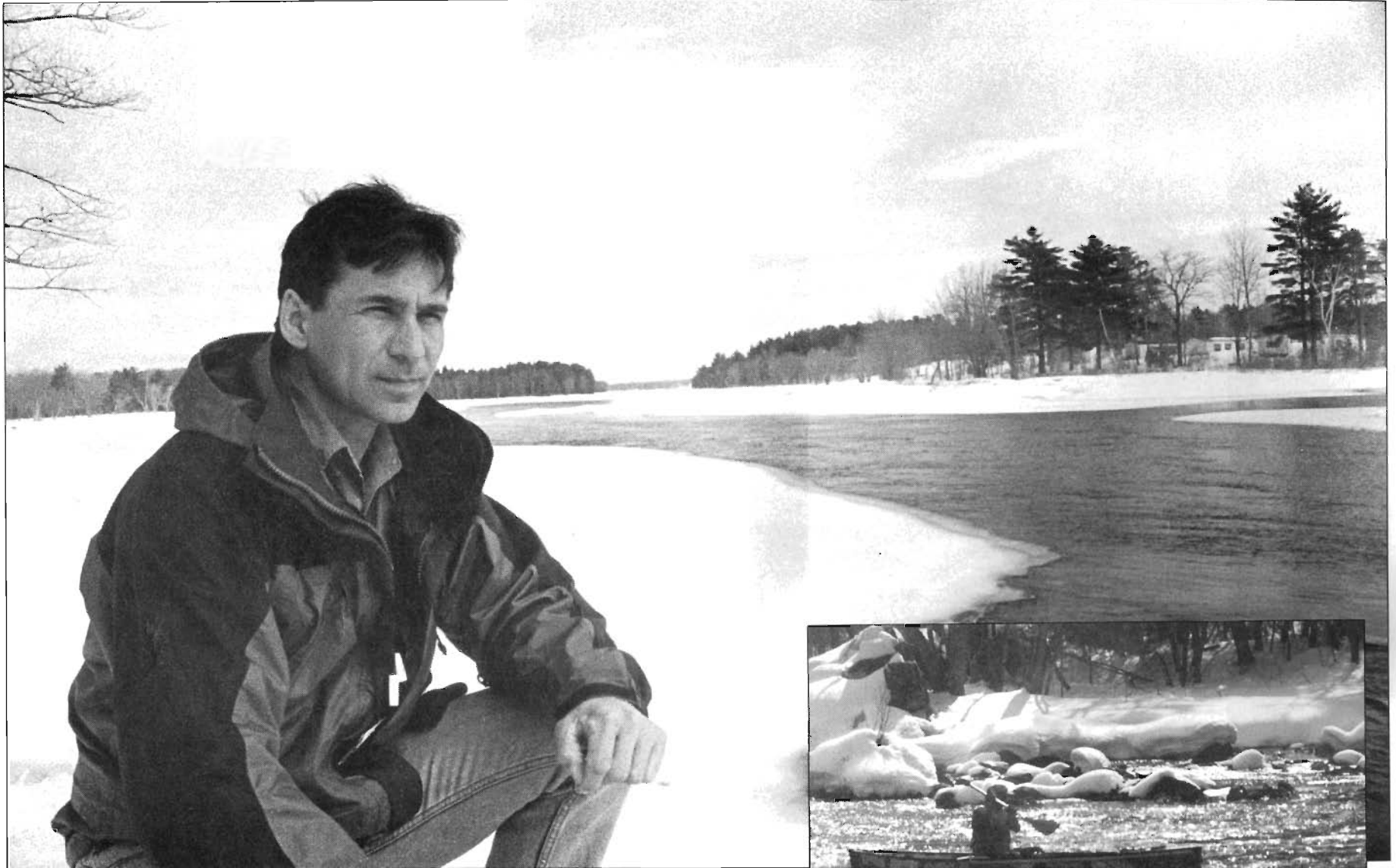


A Penobscot primer

The tribe's new governor and the language of his time



Aaron Flacke

By SUSAN HAND SHETTERLY

**"The river is like our child,"
Penobscot Governor Barry Dana
says. "We're responsible for it."**

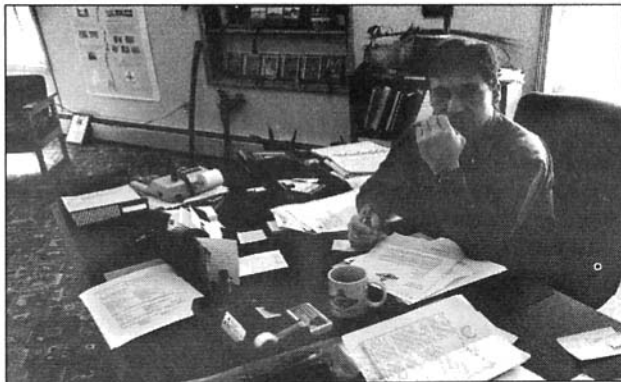
Barry Dana grew up on Indian Island. He remembers it as a time of freedom, of playing along the river and the dirt roads and in backyards. It was a time when the older people, “the elders” as he calls them, drew him aside now and then to explain about baskets or the gathering of herbs or any of a hundred different things. Or they might sit him down to tell him a story about the old days.

