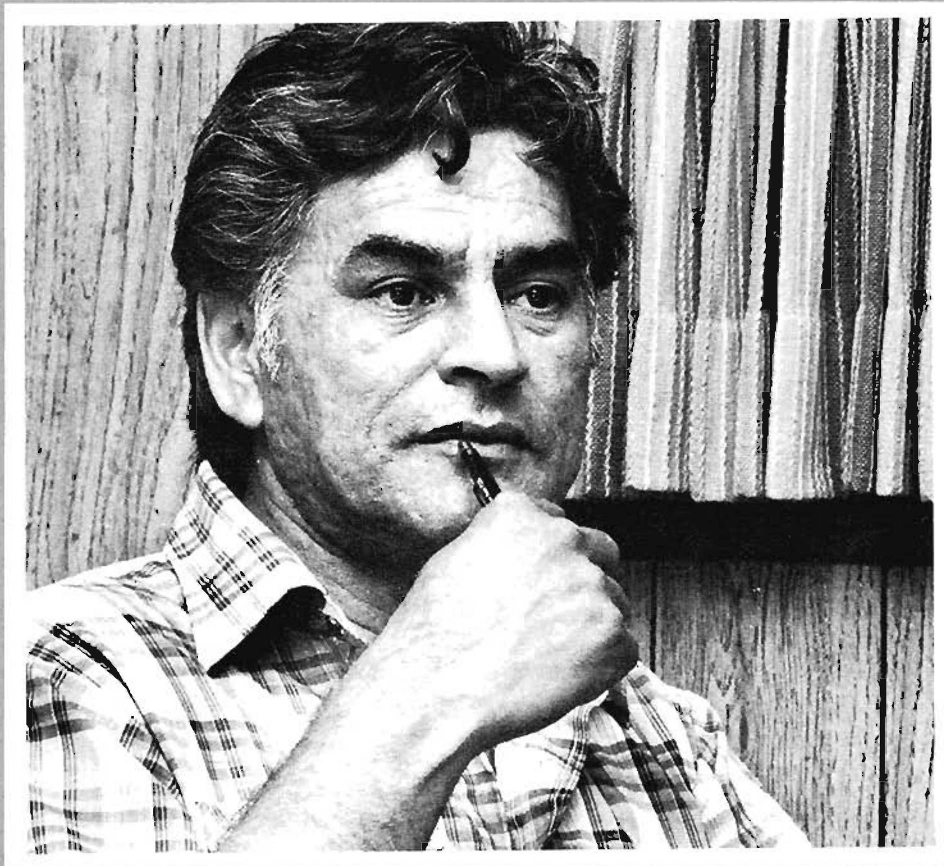
JIM SAPPIER
The Middle Generation



By Mark Emerson

Across the wide macadam road from the Penobscot Community Center sits a trailer-shaped building on stilts that is the nerve center of the Penobscot Nation.

Maps cover the walls of the command post, maps that explain at a glance which of 150,000 acres allotted the Penobscots under the land claim settlement have been purchased, which are under option, and which are targeted for option. Draftsmen sit at high drafting tables in the corner of a large workroom. In an outer office crowded with membership rolls and deeds, a genealogist studies documents to determine the validity of membership claims.

Pacing lightly from maps to drafting tables to his own cramped office is the man who directs two of the most important activities

of the tribe: land acquisition and distribution. Jim Sappier, at age 42, is a highly unusual man to find buried in a small, temporary building, serving a small isolated rural community of only 1,600 people.

But this is no ordinary small community and his is no ordinary task. He must acquire the best land he can negotiate for the $27 million awarded the Penobscots within the two year limit set by Congress. It is a pressure cooker situation that leads to long hours, too much coffee and too many cigarettes. If bad land choices are made, if the negotiating is clumsy, if the Indians don't call their shots well in this last chance to reclaim a small portion of their former vast holdings—all these "ifs" lie on the shoulders of Jim Sappier and his small band of men and women in a temporary hut.

