TOPIC 5.7

Aboriginal Lifestyles

Should Aboriginal languages be a mandatory part of the provincial curriculum?

Why is it important for traditional Aboriginal lifestyles to be maintained by younger generations?

5.96 An unidentified group of Inuit visiting a store in the Voisey's Bay area, pre-1960

5.97 Making do with whatever materials are available
This picture from the 1930s shows a woman standing next to a shed made from half a fishing skiff.

Introduction

The Great Depression and worldwide drop in fur prices in the 1930s affected all Aboriginal groups, as it did many other Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. A further challenge to living a traditional lifestyle was the reduction in traditional trapping and hunting grounds because of new forestry and other economic development – although these sometimes did offer alternative forms of employment. In particular, the building of the military base at Goose Bay drew many members from Labrador Aboriginal groups away from their traditional communities to a larger urban centre.

Inuit

When the Moravians sold their stores to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1926 because of financial difficulties, life for Inuit of Labrador changed. The Hudson's Bay Company was involved mainly in the fur trade. The company provided Inuit with the necessary food and ammunition to hunt, and encouraged Inuit to abandon or decrease many of their other activities, including sealing and fishing, in order to trade fur year-round for credit at company stores.

With the advent of the Great Depression in the 1930s, dependence on the fur trade and on Hudson's Bay Company stores for manufactured goods and imported foods undermined the Inuit subsistence economy and made them more vulnerable to outside forces over which they had no control. When the price of fur dropped during the Great Depression, many Inuit families fell into poverty. The company suggested a return to sealing rather than trapping furs, but nets used for sealing had been neglected, and the rawhide had rotted.

An additional problem was increased health issues among Inuit, arising from changes in diet and lifestyle. In 1932, the Hudson's Bay Company ended credit advances and conducted an entirely cash and barter business. The only way some Inuit could earn money to buy supplies was to sell wood to the Hudson's Bay Company store. By 1936, diseases such as scurvy and beriberi became more prevalent. There was also an increase in the number of tuberculosis cases. The only form of government assistance for Inuit was small relief payments that were distributed by the Newfoundland Ranger Force.

Eventually, lower worldwide prices for furs led the Hudson's Bay Company to withdraw from northern Labrador in the 1940s. Government then took over the posts and promoted a return to the diversified Inuit economy by accepting goods other than furs.

5.98 Inuit boys in Makkovik, c. 1930

However, other outside factors arose to influence the way of life for Inuit living in Labrador. The construction of the large military base at Goose Bay during the Second World War, and the construction of smaller radar bases along the coast, provided cash for some Inuit. This was the first time many Inuit were able to purchase goods using a cash system. This increase in construction led to some Inuit travelling to the Lake Melville area for work. Since they were not allowed to live close to the base, many began to set up their houses in Happy Valley.* As well, contact with other groups, especially the Canadian and American military personnel, introduced Inuit to a lifestyle that was very different from the traditional lifestyle to which they were accustomed.

*The two settlements of Happy Valley and Goose Bay were amalgamated into a single town, Happy Valley–Goose Bay, in 1974.

5.99 A different lifestyle
The construction of the Goose Bay military base in 1941 attracted many Inuit, Innu, and Metis workers to the area. This move meant several lifestyle changes for these workers and their families. (above) Locals wait to view a movie on the Canadian part of the base. (right) The Royal Canadian Air Force section of Goose Air Base, c. 1943.

TRADITIONAL INUIT LIFESTYLE

Inuit lifestyle continued in much the same way for hundreds of years. But the arrival of more people in Labrador and the construction of mega-projects made it more difficult for Inuit to continue this subsistence living as many of the habitats of their traditional hunting grounds were destroyed or changed. The following is a brief look at the traditional Inuit annual cycle. As you read, consider how external forces would have brought changes to this lifestyle from the 1930s to 1949.

