

# Aboriginal Lifestyles

When Newfoundland and Labrador joined Confederation in 1949, whose responsibility was it to make provisions for Aboriginals?

Will modern technology help or hinder Aboriginal groups in the preservation of their culture?



6.94 School children in front of the Grenfell Mission plane, Nain, 1966

## Introduction

When Newfoundland and Labrador joined Confederation in 1949, the Terms of Union between the two governments made no reference to Aboriginal peoples and no provisions were made to safeguard their land or culture. No bands or reserves existed in the new province and its Aboriginal peoples did not become registered under the federal Indian Act.

## Inuit

At the time of Confederation, at least 700 Inuit lived in Labrador. Aside from their widespread conversion to Christianity, many aspects of Inuit culture were intact – many Inuit still spoke Inuktitut, lived on their traditional lands, and maintained a seasonal subsistence economy that consisted largely of hunting and fishing. After Newfoundland and Labrador joined Canada in 1949, provincial and federal government agencies began to deliver some health, education,

and other services to Inuit communities. But unlike the Moravians, who tried to preserve Inuit language and culture, early government programs were not concerned with these matters. Teachers, for example, delivered lessons in English, and most health and other workers could not speak Inuktitut.

Schooling, which was compulsory for children, had a huge influence on Inuit culture. The curriculum taught students nothing about their culture or their language, so both were severely eroded. Many dropped out of school. Furthermore, young Inuit who were in school in their formative years did not have the opportunity to learn the skills to live the traditional lifestyle of their parents and grandparents and became estranged from this way of life. Confederation also brought social programs to all residents of Newfoundland and Labrador – such as child allowances and old age pensions. While this

provided a cash flow that was not dependent on the availability of resources, it also created dependence on government programs.

A further disruption of traditional lifestyle occurred when the provincial government, the Grenfell Association, and Moravian officials decided to close the Inuit communities of Nutak and Hebron in the 1950s and relocate residents to Nain, Hopedale, and Makkovik. This was prompted by visits to some northern Labrador communities by International Grenfell Association superintendent, Dr. Charles Curtis, to determine the level of health care required to curtail the spread of tuberculosis. Although he only went as far north as Nain, Curtis recommended the relocation of the most northerly communities because of the high occurrence of tuberculosis there and the high costs of delivering services to such remote areas. However, the closure of Hebron and Nutak created many far-reaching social and economic problems for those involved.

In 1955, Nutak was closed and the people were scattered to a variety of communities. The people of Hebron,

meanwhile, requested that they not be moved until they could be assured of good jobs and good housing, but when the Moravians abandoned Hebron in the summer of 1958, the government also closed its store there. Then in the fall of 1959, without consultation, Hebron was closed and all residents were relocated.\* Although the majority of Hebron residents were supposed to relocate to Makkovik, housing was not ready for them and many were sent to temporary housing in Hopedale and Nain. This crowding and competition for local resources in these communities created some tension among residents. This was exacerbated by the fact that Hebron Inuit did not speak the same dialect of Inuktitut as Hopedale Inuit. Many also did not speak English, which meant some jobs were closed to them.

These situations and others led to the creation of the Labrador Inuit Association in Nain in 1973 to protect and promote Inuit concerns and cultural traditions. The efforts of the Association and other activists to achieve self-determination came to fruition with the creation of the Nunatsiavut Government on December 1, 2005.

*\*In 2005 Premier Williams apologized to relocated Hebron residents and in 2009 he unveiled a memorial erected for former residents.*



**6.95 The relocation of Hebron**

(above) Students and a teacher from the school at Hebron, c. 1944; (left) the "Hebron section" of Nain, c. 1967

6.96 Woman making snowshoes in front of her tent at Utshimassit (Davis Inlet), early 1960s.



6.98 Innu tent in Sheshatshiu, c. 1945

6.97 Repairing a tent, 1963

## Innu

As with other people in Labrador, Confederation made new provincial and federal services and benefits available to Innu. As traditional resources such as the caribou stock dwindled, this led to a growing dependence on government services and social assistance for Innu. This further restricted Innu from maintaining their traditional seasonal round by keeping them close to the areas where these services were offered. As well, restrictive game laws

were introduced, which many felt were of more benefit to newly arrived non-Innu sports hunters than to those who hunted for subsistence.

