

# MISTASSINI CALENDAR

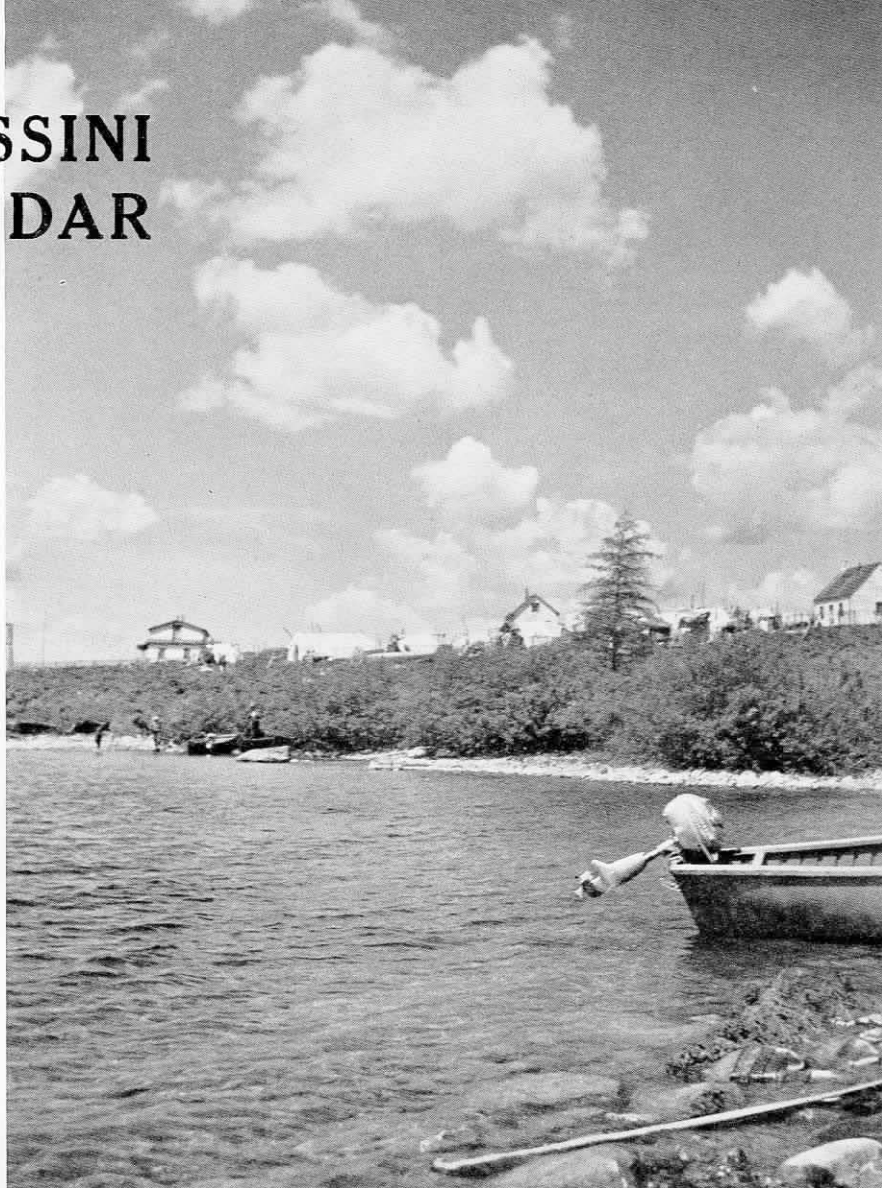
Story and Pictures

by Jacques Rousseau

(Except where noted)

A year in the life of a Mistassini Indian brings plenty of variety, from braving the hardships of winter travel to dozing in the summer sun.

The population of Mistassini Post is about six hundred in the summer, but only a handful in the winter. *O. R. Burger*



THERE used to be a time when the Algonkian tribes controlled the St. Lawrence. When Cartier travelled up the river in 1535, however, they had been somewhat displaced by Indians of Huron-Iroquois stock, who were then masters of the whole country from the Great Lakes to Quebec. The coming of European civilization to Eastern America contributed further to displace the former owners of the country. Nevertheless, the hunting Indians of Quebec's northern forests—Montagnais, Naskapi, Tête-de-boule, Algonquins, Mistassini and others of Cree affinity—all of the Algonkian linguistic family, still occupy the greater part of the Quebec triangle.