Early autumn to mid-December: Inuit went inland to hunt caribou. About the middle of October they moved to their winter camps, where they repaired and entered semi-permanent winter houses. The exact locations of these camps have been determined by archaeological surveys. All of these sites were ideally situated for intercepting the herds of harp seals.

From mid-December to March: Inuit hunted seals found out on the sinâ or edge of the sea ice. Inuit did not hoard. When they were hungry they would send out a Kamutik to their inland areas to retrieve the caribou meat that had been cached during the autumn. Fish that had been cached would also be retrieved, as needed.

In late winter (March to April): Hunting productivity was low. Inuit fished through the ice to augment their food resources.

In spring (May to June): Winter snowhouses were abandoned in favour of tents. Kajak hunting occurred – mostly for bearded seals until the arrival of the harp seals. It was also common to hunt eider ducks and collect their eggs. This was also the season when beluga whales were hunted.

Summer (July to August): Inuit would leave their spring camps to hunt for sea mammals and to fish for Atlantic salmon; in late summer they would fish for char.

Mid-August to mid-October: Inuit would obtain caribou hides for the coming winter to make warm winter clothing and bedding.

Innu

As with other groups in Labrador, Innu were affected by the Great Depression and the worldwide drop in fur prices in the 1930s. At the same time, there was a decline in the caribou population brought about by increased logging on Innu traditional grounds. For example, during the 1930s and 1940s the Quebec North Shore Paper Company gained control of more and more land. By 1950, it controlled approximately 15 500 square kilometres (6000 square miles) of timber land on or near traditional hunting areas. Further interference in Innu hunting patterns occurred in the mid-1930s, when hunting regulations were established by the Newfoundland government and enforced by Newfoundland Rangers – although Innu had been hunting for hundreds of years guided by their own respect for animals.

Innu also experienced a decline in the stock of fur-bearing animals as Metis trappers began using Innu hunting grounds, too. A Finnish geographer of the time, Väinö Tanner, estimated that in 1939 there were 15 000 traps on the Naskaupi and Hamilton River systems. Unable to obtain enough furs and caribou to adequately provide for their families, many Innu were left with no choice but to look for assistance from the government. Increased reliance on government relief, however, made it difficult for Innu to maintain a migratory lifestyle. Instead of travelling the great distances they had traditionally, many Innu remained close to settlements where missionaries and government representatives worked.

The Innu population was ministered to by the Catholic Church, at first by Oblates* from Canada, then in the 1920s by the Diocese of Harbour Grace in Newfoundland. Father Edward O'Brien visited from the 1920s to 1945 and, in 1927, he extended his mission to Old Davis Inlet. Father O'Brien was instrumental in persuading the Innu to move to Sheshatshiu as more and more non-Innu were settling on traditional Innu territory. He converted the abandoned Revillons Frères trading post there into a church and baptized

For instance, when a caribou was skinned, nothing was wasted, or left lying around. People followed the animals; they never stayed in one place for a long time, so the animals were not depleted.

*An "Oblate" is a lay person dedicated to religious work or the religious life.

5.100 "Pokue and family" and "Innu children"
These pictures of an Innu family and Innu children were taken pre-1960 when they visited a storekeeper in the Voisey's Bay area.

5.101 Innu making a birch bark canoe, c. 1930s

and married many Innu. Father O'Brien often sought the help of the government for Innu during his 26 years in Labrador, championing their cause and even intervening with the HBC on their behalf. He kept valuable records, took numerous photographs (See fig. 5.102 as an example), and took the first census of Innu. Like others, however, Father O'Brien would not allow Innu to practise their own rituals, and Innu religion was only practised when Innu returned to the bush.