In the 1960s, the provincial and federal governments established the villages of Sheshatshiu and Utshimassit (Davis Inlet) for the Innu. As government opened new schools in these villages and made attendance

compulsory for children, families became further tied to the settlements and less able to make a living by hunting and trapping. In fact, government officials threatened to cut off relief payments to parents who did not send their children to school, which coerced many Innu families to abandon their tents and traditional lifestyles to move into government-built homes. These homes were poorly constructed with few, if any, amenities. School curriculum was also an issue. Many residents in both Sheshatshiu and Davis Inlet felt the school curriculum was not relevant to Innu culture and placed too much emphasis on mainstream North American society. Textbooks written in English made it difficult for many students to understand their lessons and drop-out rates were high. This left many students alienated from their own culture and traditional lifestyles, yet unprepared to enter the workforce.

Some Innu suggested their settlement into villages was part of a concerted attempt to separate them from their land, which at the time was becoming transformed for industrial purposes. The most dramatic example of this occurred in the 1960s, when the Smallwood government decided to develop the hydroelectric power potential of the Grand Falls (later Churchill Falls). The damming of the Churchill River for this project diverted hundreds of

waterways and flooded more than 1300 square kilometres (over 500 square miles) of land in central Labrador – much of which Innu had used for generations. Innu cultural sites such as Kanekuanegau and Meshikamau were destroyed along with Innu hunting territory and traplines, fishing gear, and campsites. The flooding also meant that caribou, waterfowl, and other wildlife species lost their habitat, while the water's increased methylmercury levels – produced by the rotting of newly submerged vegetation – affected some fish populations. Accelerated erosion affected the river's banks as well as several Innu burial grounds, leaving some human bones exposed. Innu were neither consulted nor compensated throughout the whole process.

The result of these changes was that formerly independent Innu hunters became partially cut off from the one activity on which their culture placed most value – caribou hunting. With a decreased land base and feeling the erosion of their culture, Labrador Innu formed the Naskapi Montagnais Innu Association (today the Innu Nation) in 1976. As a result of the group's efforts, the Canadian government began registering the Labrador Innu as status Indians in 2002, giving them access to federal services and programs available to First Nations people in Canada.



6.99 An Elder remains close to his culture

### *Experiencing The Arts*

Turn to page 586 to read about Angela Andrew who is helping to keep the tradition and craft of Innu tea dolls alive.



6.100 A classroom in Cartwright, 1960

## Metis

Although aware of their Aboriginal heritage, the Inuit descendants of south central Labrador had not formalized a group identity at the time of Confederation. Other people identified them as “settlers” or “livers,” but they referred to themselves as Labradorians, people indigenous to Labrador. This identity created difficulties when people of non-Aboriginal background began to settle in Labrador after confederation.

The provincial government’s resettlement policy of the 1960s seriously impacted their lifestyle. Families were pressured to leave their traditional homes, many of which were occupied long before the European “Age of Discovery.” They were moved to more centralized administration centres, towns which promised improved medical services and educational facilities. However, this added more economic hardships, as they were moved to areas that offered little employment and were

located further away from their traditional fishing berths. This often meant that fishermen from Newfoundland arrived on a coastal boat and occupied Metis traditional fishing berths before they could arrive from the resettled communities. Education also suffered as students lost as many as three months of school during the fishing season.

To make matters worse, resettled residents put greater pressure on the local resources necessary for traditional hunting and gathering. For example, the population of Cartwright tripled. This led to frustrations both for the traditional residents of Cartwright and the new residents from the resettled communities. What looked good on paper proved to be devastating for the cultural and economic well-being of the Inuit descendants of southern Labrador.

