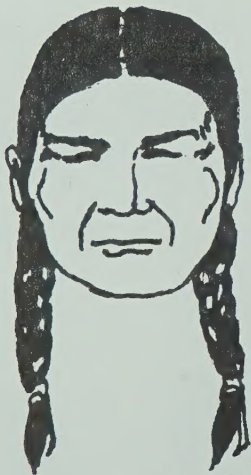
Most of the songs were learned from the birds and since the Indians could not understand the birds, their songs didn't have any meanings. The Micmac would listen to a bird until it has finished its song, then he would sing the song over and as he is doing it, he will put in words of something that he knows or likes.

The Micmac sang songs for just about anything. There is one about a boy from another reserve engages to a girl. The girl always bragged about her engagement and the boy was angered by this; so he sings a song about her for everyone to hear. He sang this to let her know that he didn't like how she was bragging and that she should stop doing it.



HAIR DO

The hair style of the Micmac was very much similar with that of the other Indians. Braids were worn with long hair parted in the middle. The old Micmac hair styles are/will known; it was made up in two strands, which were doubled and sometimes redoubled, then tied close to the head with a piece of eelskin or deer-hide thongs. Men often wore a kind of crown made from two wings of a bird killed in hunting. The men had by 1911 discarded the old hairdress. Great pride was taken in the hair, and to keep it black, they would rub oil on it.



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