“I know you were around here yesterday. Why didn’t you come in?” his grandmother would scold if he had played near her house but had not stopped for a visit. How did she know? he’d ask himself. She was blind. But she knew. And the next time he wouldn’t pass the house without stepping inside.

Dana loved his grandmother. He loved her stories. And he liked to be around the other elders in the community who took it upon themselves to talk to him and to show him how to make things. He soaked it all up. For him, it was just being a kid on an island. But, in truth, these elders were teaching him to be Penobscot. What is a Penobscot? Dana is asked. He smiles.

“Well, we’re Indian and we look a certain way. It’s genetic. It’s in the blood. But I think that this genetic code can affect how we feel about places and how we feel about the way we like to live and do things. Being Penobscot is part choice, too. It’s choosing to trust those feelings and follow them.”

When Barry Dana went to Old Town High School, he crossed the Indian Island bridge to the mainland and became an Indian among whites. An excellent athlete, he was also clean-cut and good-looking — a big help in high school — and he seemed to fit right in. He was on the football team and the track team.



“Afterwards? I got to thinking about it,” he says. “On the football field you can’t tell anyone apart. You’re a uniform with a number on your back. And track. Who goes to a track meet but a few parents standing in the rain, waiting for you to run across the finish line?”

“No matter what I did,” he continues, “I never started in basketball. I made the varsity team as a sophomore. I was on the team for three years. But I sat on the bench most of the time. We had a terrible record. One season, we won only two games. And still, I was benched. When I finally asked the coach why, all he said was, ‘I don’t like the way you play.’ I think, though, there was more to it.”

Dana admits that others from Indian Island who crossed the bridge to high school had more difficulties and faced more blatant prejudice, that athletics made the transition less painful for him. He was hurt but not wounded. And there is a difference.

In an American literature class one day, the teacher was reading from an early book about Maine woodsmen that referred to “savages.” Dana raised his hand and asked her what the writer meant. Did the writer mean people who acted savagely? Who were those people? he demanded. Were they the ones who first scalped people? If so, then the writer must have been referring to the English. Were they the people who put out bounties on other people? Then the writer must have meant the English.

The class went silent.

Afterward, his white friends came up to him and said, “We had no idea you felt that way.”

When Dana graduated from the University of Maine in 1983 with a bachelor's degree in education and an associate's degree in forest management, the Maine Indian Land Claims Settlement Act was 3 years old. The settlement, with its accompanying Implementation Act, included the Passamaquoddy Tribe and the Penobscot Nation. In the settlement, the tribes relinquished their claim to millions of acres of state land in exchange for money to purchase trust and fee lands, more money held in federal trust and dispensed to individual tribal members, and a complicated — some would say unclear — combination of sovereign and municipal rights.

To people who had lived as wards of the state, the settlement looked like a way out, a way up. It was 1980, and on the reservation there were still dirt roads and tarpaper homes without running water. The settlement seemed as if it had the power to change lives for the better. And in many ways, it has.

But the Penobscots think of themselves as a separate people with a culture based on the belief that they have a unique relationship with the river whose name they bear that goes back long before any treaty or settlement. They believe they never gave away their rights to protect themselves from outside trespass and environmental harm.

At the core of Barry Dana's life — or maybe one could say the light that has guided it — has been his commitment to Penobscot culture. Dana has taught himself to build birch bark canoes in the old way, and today is a whitewater canoe champion. He is also a long-distance runner. He trained himself along I-95, running from Indian Island north to Katahdin in the summer dust of the highway. He makes and sells traditional baskets, and he has founded a Wabanaki outdoor cultural center where he teaches school children the old ways the elders once taught him.

The only thing that doesn't quite fit is his passion for sled-dog racing. But then, a few hundred year ago, the Penobscots, in winter, took their sleds upriver, pulling them along the frozen highway and into the interior to hunt and bring back game. And just a few generations past, they hauled firewood from some islands down the frozen river on sleds.