Metis families that continued to rely on a seasonal economy of trapping, fishing, and other resource-harvesting activities found their lifestyles dramatically impacted by provincial game laws and rapid industrialization during the late twentieth century. The construction of the Churchill Falls hydroelectric project destroyed some tracts of wildlife habitat traditionally used by the Metis. In addition, some new forestry developments reduced trapping habitat – although these operations also provided an alternative form of employment for people in the area.

Technological advances, however, did lead to some improvements in lifestyle for those in southern Labrador. The establishment of the air base in Goose Bay, for example, brought better communication, and the port at Goose Bay served as a distribution centre for freight and mail going to the coast.

Also a road and cable car linked North West River and Goose Bay. In 1949, the federal Department of Transportation and Communications replaced the Marconi wireless stations with radio-telephone stations. This allowed residents to make phone calls through an operator. In 1966, a ferry service across the Strait of Belle Isle linked the south coast of Labrador with the island of Newfoundland.\*

In recent decades, Labrador Metis culture has undergone a revival, in part sparked by the formation of the Labrador Metis Association (later the Labrador Metis Nation) in 1985, which has provided a cohesive voice for social and political issues. In 2010, this organization changed its name to NunatuKavut (noon-ah-too-ha-voot), which means “our ancient land” to better reflect its members’ Inuit-Labradorian heritage.

