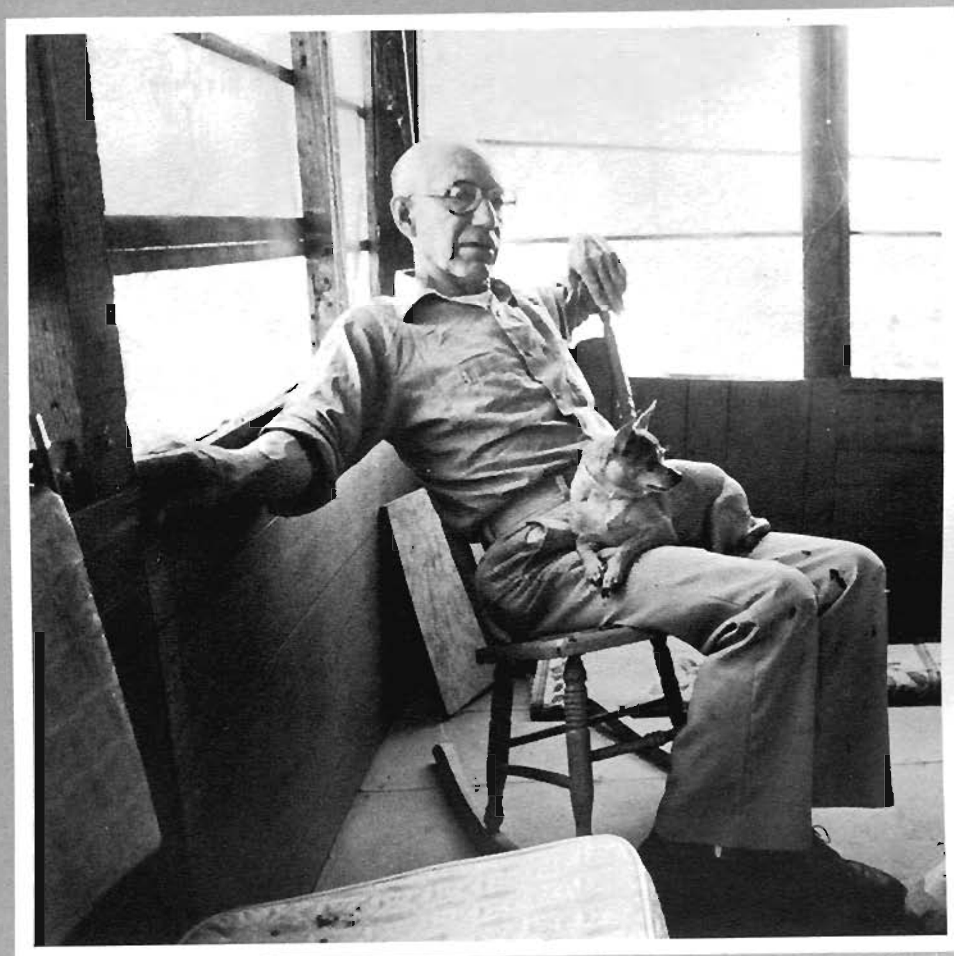
CLARENCE FRANCIS
An elder



By Mark Emerson

Clarence Francis, better known as "Guag-guag" Francis, leaned back in his rocking chair and gazed thoughtfully through the window of the screened porch of his home on Indian Island, Maine. In his lap lay one of his three small dogs and behind him the placid waters of the Penobscot River slid silently along the shores with 50 miles still to go on their journey to the sea.

Like many Indians on the island, Clarence seemed reticent to display his feelings overtly, though if one watched closely and listened carefully to his steady speech, the depth and range of his feelings were unmis-

takable. As he spoke about his life and his culture, one could detect a mixture of pride, regret, resignation and even self reproach. Through all of these emotions ran an unswerving respect for the woods, lakes and rivers he considered to be his true home.

"Wabanaki—people of the dawn—that's what it means," Clarence explained, as he spoke of his own tribe's membership in the larger Wabanaki Nation composed of Penobscots, Passamaquoddys, Maliseets, and Micmacs.

"Now Penobscot itself is not Penobscot. It's Pen-o-wob-scot. That's its real pronunciation. It means 'place of lot of rock.' But somewhere along the way it lost its meaning and its pronunciation.

"They were river people—canoes. The only transportation was canoes. That's how they survived. They always lived on the river, surrounded by water."

He paused. "The Indians were pretty good farmers. They were also good lumbermen. They were also good hunters, good trappers and good fishermen. Many people from other states, when they wanted to come up for a vacation and get a load of fish or meat, they came to the Indian for a guide. We are still guides, at least in this region.

"My family was a good bunch of hunters. Grandfather used to guide up Moosehead Lake. My father did, too. I'm quite old, but I used to do it a little bit. In the woods, hunting moose, bear, deer, I guided up around Moosehead Lake, Nicatous Lake region, Saponac Mountain and mostly up within a 25 mile radius above there.