Extremely disseminated, they inhabit a territory as large as France, though their numbers do not now

exceed 5,500, and probably never surpassed 10,000. As opposed to the farmer, the hunter needs a large territory to contribute to his needs. On a small scale map of Quebec, it would be easy to mark the place of each Indian tent during the winter months, their season of activity.

These Indians are considered as nomadic, a qualification which appears to be grossly exaggerated. No doubt the caribou hunter in northern Ungava pursues the caribou in winter, and for this reason does not live within the limits of a given territory. He is truly nomadic. But the Mistassini people, and the majority of forest Indians, live within well defined limits. During the summer they assemble normally at the same post. In winter they will always head for the same

Right: While she works, the mother rocks her sleeping baby with a cord attached to the cradle thongs. Below: Indian children outside the usual type of tent seen at Mistassini to-day. Note the spruce bough floor.



tract of land covered in previous seasons. As they have no permanently built dwelling, the tent may not necessarily be put up in precisely the same spot as during a former sojourn, but at least it will be within a very limited distance from it. We should refer to them as a migratory people, not a nomadic one.

If we compare the life of the hunting Indian with that of the city business man, a certain parallel, although more or less in contraposition, would strike us. From the beginning of fall to the end of spring, both are on the watch; the former hunting fur animals, the latter in search of prospective customers. All activity is centred on production. During summer, the rest period, the Indian plays at business, the business man turns his attention partly to fishing and, a little later, hunting.

Let us start the yearly cycle with early summer. Towards the end of May or the beginning of June, the scattered population takes leave of the forest: the

head of the family at the stern of the canoe, the wife at the bow, both paddling along, with children, dunnage, food and dogs between them. From all directions, they head for the post of Mistassini. From the Temiskamie River, from the main body of Lake Mistassini, from Neoskweskau, from Nichikun Lake, they all come and, with ten to twenty days of canoeing behind them, reach their destination.

The location of the post is best described as a clearing in the subarctic forest by the shore of a bay. Until break-up, it is merely a desert where old beddings of rust-colored spruce and fir boughs, and the remnants of old camp fires, bear witness to the throngs which formerly dwelt there. The Hudson's Bay Company store, the house of the manager, the house of a free trader, two or three tents of Indians who wintered on the spot, are the only dwellings which show any sign of life, as can be judged by the smoke issuing from the chimneys.

The arrival of the Indians changes all this. Out of the silence arises a turmoil of sounds, the babbling of children, the chattering of women, the laughter of men, the chopping of wood. In a few days, three long rows of tents have altered completely the physical appearance of the post. From a dozen or two individuals, the population has miraculously increased to six hundred.

Months passed in solitude have given rise to new hopes. Matured by months of silence, the youngsters discover that former gawky girls have become desirable women. In a matter of days, the joint wedding ceremony of fifteen new couples indicates that in the near future fifteen new tents will illuminate the darkness with their diffuse light. The whole day will be given over to festivities: a banquet of bannock, bear's grease, pancakes and tea, with speeches, drumming and dancing to follow.

The purpose of the summer sojourn at the post, apart from its social aspects and advantages, is fur trading. Part of the catch has already been traded during the winter, as fur traders now visit the hunters by plane. The main business, however, is still carried out at the post in summer. Furs are evaluated at market price. If the hunter agrees, credit is immediately assigned to him in the big book. The time has now come to buy the chief commodities for his family. A few purchases, the necessity of which is rather doubtful, are also included. Is it not a holiday after the hardships of winter? Long months of subsisting on the strictest minimum, after all, entitle one for a time to some diversion. Very often some good hunters, with the help of their families can earn \$1000 to \$2000 with their winter hunting. Naturally, all this is not debt free. Before returning to the bush in the fall, they become indebted through the purchase of their winter's supply of flour, lard, sugar, tea, baking powder, cartridges, guns, tin stoves, soap and clothing. If they have had a good hunting season, they will apply their first returns to erase the debt.