*\*There was still no road to connect most of Labrador beyond the Straits.*

**6.102 One of the first houses in Charlottetown, c. 1964**

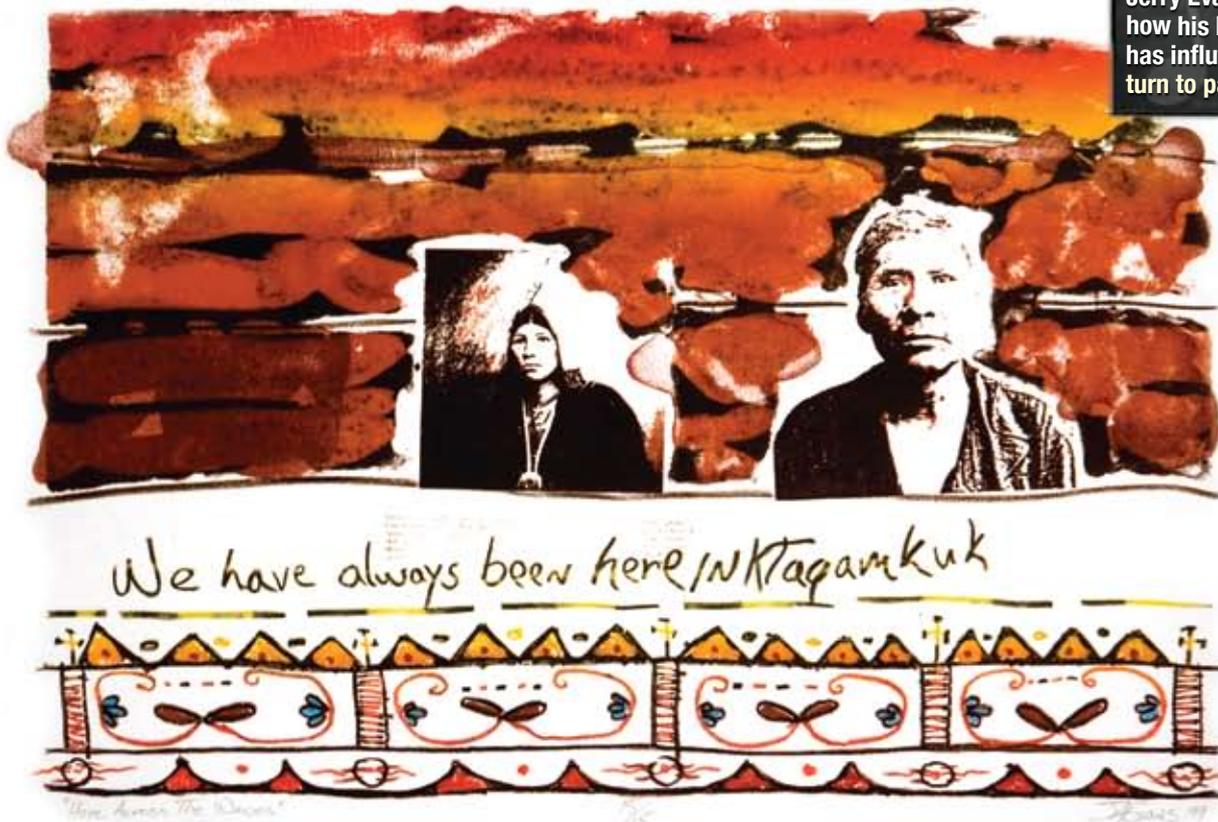


**6.101 Shovelling snow in Cartwright, c.1948-49**



### Experiencing The Arts

To see more works by Jerry Evans and learn about how his Mi'kmaw culture has influenced his work, turn to page 614.



#### 6.103 *Here Across The Waves*, lithograph by Jerry Evans (1999)

A rekindled sense of pride in Mi'kmaw culture has inspired work by artists such as Jerry Evans.