"Sometimes I think how peaceful it would be if I could be back at Pratt and Whitney, with nothing to do but turn out airplanes," Jim laughs ruefully, referring to his years in Connecticut with Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, and later Sikorsky Aircraft.

Watie Akins, his friend and colleague, laughs with him. Both men know what it is to work lucratively in the outside world and return to cast their lot with the fate of the tribe. Watie has a brother who has also worked for the tribe. Andrew Akins won the federal funding in the late 70s that brought amenities to Indian Island which many small Maine communities had long had: a sewer system, low income housing, a health center, the community building.

Jim Sappier and Watie Akins are two of the very few Penobscot tribal leaders who were able to acquire more than a rudimentary education. Their generation, like that earlier generation of Clarence Francis and Madasa Sapiel, foundered on the shoals of the white man's school in Old Town, where they were "dirty, ignorant Indians." The latter part of the taunt too often became self-fulfilling.

This withholding of higher education has left the Penobscots doubly vulnerable in the modern world. They must fight their legal battles, their technical battles, their economic battles, their health battles, their cultural battles and their battles to win a better education for their children with a front line that is not nearly so well trained as their adversaries. It is no small miracle when they win.

In the case of Jim Sappier, here is no uneducated man. To an outsider expecting a stereotype, he is perplexing. He is a complex man whose subtle mind jumps from one thought to another as easily as a bird flits from one limb to another. He is a man from whom it would be foolish to expect unmodified answers.

> Washington said, "Penobscots? Who are you guys? Where did you come from?"

He is not as easy to understand as elders like Clarence Francis and Madasa Sapiel, whose character was shaped in more straightforward times. There are contradictions within his nature, and it is a measure of his strength that he binds them together.

How easily he pokes fun at himself and the world, and how intensely, with taut passion, he describes the tasks that lie ahead, the decisions to be made, the problems that lie lurking.

Now he speaks with the precision of an engineer: point one, point two, point three. Then, as those crisp words fade from the air, when all is explained, contained, he turns to parable and the tight thoughts spring out, freed and cloaked in mystery.

It is not surprising that it was Jim Sappier himself, not his interviewers, who found the words to frame the central question of this study. The interview had proceeded for some

moments when he perceived in one rush of understanding what we sought.

"Ah," he groaned in mock pain, clutching his brow. "Not that. You are not asking the worst possible question! What is a 20th Century Penobscot!"

He paused and his voice became grave. "There is a philosophical quest that hovers over the tribe: What is a 20th Century Penobscot?" And then he directed the shaft of the question at himself, like a true, straight arrow.

"Do I lose my Indianness when I equip myself to fight for my tribe in the white man's world?" It is a question that speaks for the spirit of the man who phrased it.

Pamela Wood

Jim Sappier went to grammar school on Indian Island, then on to Old Town High School, graduating in the late 50s. He worked in shoe factories in the area before moving to Connecticut, where he worked for Pratt and Whitney Aircraft and Sikorsky Aircraft. Like many men of his generation, he moved back to the area and became involved in tribal government during the early 70s.

He chose to speak very little about his own past, but extensively about the trends he saw among his people as a whole. World War II started a major outmigration from the island, he explained.

"Men went to war, came back and had seen what was out there. 'Why should we live like this when we are treated half way decent in another country?' So the outmigration started because, one, no housing on the reservation; two, no equal opportunity in employment on or near the reservation; and three, the environment itself—the (attitudes) of local communities towards the Indians."

"Do I lose my Indianness when I fight for my tribe?"

When Jim came back in 1970 to work for the tribe as director of Operation Mainstream, he soon found that the federal and state governments were almost totally ignorant of the plight of the Penobscot Indians.

"The Feds didn't even realize there were Indians here. Every Fed I talked to in the Boston, New Hampshire, Washington level said 'Penobscot what? Penobscot who? Who are you guys? What are you? How did you come into being? Why are you there?'