"This was all our country because we knew it better than the back of our hands or our own back yard. We could go in anywhere, we knew where we wanted to go, we knew where we wanted to place our men. We knew just what we had to do to get whatever game we needed. What you had to do certain time of the day, good days, bad days.

"Everyone on the island at one time—20's, 30's, even 40's I guess—owned canoes. So it was nothing for us to jump in a canoe, take a bedroll and a piece of pork, a few potatoes, bake some beans and take them along. That's what you took. Took your fishing pole and went up. Cleaned all your fish, cut their heads off, tail them, put them in the barrel and get a lot of salt, salt them down—they last you to the next spring."

Though most of the Indians in Clarence's younger days supplemented their diets through hunting and fishing, most had to seek employment off the Island and the river doing whatever work they could find.

"What I did was similar to the other young fellows of my age. We went wherever there was work. I went to work on the Bangor railroad when I was about 15. My mother had to sign a minor's release. Seasonal work, that's what it was. It ran from after the frost got out of the ground until it started to freeze. I worked on the Illinois Central for a few years, too."

> "Some of us just couldn't make it on the other side."

In addition to gravitating towards construction jobs around the country, many of the Indian males of this generation found it possible to eke out a living closer to home by selling traditional Indian crafts.

"My father was a good carver and I done it. It was sought in those days. We used to make all kinds of Indian novelties. We go up in the woods to a camping area about 15 miles up river. Get in a canoe and go up. Take all our equipment with us. I'd make rough stock up there—go as far as we could up there without painting it. Then we'd bring it down—lots—a canoe load. Bows, arrows, tomahawks, everything, war clubs, paddles—get

them in rough stock up there, bring them down and finish them up.

"I got a few gashes to show—14 from here to here (forearm). It can happen. Drove a knife in my leg—broke the blade off up to here. You get hurried, get careless just an instant—that's all it takes. You've got to respect that knife."

There was yet another profession available to the Indian male at this time. It was a profession that attracted the ablest men and drew upon their traditional knowledge of the woods and the river. This was river driving, gathering harvested trees in the northern woods and herding the logs down river to the lumber mills. Among lumbermen throughout the northern Maine forests, Indians were respected for their superior skill and agility out on the river.

"That was all our country because we knew it."

"Yep, they were all river drivers, the majority of them, even up to my generation. I guess the last time I drove I was about 25 (1935). I drove the logs down and made sure they got to a place where they could be reached by rail. They had no trucks then, no big trucks.

"Them days everything was peeled and seasoned. There's only one time that you can peel them—the first full moon of August. Then the bark stuck and you couldn't peel them. You let them dry there until the next spring. They would stay there all fall and winter and then the next spring when the snow started to melt and the springs started to swell up a little bit and there was some water, all this pulp was loaded into the streams clear up to the northern Maine shores. Them was the old days."

There was a change that came in the 1940's. Like many Americans, the Indians went into the armed services and fought for the Allied cause in World War II. This had a powerful effect on the Indian community. In addition to the impact of the terror, death and destruction they witnessed, their experience in the military was also the first time that they were afforded the opportunity to join the mainstream culture and work their way up through the ranks solely on merit.

They mingled freely with Americans and foreigners of all social classes and when they returned to the reservation after the war, this taste of opportunity led to widespread frustration. With employment scarce, this dissatisfaction festered and resulted in a large scale migration away from the island, as Indians attempted to blend with the majority society.

For a few this worked effectively, for a larger number it worked temporarily and for many more it led to yet another form of failure and frustration.

"Yes, that's when it all began. People began selling their homes, no gardens, no interest. They went outside. She (his wife) worked in a shipyard in Portland and made big money. People sold their homes and went to the city where it was easier getting started. They thought it was easier, that's what we thought. We didn't know that it was going to be a pretty hard job."

Finding jobs difficult to come by after the war, Clarence set out to see the country he had defended. "We went out and saw everything for free—from a boxcar, of course, but we wanted to go back afterward (after the war) and see it, so we did.

"I got out in May (from the army), hoboed around the Midwest. I worked in different places until the wheat harvests began and then I got in it. Started in Salinas, Kansas, ran a combine with two other young fellows who followed the wheat harvests.

"But when it came the fall of the year, no matter where I was—if I was in California,

Denver, Florida, New York, Boston, Portland —when it came around and the leaves started turning, it was time to go hunting. I'd head right back. 'I'm going up in the woods where I belong.' I was used to that. I was used to getting my share of deer meat."

When Clarence returned to the island after hoboeing, he found, like everyone else, that there was more money to be made working in the factories than in producing Indian crafts or in any of the other more traditional occupations. He began working in the shoe factories, because sewing came more naturally to him than any of the other factory jobs. He remembers this period of his life with a certain amount of self reproach.

"We went wherever the money was. Had to. I guess there was a little bit of greed set in here about that time. They say they're paying 50 cents more a pair of shoes in Massachusetts, that's where you went. You went wherever the money was. I worked in Massachusetts for a few years and then I sobered up. We were drinking all the time."