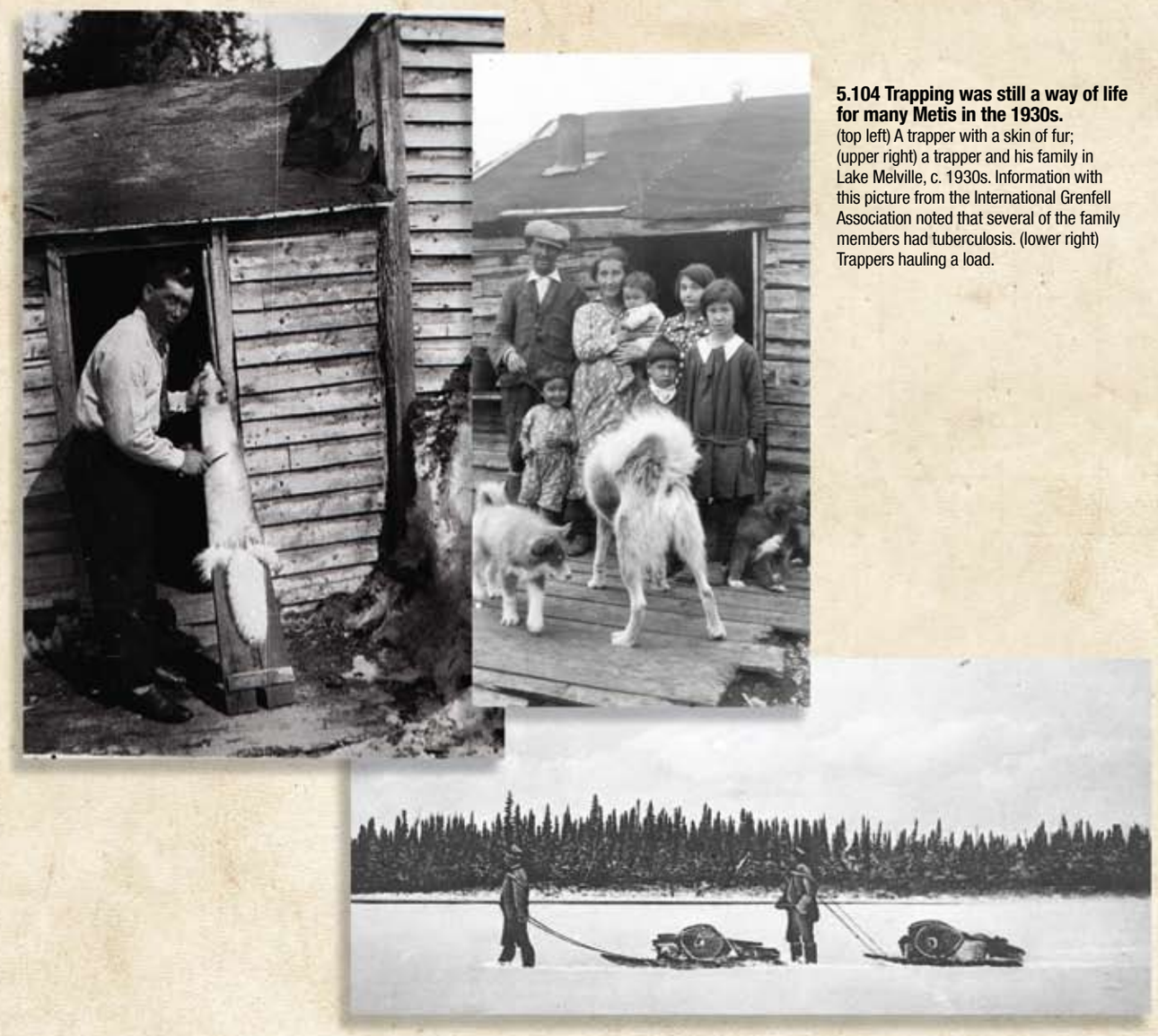
5.102 A husband and wife from the North West River area, c. 1930
This picture was taken by Father Edward O'Brien.