"So what they needed was a complete re-indoctrination, one agency at a time, to say, 'Here are Penobscot Indians. They do exist. They have been here from the beginning of time. They have a government structure—the oldest in the United States.'

"So I wrote up a fellowship and submitted it to the Ford Foundation." Jim was granted his fellowship and subsequently studied the relationship of the federal and tribal governments. He used this knowledge while serving on the National Advisory Council on Indian Education and as the Federal Regional Coordinator for Indian Affairs in New England. His 12 year experience in tribal affairs has taught him a great deal about the relationship of his tribe to the larger society.

"(We are) now trying to resolve the issue of our relationship with the state and federal agencies. The future of the tribe rests on, one, the tribe's cohesiveness; and two, on resolving the conflict of an external philosophy being superimposed on the tribe. Our future depends solely on our own interpretation of resolving these conflicts."

Jim also feels that it is essential that the educational system be improved for the younger generation. As he puts it, "Those who master the language will rule the country." And later he expanded, "The community was losing their jobs because some spoke

broken English. And speaking broken English, we never did get the managerial and supervisory jobs in the factories.

"It is also essential to improve the history curriculum in order to foster knowledge and pride in the students' Indian heritage. This is a big task, however, and carries with it the added problem of how this new assessment of colonial history will be received by the whites.

"State history is a big issue. Does the state really want to know the truth and can they handle it after they receive it? Do they really sit down long enough to hear how the Indian was treated? When they are told, there seems to be a mental block and they can't believe it."

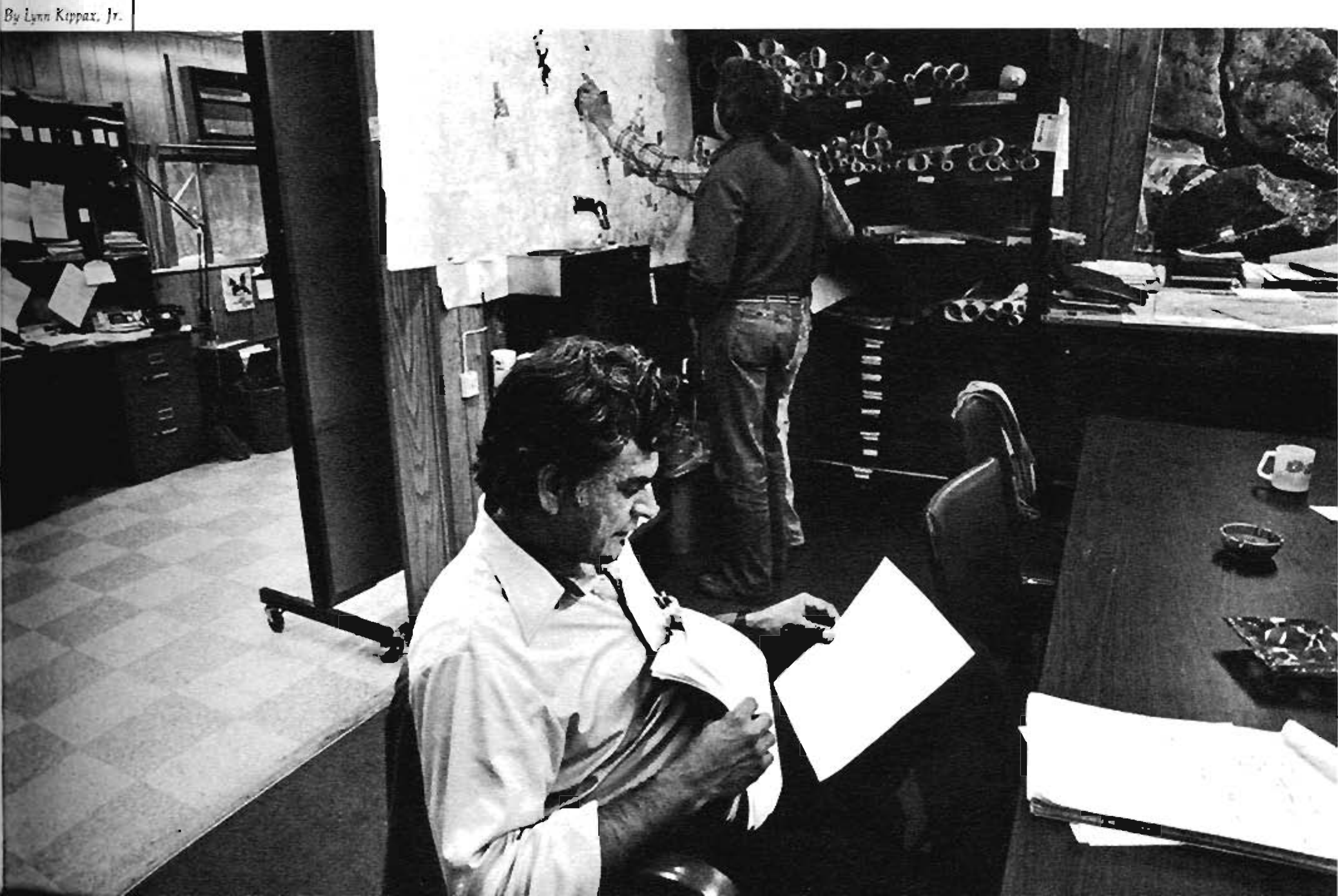
Jim was optimistic that the land claim settlement will help the tribe considerably in its quest for self determination. This optimism is accompanied, however, by a fear based on centuries of tribal experience, that too much gain could lead to serious retribution.