At 42, he's the father of five children and the newly elected governor of the Penobscot Nation.

gives us life. If you put yourself in that position, there's no stronger bond."

Despite the bond, he runs his cultural center on the bank of the Kennebec, above Skowhegan, away from paper company effluent. "I had to move the program from the Penobscot for now," he says, "because the river's not clean enough to have kids gathering fiddleheads and canoeing, and doing all the things I want to teach them here."

The Penobscot children may be going to the Kennebec to learn traditional outdoor crafts, but on Jan. 24 of this year the tribe invited the public to the reservation to talk about water issues. It had never done this before. Along with the Maine Rivers Coalition, the Passamaquoddy Tribe, the Houlton Band of Maliseets and the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, the Penobscots sponsored a conference called "Bringing Rivers Back to the People."

"It was tough, at first, to accept this idea," acknowledges Dana. "We've always known that for our own survival, we had to open our doors to others. But there was always resistance. And I was one of the people who resisted, because the very people we needed to open up to were the ones who had oppressed us. It's true, we've got a pretty heavy chip on our shoulder at times. History is hard to forget. And we've been hurt. We've been hurt by people who have said, 'We're going to help you.' So, it takes time. And yet the con-

ference turned out to be everything I'd hoped for. The people were genuinely concerned about water and all forms of pollution. When we broke up into what we call talking circles, and everyone got a chance to speak, it was empowering. They were echoing the same values that native people share. And it's nice to know you're not the only one standing in the middle of a field, and when you open your eyes and look around, you have a lot of friends. ..."

Linda McLeod, principal of the Indian Island School, likes to tell a story about Barry Dana when he was the Penobscot culture teacher there. It was back when Sister Helen, a Catholic nun, was principal and McLeod taught fifth grade.

"One year, in the fall, Barry asked the children to bring in some fresh deer hides. They did, and the hides were very fresh, and he proceeded to teach the children how to wash and scrape and stretch and tan them. The trouble was that every afternoon, he'd roll those hides into a ball and leave them until the next morning. Well, Sister Helen would walk into the school at the start of the day and almost collapse from the smell. We all were walking around hardly breathing, but you know Barry, he comes in calm as can be and says, 'Just open a window.'

"He got those children to make drums out of the hides, and then he taught them how to play the drums. It was pretty remarkable. But the next year, Sister

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**If you can't live
without cigarettes,
can your children live
without you?**

Parenthood is no
protection from

On a day of snow mixed with sleet, Barry Dana turns into the Penobscot Nation Community Center parking lot in his 1990 red Subaru with the canoe rack on top. He's driven an hour-and-a-half from his home in Solon, dropped his daughter off at John Bapst High School in Bangor, and is ready to start a workday that sometimes lasts 10 hours.

He grabs his athletic bag and sneakers and makes a dash for the office. Betty Kimball, his office manager, greets him. An elegant and calm woman, she has worked for 13 years for five Penobscot governors.

On the wall above a table covered with magazines and newspapers about national Indian issues, and across from the coffee machine, hangs a framed copy of a 1756 proclamation from George II of Britain, requiring his subjects to pursue Penobscot Indians, and to bring in their scalps for bounty money. Alongside it, a framed 1943 newspaper article, a yellowing piece of paper under glass, shows blurry photographs of young Passamaquoddy and Penobscot men in uniform, off to fight for their country in World War II. Eleven years later, Indians were given the right to vote in state elections.

Dana's private office is just off the gym and the exercise room, where — if he's lucky — he'll take a break to work out sometime during the day. The office is furnished with a large desk, a small conference table, some comfortable chairs, and a few moose antlers propped against a wall.

"Pana'vampsk'ewi." Dana is pronouncing, very carefully, the sounds that mean, "I am Penobscot." Or, "I am a person who lives along the river of the white rocks."

"In the summer," he says, "the rocks in the river bed were sun-baked and appeared white. This was a very shallow river before it was dammed. And it still is above the dams where you find it in its natural state."

In the original treaties signed when the land was still part of colonial Britain, the Penobscots retained all the islands north of Indian Island. They also kept ownership of the river banks and bed.

"The river is like our child," Dana says. "We're responsible for it. It is also like our mother because it

Helen somehow found money to have a separate building built down by the river for special cultural projects, and I'm sure it had to do with those deer hides."

Dana taught for 14 years at the school before he opened his center where the children come for two- and four-day overnights." You can do more with them in four days than you can in 45-minute blocks all year long," he says.



"I don't want non-Indians to tell us that they know how we feel," says Barry Dana.

McLeod believes this is the best working relationship the school has ever had with a tribal governor. Dana loves children, is a good role model, and is enthusiastic about working with the school on its

a couple of lug nuts missing, cling-banging across the country.