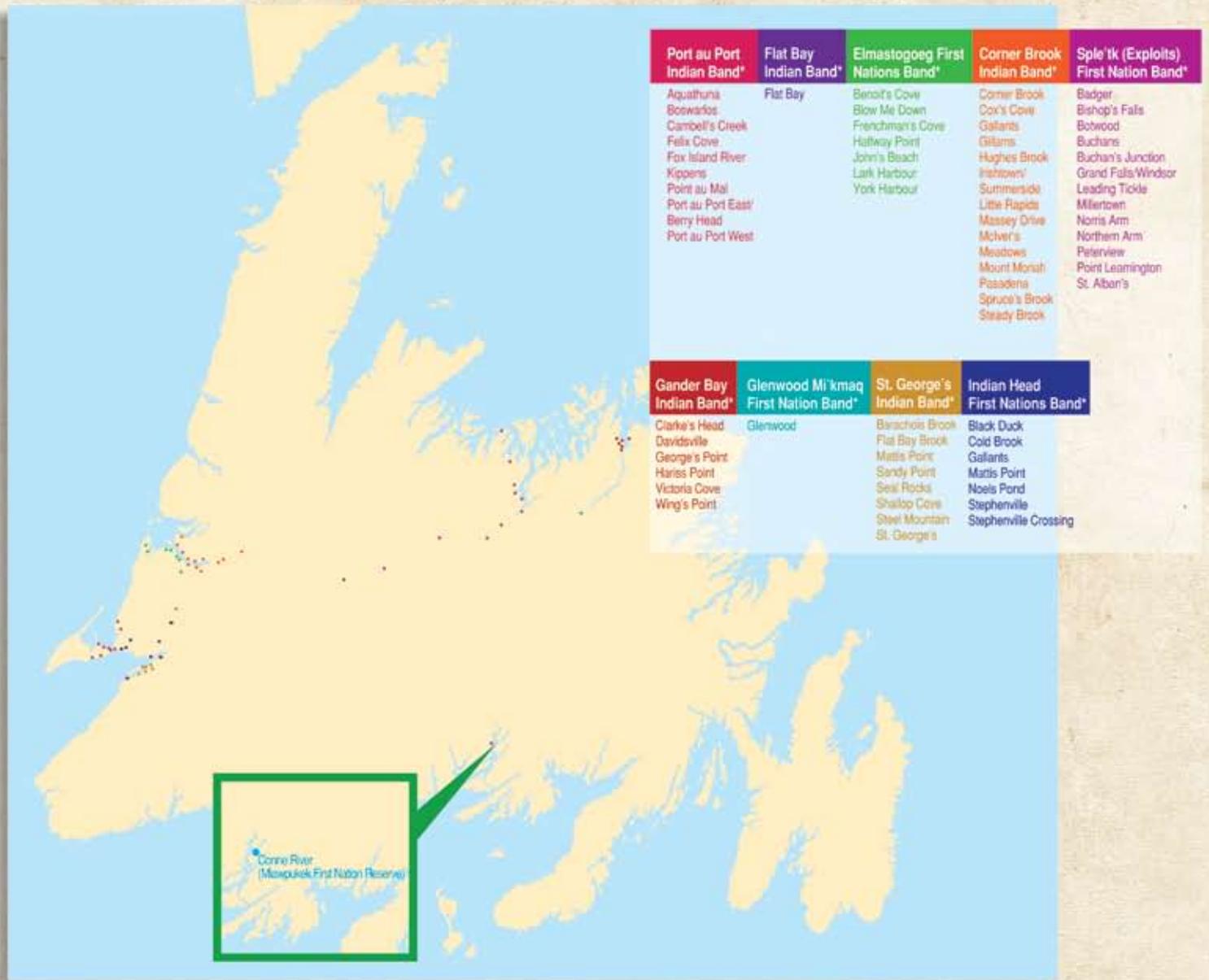
## Mi'kmaq

After Confederation, Mi'kmaq continued to lose more of their traditional hunting grounds to industrial developments. One of the biggest examples of this was the Bay d'Espoir hydroelectric project, which began in 1964 as part of the Smallwood administration's plan to electrify rural Newfoundland. As a result, large tracts of caribou habitat and hunting grounds on the west coast were flooded, making it even more difficult for Mi'kmaq to harvest this traditional food source. At the same time, approximately 840 kilometres (520 miles) of high-voltage transmission lines were built connecting St. John's, Bay d'Espoir, Grand Falls, Corner Brook, and Stephenville. These new transmission lines cut through numerous Mi'kmaq trapping lines, travel paths, and hunting grounds.

This and other factors contributed to a lower standard of living in Conne River than that of many of its neighbours in the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, prior to 1960, there were no telephone or electrical services in the area, and there were no roads in Conne River until the early 1970s. While no one actually starved, as one authority noted in 1958, "only 30 per cent [of Conne River's people] were functionally literate." During this period, Newfoundland's

Mi'kmaq did not receive any federal benefits because Mi'kmaq were not recognized as "status" Indians.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Newfoundland Mi'kmaq were part of a general movement by Aboriginal peoples throughout North America to protect their rights and heritage and rekindle pride in their culture. As with many other First Nations people in North America, some older Mi'kmaq from the west coast recount experiencing prejudice and how some people hid their Native ancestry for fear of ridicule. To counter this, the Mi'kmaq people helped form the Native Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (NANL) in 1972 – an organization which later evolved into the Federation of Newfoundland Indians (FNI). In the same year, three Mi'kmaq from Conne River appeared before the Federal-Provincial Committee on Financial Assistance requesting funds for community development, including funds for a new school. They also asked for better roads, housing, and especially a bridge or causeway to relieve isolation. These acts were the beginning of a new life for Mi'kmaq on the island of Newfoundland.



### 6.104 Mi'kmaq Bands on the island of Newfoundland, 2010

\* The Federation of Newfoundland Indians also recognizes that there are Mi'kmaq communities in Newfoundland that are not affiliated with the Federation of Newfoundland Indians. One of these, the Miawpukek First Nation, was officially designated as Samiajij Miawpukek Indian Reserve (Conne River) under the Indian Act in 1987.

## Questions:

- Use a graphic organizer to list the main changes that occurred in the lifestyle of each of the following Aboriginal groups from Confederation until the early 1970s. Indicate whether each change had a positive or negative effect (or both) on the Aboriginal group.
  - Inuit
  - Innu
  - Metis
  - Mi'kmaq
- What main step did Aboriginal groups take in response to these changes in lifestyle? How has this step benefited the Aboriginal groups?