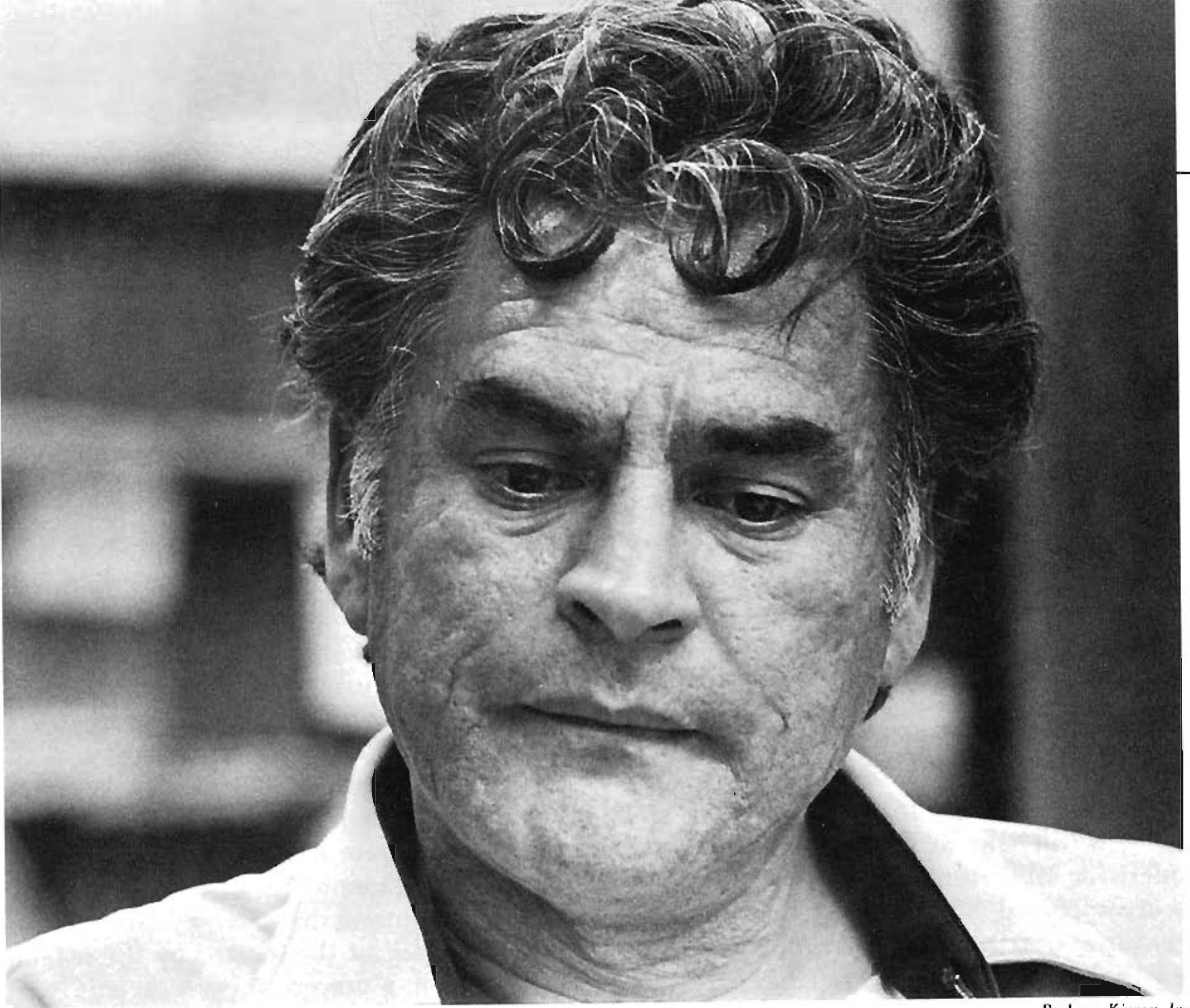
"I think that the tribe is definitely heading towards economic independence. The only problem with that is that the tribes that started with economic independence ended up terminated and are now the poorest tribes in the United States. Reality. Legally, Indians have the right to two-thirds of the state of Maine—actually the whole state of Maine.