5.103 Women and children in a camp at North West River

WOMEN IN INNU SOCIETY

Each person in Innu society had an important role. Decisions were made by both men and women. A problem was discussed and a decision was made by all. When the men were gone hunting or trapping, elderly women in the camp made the decisions. Husbands respected their wives and acknowledged the work they did. The following are some of the typical chores an Innu woman may have traditionally done in a day:

- **Make a fire to heat water for washing**
- **Cook for the children**
- **Clean dishes**
- **Clean blankets and tent**
- **If caribou had been caught, clean the meat and prepare it for smoking or drying**
- **Get boughs for floor of the tent**
- **Spend time outside with the children, perhaps on a hike to go partridge hunting or berry picking**
- **Sew**
- **Make bread**
- **Prepare the main evening meal for the hunters' return**
- **Put the children to bed – children were often told bedtime stories about animals and the traditional lifestyle**
- **Sometimes wives would hunt with their husbands. When they did this, the oldest daughter would be in charge of the family.**



5.104 Trapping was still a way of life for many Metis in the 1930s. (top left) A trapper with a skin of fur; (upper right) a trapper and his family in Lake Melville, c. 1930s. Information with this picture from the International Grenfell Association noted that several of the family members had tuberculosis. (lower right) Trappers hauling a load.

Metis

Metis life continued to be one of hunting and gathering, augmented by commercial trapping and fishing. After the 1929 stock market crash, the price of fish dropped dramatically. Although trapping was affected, it provided a modest living for most Metis.

In Upper Lake Melville the Hudson's Bay Company was given competition by the Revillon Brothers and by trapper-trader John Groves. It was also given competition by the Fequets in Sandwich Bay. In Aboriginal tradition, Labrador Metis had their own social support system separate from government. The person who inherited a trap line gave 30 per cent of his gross earnings on the trap line to the family of the previous owner.

During the Second World War, the demand for fur declined, but a major air base was constructed at Goose Bay in Central Labrador and many people from all parts of Labrador came to work on the base. Although many continued commercial trapping and fishing, this marked the beginning of the end for a subsistence way of life for Metis, as people moved to a more reliable cash economy.

From the 1920s, increased missionary activity added a new dimension to life for Metis. The International Grenfell Association established a hospital and a residential school in North West River, Cartwright, and Battle Harbour regions. People not only experienced better health care, but the children were being educated to face the challenges of a changing society. During this time, some people gave up commercial trapping and fishing to work for the mission.

An important missionary was Methodist Reverend Dr. Lester Burry. He did much to alleviate the loneliness and isolation experienced by trappers on their trap lines. From September to Christmas, and sometimes until March, trappers were alone on their trap lines deep in the heart of Labrador. The only way to send or receive a message from home was to leave a note at the end of a trail and hope that someone would come along and bring the note to the end of the next trapper's trap line. This would occur all the way down "the river" to his family.

In 1937 Dr. Burry built four radios and distributed them

5.105 Hauling up a boat in Table Bay in the early 1940s

5.106 Rev. Lester Burry

to trappers on the trap line. On November 20, 1937 he made his first broadcast. Trappers could now receive news from home, weather forecasts, and Sunday services.

Dr. Burry also introduced democracy to Labrador. Until the Confederation debates, the people of Labrador did not have the right to participate in elections and had no representative in any Government House of Assembly, although they paid taxes to Newfoundland. Dr. Burry* was the first Labrador representative in government. He encouraged Labrador people to support confederation. The Labrador vote helped ensure Newfoundland's confederation with Canada, which not only dramatically changed the life of people in Labrador, but on the island of Newfoundland, as well.

*Rev. Burry was the Labrador representative to the National Convention and one of the "Ottawa Delegation" that went to discuss the possibility of Confederation with Canada.