Formerly, supplies sold at Mistassini post were carried from James Bay via the Rupert's River by a brigade of canoes. This long and expensive trip was abandoned with the improvement of conditions. The canoe route from Oskelaneo, a station on the Montreal-Abitibi railroad, via a series of lakes and rivers, proved less expensive. Until only a few years ago, bulky material was transported this way. Representatives of each family annually went to Oskelaneo to obtain a part of their own supplies and, at the same time, carry material for the store, receiving a compensation based on the weight of the load. Planes are also used to carry a part of the material from Roberval to the post. The trip by air imposed a mark up of the price of each item at the rate of fifteen cents per pound. The use of Canso aircraft subsequently reduced this charge. When the road from Lake St. John to Chibougamau is finished, the transportation by plane will be greatly shortened and the price of the goods bought by the natives reduced accordingly.

The Oskelaneo trip, three to four weeks, is the main pastime of the summer. There is little variety in the others. Except for the annual feasting at the time of marriages in the beginning of summer, and the election of a chief every third year, recreation consists mainly in chatting with neighbours, visiting the store for purchases, or merely for the sake of a change, attending religious services held by the catechist or the missionary, and an occasional burial. There is nothing like this to lessen the monotony of time. Meals also happily divide the days, and these are occasionally rendered more enjoyable by the serving of butter, jam, cocoa, macaroni, cheese or other choice tid-bits which are not to be had in the bush. Even bannock is occasionally sweetened and made almost a delicacy by the addition of raisins.

Observing women chopping wood and carrying fir or spruce boughs to replace the old ones of the tent floor, the occasional traveller would think that the Indian husband is lazy and leaves the burden to women. This impression is entirely false. There are, of course, lazy people among the Indians as there are



Animal skulls placed on a pole, and a trout head on a stick, invoke the spirits of the departed owners. The fish line is placed there to bring good luck before it is used.





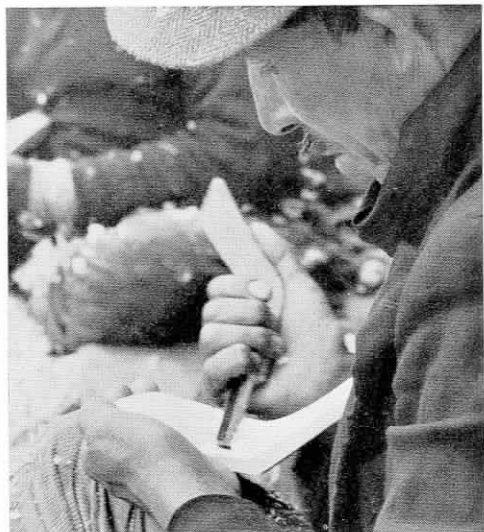
The Big Rock (*mista assini*, colloquially) near the Rupert's River portage, from which Lake Mistassini takes its name.

among the white. The impression of an Indian visiting our city homes would doubtless also be that only women work in our midst. With Indians, as with white people, domestic work is mainly the concern of women. Listed amongst these duties is the chopping of wood, which is merely child's play in the opinion of Indian women. During the summer recreation—and it is only then that white people generally meet the Indians—men will very often devote a great part of their time to rest, a rest which they have deserved. During the spring and the fall migrations, men have the toughest part of the portages. During winter, while the wife stays in the permanent tent, the husband and older sons will spend days, and even weeks, travelling on snowshoes through the tangled forest, visiting traps on the coldest days, dragging the toboggan through the deep snow and smarting for hours under the whip of blizzards. And generally with a minimum of food. Winter hunting is rough work, and in many instances proves exhaustive.

At the summer camp, life flows on. The long sunsets decrease day by day, punctuated by the continued whining and howling of starving dogs, dreary and inhuman, like the complaint of dying men. In the middle of August, the chilly nights make wood a welcome commodity in the stove. A few days more and the aspens will change into their golden robes. The Nichikuns, from the territory farthest away, hear the call of the woods: "Fall is running out, and frost will soon set its traps." All the narrow brooks, which, from portage to portage, will carry them to their hunting ground, must be left far behind before the cold nights seize them in their icy grip. The Temiskamie, Neoskweskau and Mistassini groups follow, and after a night of drumming, tents collapse and long lines of canoes leave the post.