"Now the reality behind this is: What would you do to a small group of people who had a 25 billion dollar case against you and a million other people? What would you do to them? There's a lot of reality there. I'd say that a lot of the time we're so scared of what could happen to the Indian tribe when all guns are pointed our way . . . ."

He paused. "If you weigh how many people will kill their own family members over a family spat, what would they do to an external group that they never had any liking for to begin with—us? How big is Great Northern Paper Company, St. Regis Paper Company, Brown Paper Company, Georgia Pacific, the State of Maine highway system? (These are among the codefendants in a suit filed on behalf of the Indians by the federal government, a precedent breaking and strategically brilliant legal action engineered primarily by the Indians' attorney, Tom Tureen. For a point by point account of the legal maneuvering that has the suspense of a

By Lynn Kippax, Jr.





By Lynn Kippax, Jr.

spy novel, see Paul Brodeur's lengthy piece in the October 11, 1982 *New Yorker.*)

Jim Sappier feels strongly that the tribe was wise to settle out of court for a fraction of their claim (still the largest Indian land settlement in American history), rather than press for the full amount. "We would probably be terminated the day after we won the case," he exclaims.

Indian culture is at this time "fragile and unprotected," Jim says. With many of the older traditional Indians dying off, he feels it is important for others, like himself, to begin setting an example for the young.

To a direct question about aspects of the Indian culture which have been lost, Jim was at first defensive and then more open as he tried to show how these things have not disappeared as completely as it may seem. An example of this was his reaction to the subject of Indian religion.

"We have been here from the beginning of time."

"I'm a Catholic, my mother was a Catholic, my grandmother and grandfather were Catholic. Five or six generations of being Catholic. That's doggone close to being traditional.

"What's important is that you follow Catholicism but don't forget your own tradition. In this respect, many of the people are confused.

"I'm a Catholic on one hand, but I believe in the 'Little People'. But being Catholic, you can't believe in them. I believe in them anyway. My grandfather believed in them and he was one of the best, most honest men around. And if it's good enough for him, that's good enough for me. That's traditionalism."