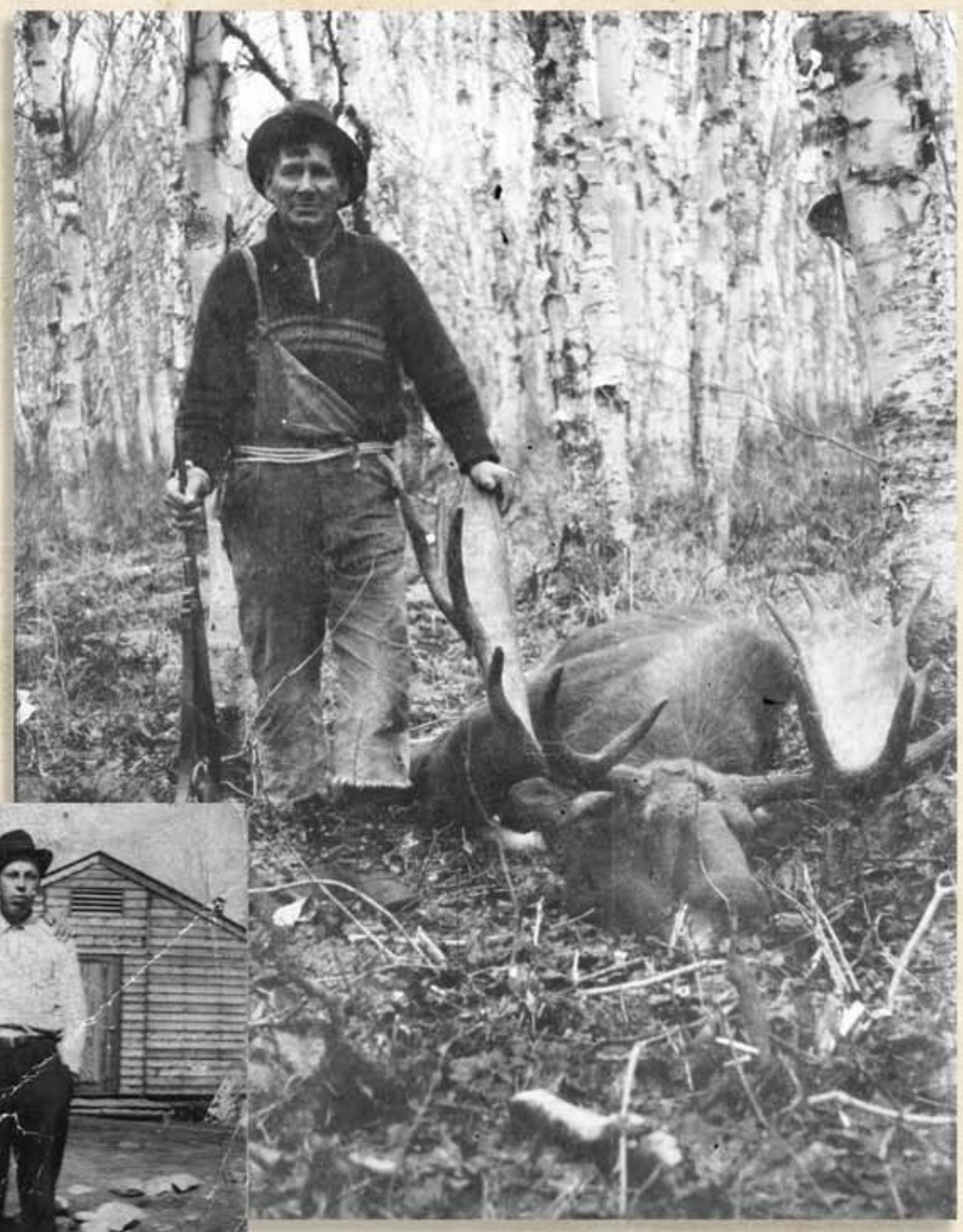
A NEW LIFE IN HAPPY VALLEY AND GOOSE BAY

In the following excerpts from *Woman of Labrador* (1973), Elizabeth Goudie shares some of her memories of the changes introduced to her life by the building of the base at Goose Bay.