In a day, with paddle or improvised sail, or in a few hours with a "kicker," they reach the end of Abatagouche Bay, at the entrance of the main body of Lake Mistassini. Caution here! Some evil genius protects Manitounok Island, and it is better to wait a few days before crossing the big lake rather than risk braving the waves. Happily, when canoes lie turned over on the beach, a good cup of strong black tea, a couple of times each day between meals, shortens the period of inactivity and helps to resist cold winds.

A few days later, each family has reached its winter precincts, which are separated from the next neighbour's by some thirty to fifty miles of lake and forest. In the caches, built so as to be inaccessible to the



Carving a wooden "fish spoon" with a crooked knife or *mocotaugan*. The wooden handle is made by the owner.

ravages of animals, they find their traps and other belongings left there last spring. Snow starts to fall soon, and the stove in the tent is sufficient to fight against extreme colds. Even when temperatures outdoors are below zero, the roaring fire within can bring the temperature in the tent to 85°.

During winter, all the lakes freeze, even Lake Mistassini, and may be crossed on snowshoes. Freezing of the lake surface however does not prevent fishing. With the use of many holes in the ice, the natives can employ their fishing nets. The Mistassini Indians are great fishermen. Fish is an important part of their diet in winter as well as in summer. Whitefish and lake trout are favoured.

With the successive visits to traps, furs, mainly of beaver, dark mink of high grade, lynx, otter, marten, ermine, muskrat, squirrel and fox, will accumulate. Ermine and squirrel are often left for women and children to trap around the tent. Once in a while, a hunter will kill a bear, a moose in the southern part of the territory, or a caribou in the northern sector, but this happens only occasionally. The yellow water lily, a vital food staple for moose, has its northern limit in our area, at Lake Mistassini, and consequently is rare there. On the other hand, the caribou moss (really a lichen, not a moss) of constant occurrence in the northern tundra is far from common around Lake Mistassini. For such reasons, Lake Mistassini is almost outside the range of either moose or caribou.

After the removal of the dwelling, just before thawing, so as to avoid the winter accumulation of dirt, the natives await in readiness the break up, and the annual cycle recommences.

Everyone remarks how far from expansive Indians are when returning after long months away from the post. When people meet after long periods of isolation, the show of some enthusiasm at least, it seems, would not be out of place. But it is only after a very



quiet and almost impassive meeting that there appears to be room for expression of sentiment. Contrary to what we have read about Indian impassivity, the Indian does not differ on that count so much from the white man. He can be just as sentimental as the latter. He likes to joke and laugh and enjoy life. But the Indian is most discreet and will not easily show his feelings when white people are present. Only when they forget us completely will they become their uninhibited selves. Nevertheless, it is a fact that after a long absence they are always slow to give vent to joy.

After my first sojourn in the wilderness and solitude of Lake Mistassini, I found an explanation for such an attitude. I now understand the long silence which comes over those who return from expeditions. With a colleague and four Indians, we had spent many weeks in the wilderness without the slightest contact

with civilization, not even by radio, or a living soul outside the members of the party. We finally approached the Little Narrows, where six hundred Indians were encamped for the summer. The point passed, the rows of tents suddenly came into view. My colleague and I had thought that the return to civilization would be celebrated by an expression of joy; but we too were silent, much like the Indian after a long absence. I now understand this silence, this impassivity. It is caused by a certain anxiety. The great joy of meeting one's own family is shrouded in an anguish of uncertainty. What will be the news from home? What, in a moment, will fall on our heads after so many days? But when long-awaited letters have been hurriedly read through, a smile erases the wrinkles of anxiety and, like the Indians, we too start shaking hands with everybody.



Long lines of paddle canoes towed by outboards approach the post in the spring. These are the Nichikuns, the last to arrive.

*Photos by S. Crone*

As each new band arrives, everyone shakes hands with them. Now the toil and hardship and danger of a winter in the wilderness is over for another season.