And then Jim spoke of the one lane bridge built in 1950. Its mention seemed to trigger all the conflicting feelings that surround a society in transition and Jim's comments were yet another indication that this bridge has taken on a symbolic meaning which transcends its mere physical reality.

"I think that the culture has definitely suffered greatly here since the bridge," was Jim's first reaction when the subject came up, but upon further consideration, his opinion wavered.

"I don't know whether you can measure the bridge, whether it is an asset or a negative aspect of the culture. The asset is that we don't have as many drownings as we had before the bridge and we can cross this bridge much easier now than our sawdust bridges we used to make on the ice.

"We have, to some degree, established a mobile community. We are now able to work further away, year round, instead of losing our jobs due to lack of transportation when the ice is running. I don't know, I think the bridge has been an asset to the tribe, though culturally it may have hurt us.

"Let's take a story. Let's take two Indians standing on a mountain. They're standing on the mountain, looking all around and they see all the valleys and the water and the trees and they see the grass and the other hills and they see everything. They see all of this and they see all the clouds around them.

"One Indian says to the other Indian, 'What would you do to make this view perfect?' So the other Indian looks around and he says, 'Well, I think this cloud should be over here.'

"So he moves the cloud over and he stands back and looks all around and he says, 'Nope.' So he reaches back up, and he puts the cloud back the way it was.

"And he looks again, and he looks down and he sees this rotting log and he says, 'This doesn't belong here.' So he reaches down and grabs the log and he looks underneath and

"I'm Catholic but I believe in the Little People."

there's all the spiders and the ants and the worms.

"And he puts the log back gently, and he asks forgiveness from God."

Jim pauses and looks for a long moment at his interviewers. "How do you define economic development? How do you make everything perfect?

"What is traditionalism? What is culture? It's just respect for everything that's there."

There is a much longer pause and Jim's eyes fix somewhere outside the busy workroom where he is standing. "The bridge." And it is not a physical bridge his eyes see. "We will probably regret it for the rest of our lives."

By Mark Emerson

The Little People

To hear about the "Little People" from a man who, outwardly, seemed to be so much a part of the 20th century was surprising. Jim Sappier, however, was not the only Penobscot who mentioned the "Little People" in this series of interviews. Almost all talked about them.

It would seem that a belief in the "Little People" is one link that the Penobscots continue to have with the old culture. As such, it is an indication that traditional Indian attitudes and beliefs lie beneath the surface of many seemingly Anglicized Indians such as Jim Sappier.

Who are the "Little People"? Madas Sapiel says, "They are our protectors. They protect the Indian people. Every Indian tribe has its own "Little People". They are emissaries from the Great Spirit, who appear sometimes to warn, sometimes to confirm.

They are often seen in the lowlands behind Madas Sapiel's house, in the woods near the quiet water where the lily pads grow.

"It is an honor to see them," Madas says. "All the elderly people saw the 'Little People'. They saw them more than we did.

"Now I've never seen the 'Little People'. But I heard them one time. We went into the woods to have a ceremony and after we had our ceremony, the 'Little People' had theirs. The medicine man said, 'Shhh. Be quiet. You've had your ceremony. Now the "Little People" want to have theirs.' And I was lying there in the woods and I could hear them, very loud.

Others talked of the "Little People".

Clarence Francis: "We depended on nature for our livelihood. For everything. The 'Little People' were around then."

Violet Francis: "The 'Little People'. I believe in them. I really do. It sounds foolish of me, maybe, but I do. They say they were seen around here a lot, but as we become more and more modern, that's going, that's gone. I wish I was able to see them."

Tim Love: "I see myself as a traditionalist more than anything else. I believe in the greater power and that the gift of life was instilled by that greater power, that everything lives in balance and that it shouldn't be tampered with to the point of upset.

"And I'm superstitious about certain things. I believe in the 'Little People'. Some people call it crazy, baloney, but they're just not believers."