"I would sit listening to elders speak, some of them in their own language, hour after hour. The underlying point was always this: Preserve your culture, speak your language, make your baskets, continue to be connected to the earth ... because there will come a day when the non-Indian will be coming to you to ask for help saving the land.

"Now, I'm 15, and I'm thinking, 'What the heck does that mean?'"

"Today, I know what it means. I know you can't starve your grandchildren to feed your children. You have to look ahead, 20, 40, 100 years. And things are starting to turn around."

"Here, at the Penobscot Nation," he says, "we've set high standards for managing our trust lands. We're being recognized for our forest practices. And we're fighting like a son-of-a-gun to preserve water quality."

The Tribal Department of Natural Resources has just published a detailed and comprehensive report on the Penobscot watershed, which includes water analyses and reports on various fisheries. According to Dana, this is part of the scientific work the tribe does to back up its commitment to its culture. "We're talking on two levels here," he says.

"When non-Indians think of us," he continues, "I want them to start from the top. I don't like it when it's OK to like an Indian because he makes baskets or does these dances, or because Indians have feathers and are fast drummers. I don't want non-Indians to tell us that they know how we feel.

"I want non-Indians to like us because, first of all, we're still here, and I don't know how the hell we're here after all we've gone through. I want non-Indians to like us because we have our own government, and we're good neighbors, and we're good stewards of the land. When I hear those kinds of comments, and I do, it makes me think 'OK, we're on the right road.'"



Aaron Flacke

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“He understands,” says McLeod, “that you can’t have a strong culture without its language.”

“When I visited my grandmother, we’d end up with the old days,” Dana remembers. “She liked to talk about life before the bridge. Life before cars. If you wanted to get somewhere on the island, you had to walk. Everybody was out walking. Today, you might see just as many people, but you’re in your car and you wave. You drive around the island and it’s just constant waving. Back then you’d stop to talk. It was, ‘Oh, I saw your kid getting into my garden. ...’” Dana laughs, as if he might be calling this up from his own past.

“And they always took care of each other,” he adds. “They always took care of each other’s kids.”

“My grandmother was a sweetgrass braider,” he says. “She braided the grass that would be put into the baskets by the basket makers. But if she got too many orders to fill, or if she’d get behind because the kids were sick, all the women would come over and camp in her living room and braid sweetgrass for her. All she had to do was to make sure there was coffee and biscuits. By the time they left, her grass was done.

“She liked to tell stories about going upriver. Going up to fish camp with Papa. He’d put them all in a boat and take them up and they would stay there for the entire summer. Her father cut firewood for the tribe. During the winter the people went up the river with their sleds and brought the wood down so everybody could have firewood.

“I remember when I was about 15. Indian people all over the country were getting back to their roots and getting back to native spirituality. There would be sweetgrass ceremonies and sweat lodges.

“My mother and my grandmother took me to gatherings in Canada and down to Oklahoma. I’m talking about your classic reservation vehicle here — rusty and

I don’t want to snip at people unless I get a sense it’s not coming from the right place,” Dana says. “A husband and wife team came here recently, and they were absolutely sincere. They wanted to start a church with all Indian ceremonies, and they wanted me to come down and show them how to do it.

“I said ‘Why?’”

“They said, ‘You do things the right way, and we want that. We want the circle and the sweetgrass and the pipes.’”

“I told them that those were just tools. What would happen if we were conducting our ceremonies and somebody came in and stole those tools, took them away, and left us sitting there? What would we do? Fold up our tents and go home? No!”

“I said to them, ‘Can you be connected to the earth?’ They said, ‘Absolutely.’ So I said, ‘You don’t need a feather in your hand to do it.’”

At the January River Conference, people from all over the state have brought small jars of water from watersheds close to their homes. Barry Dana holds up a birch bark container he has made and announces, “I haven’t finished putting pitch on this, so it may leak. Just in case, I’m going to set it in a plastic tub. Then I want all of you to come up, one by one, and we’ll mix the waters of Maine.”

The drummers begin to drum. Indian people and white people get in line, holding their jars. As each is poured into Dana’s container, the name of the stream or the bay or the river it comes from is called out over the drumbeats: Saco, Passadumkeag, Kennebec, Androscoggin. Sebeccook. Sandy River, Morgan Bay, Cobscook Bay, Penobscot, Eggemoggin Reach, Sheepscot.

The names go on above the drumming: Damariscotta, Aroostook, Passagassawaukeag, Meadow Brook, Sebago, Seboeis, Presumpscot, Piscataqua.

And Barry Dana’s birch bark container leaks only a little bit.