Throughout this period money continued to be very tight for those living on the island. In addition to supplementing their diet with wild game and fish, many Indians had to hustle for money in ways that conflicted with their values. Clarence described one such incident involving Indian relics.

"I guess some of the people around here still have some, but they were around buying them for museums and everybody sold them —for money. We had a lot ourselves, but we did the same thing. I sold them unwillingly. We heard some of the offers that was made and we realized that money was pretty important—and we sold them." His voice trailed off as he added, eyes downcast, "Person offered us a good price, so . . . ."

Clarence also spoke of the island and the culture he had known as a young man and the changes he had seen in both. "There used to be a lot of shacks. There wasn't too many big houses around here when we were young. We were a poor class, an ignored race

By Dorothy Dunn

of people. We depended on nature for our livelihood. For everything. We always lived with sharing—that's the only way we could live.

"One person go up and get a deer and probably divide it among eight or ten families. He get more fish than he needed and he help his neighbors, and when it come time to go farming, most of them pitched in and helped one another. That's how all these houses

were built—they helped one another. I didn't want to see it changed."

But there was another aspect of Clarence's younger days that was not such a pleasant memory. This was attending school across the river at Old Town High School, nearly every reservation Indian's first extended contact with white society.

"In those days, the Golden Rule didn't apply except in reverse. 'Do unto others before they do unto you.' And they made quite sure that we didn't get into the culture and become outstanding. Some of us got beat up. I got beat up plenty of times over there until I finally gave up . . . Old Town—it was quite bad at that time.

"In our generation, of course, they thought education was going to be the thing. I guess a lot of them that could, got a good education. Unfortunately, some of us just couldn't make it on the other side—we just couldn't adjust to the system they had."

Clarence began to talk of the changes he has seen over his lifetime in the Indian culture. The gravest loss for him is the loss of the language, which is spoken fluently by only a handful of dying elders. He spoke more hopefully about the survival of the Indian religion.

"Religion is something that you live. It isn't," he paused, "it's your livelihood. Go into the woods frequently and you can appreciate what's here. We use it all—everything. Even the grass has its purpose. And to believe that and accept it and do it, that's a different thing altogether. People can talk about it, but if people only took what they needed, why we'd be all right today.

"Let them go up there and stake their claims."

"Some of them have what they believe to be the old traditions. A lot of us are that way. I'm one myself.

"[But the culture is slipping away] because the younger generation isn't taking any interest in it. The only time you see it over here is when we appoint a new chief—a new governor, and we have an inaugural ball. That's the only time you see costumes. I guess it was much easier to buy a pair of pants than make one. And I think that's where the culture went—the same way.

"And it's the same thing with Indian medicine. That's dying out. I used to know a lot of it. But I forgot. I never used it. The only thing I use today is spruce gum. That's the easiest.

"Yep, there's a lot of things dying out. I try to show young people here how to get respiratory medicine from a balsam tree. I don't know whether you know that or not, but in the spring after they sprout out at the end of the limbs, there's a new extension comes out and it's white—light, light green. That's when you got to pick it. Just at that time. It's just like everything else. There's a time and a place for everything.

"The society has changed and the people change with it. They think they have to in order to be part of the society. Give your faith in something. This generation has lost that. They got no faith in nothing. All they do is wait for the next thing to come and they grab hold of it. Everything new they see, it gives them a different idea. They got no values of their own. No strengths."

Though Clarence does get exasperated with the young people living on the island today, he also gives credit to those who have made an honest attempt to retain some of the old values. Though his view of them as kindred spirits is clear, he is less certain about how he views their likelihood of success.

"I think now they want to go back and they eventually will. We've had young fellows come up here, they went to the next island. They didn't want to live here because of the houses. They wanted to go up there and

pitch a tent or build a tepee and be by themselves—start their families up there. But they tried it and I guess it didn't work. They found that they couldn't get by living the old way, so they had to go to work like the rest of us. But now they forgot about all that. They're living in today, but they would like to go back very much.

"I know myself. I thought about it many times. I went all over the United States, hoboed around, worked around and tried to adjust outside. I learned all the tricks, but I just couldn't do it." For Clarence, a return to the island where he was born was the only answer.

Clarence's attitudes about the Indian land claim settlement stem directly from his mystical reverence for the land. "I would rather see them get all land. Let the money go. Of course you'd never see it in this generation. The land is—I think it is—more important than the money. Of course you've got to have money." He shook his head. "Money.

"Yep, I would rather see it all land myself. Then we would have places to go. These people don't have anything. Then they could go up there where nobody could bother them —live the way they want. Of course everybody doesn't want to—give them a choice.

"Let them go up there and stake their claims. If they want to farm, good. If they want to hunt, that's all right, too. There's a lot of people call themselves traditionalists that feel they got a right to stay low and live. Of course we all did at one time. But I don't think anybody today would want to go back to the old ways—living in tepees, birch bark wigwams and skins and rawhide."

What would Clarence himself like to go back to? "The ceremonial culture. I don't know whether it would give you anything to live for, but it would strengthen your faith."

By Mark Emerson