"1939 brought the old life of Labrador to a close. The war was on then and in 1940 people began to talk about an air base being built in Goose Bay … Everyone was so happy. There was going to be work for our men. We were going to have a chance to earn a steady income."

"[At first] … we still lived on in Mud Lake. Jim worked in summer and trapped in winter. We were bothered with heavy colds and flu and a lot of us got quite sick. The doctor said it was because of the new people that had moved into Labrador … There were a few of our old people who died of heavy colds and pneumonia when the base first came to Goose Bay."

"The next year, 1944, we moved to the Valley. I had lived 25 years in Mud Lake. I was sorry to move because I had gardens in Mud Lake … We came in August and had to cut all the birches and spruces off the bank to put down our tent camp. Although my husband was working every day, he got some second-hand lumber and whatever else he could get to build a little shack for the winter. We camped from August until October when we moved into the house. It was pretty small, about 18 by 20 feet …"



5.107 A Mi'kmaw hunting guide near Gander River, c. 1930s

5.108 Two young men from Conne River

Mi'kmaq

As for many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, the 1930s brought hard times to Mi'kmaq. In addition to facing the near extinction of caribou in their traditional hunting lands, they too had to deal with the effects of the Great Depression and the worldwide drop in fur prices. By 1945 there were no full-time trappers left in Conne River (Miawpukek), the largest Mi'kmaw community.

Some Mi'kmaq were able to find work as loggers or as guides for hunters in the 1930s. This represented one of the few sources of cash for the community. The Second World War brought a measure of improvement for some Mi'kmaq, as it did for many other Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and several Mik'maq joined the Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit as loggers. Also Bowaters began pulpwood operations in the Conne River area in the early 1940s and this provided work for some. However, hunting, fishing, and gathering berries remained a necessary part of most peoples' lives into the 1970s.

In an article in *The Coaster*, Conne River resident John Nicholas Jeddore shared some memories of his life in that community during the 1930s and 1940s:

5.109 John Nicholas Jeddore was born in Conne River in 1922.

"I finished school when I was eight years old. From that point on – 1930 to 1941 – I used to go hunting and trapping each year with my father … We would start hunting caribou in late September and probably kill seven or eight for the fall and winter. We would dry the meat, which would be a good part of our winter's food supply. It would get as mouldy as hell at times, but it was still good to eat.

"After the caribou hunt was over the prime 'furring time' would be starting and we would spend the rest of the fall and winter trapping beaver and otter. We would live in wigwams in the country while on our trips. We'd spend about seven days in each wigwam until we came back to the main wigwam again. This was my life until I went overseas [as a member of the British Forestry Unit in Scotland] in 1941.

[Back in Conne River after the war …] The bottom had fallen out of the trapping industry by 1945, so I went to work for Bowater's cutting pulpwood – a job I held until 1954."

By the late 1940s, Mi'kmaq lived in 11 small communities scattered across the southern, western, and northern parts of the island of Newfoundland. However, in 1946 when Newfoundland was discussing confederation with Canada, the Director of Indian Affairs erroneously reported that there were no Aboriginal people on the island. Again when confederation was settled, Premier Joey Smallwood did not list the Mi'kmaq as Aboriginals. It would be several more decades before any Mi'kmaq would receive government recognition.

5.110 Mi'kmaw star
Chief Jasen S. Benwah of the Benoit First Nation notes this symbol "is a revision of the seven-pointed star that has been used for centuries as the symbol for the sun, but it also represents the original seven districts of the Mi'kmaq Nation which later became eight districts with the addition of Taqamkuk (Newfoundland). There is a similar one that is the hieroglyph for a star. It has many variations and is one of the petroglyphs that can be traced back over 500 years in Bedford, Nova Scotia."

Questions:

1. Use a graphic organizer to identify the problems faced by Aboriginal groups in Newfoundland and Labrador during this time period. Which was the most significant problem? Explain.
2. What alternative forms of employment (unrelated to traditional lifestyle) were available to Aboriginal people?