

MADASA SAPIEL

An elder



By Mark Emerson

Madasa Sapiel is a 78 year old woman of boundless energy and resolute opinions. Madas, as her name is shortened by friends, has welcomed *Salt* staff and students to her home on Indian Island over the years and was the subject of a feature article published in the spring 1979 issue.

As we gathered around her kitchen table, we were pleased to find that the intervening months had done nothing to dampen her vibrant spirit. Except for a bit more gray in her hair and the replacement of Catholic images for the Indian posters and memorabilia that had previously decorated her

kitchen walls, we saw nothing to indicate the passage of time since our last visit.

Her expressive face could, at one moment, be filled with the impish glee of a mischievous child, in another the resolute determination of an outraged elder, and then melt suddenly into an expression of pity for the plight of her Indian people. But it was the transition from contemplation to gaiety that was the most dramatic, for it was at such moments that her spontaneous laughter flashed across her features and the edges of her smile tucked under the high Indian cheekbones which dominated her face.

Madas, which means "baby of the family", was the youngest child in a strongly traditional Indian family. Like Violet Francis, she is a full blooded Indian (half Penobscot and

The land grant!
It's just helping
them buy into the
white man's ways."

half Passamaquoddy) and is one of the few remaining elders who can speak the Penobscot language. Throughout her long and diverse life, she has earned a living using a variety of Indian skills. During her youth she made baskets with her family and for 14 years she supported herself and her many children by dancing Indian dances in traveling shows. In addition to this, she has also worked in the shoe factories across the river.

In her later years, Madas became quite active in the militant Indian movement which asserted Indian autonomy and pride in a unique heritage. More recently she has returned to the folds of the Catholic Church, serving as an energetic member of a charismatic group. She grins and says, "I don't have no hate anymore. I've gotten mellow." Madas

continues to be an ardent advocate of preserving what remains of the traditional culture.

"I was born and brought up as an Indian person. My mother says, 'When you go to the white man's school, you talk white, but when you come home, you talk Indian or else!'

"Everyone danced back then, whenever they had elections or a pageant—weddings, everyone danced. It would all be Indian dancing. They never had no other dances. I still dance Indian dances.

"Things are going so fast and furious here, too fast for people to live. The island is all built up now. Back then there were just little paths all over the island. I enjoyed living here then. We never locked our door. Take anyone in.

"We didn't have no bridge then, either. We had a boat. It cost two cents over and two cents back. We had no cars, no horses, no nothing. We never had fences in our lives over here until they built that bridge.

"And in my mother's day, they didn't depend on all this stuff they do now. They all get help up here now. Everybody gets help all the year round. But my father and mother didn't have to do that. My father was a railroad driver and my mother made baskets and braid grass and went to the seashore to sell her wares in the summertime. We made enough money to keep us all winter."

The sore spot in Madasa's memory of her youth was her experience attending school at Old Town in the sixth grade. "When we went to Carlisle (an Indian school), it was all Indian kids. I think they got along better. They were more open. I went to school over there (Old Town) and I felt as though I was in a shell, and I was afraid to say anything, because I was afraid someone would do something to me. I couldn't take it. I'm a good natured person, too, and I can take a lot, but I couldn't take that.

"Those people were hostile to us, because they weren't used to Indian people going to



By Mark Emerson

school over there. Out of the 25 that went, there were seven that graduated. I tried, but I couldn't take it. It was awful.

"There was this little girl that used to chase me from the school to the ferryboat. She called me names and said that I should go over on my own reservation, that I was no good and would never be anything, we were never going to amount to nothing—things like that. Called us dirty names, too.

"So one day I was going up to school and I had my books in my hand and I said, 'Where's my knife! I'll fix you.' My lord, she keeled over! I dropped my books and I run for that ferryboat and I got into that ferryboat. I run right upstairs and my mother says, 'Madasa, what's wrong with you?' (In Indian, you know.) She says, 'You look awful white,' and

I says, 'Nothin, Mama, nothin.' I thought I killed the girl, you know.

"So the truant officer come over here after me and he says, 'Why is Madasa not in school—why is Evelyn (Madasa's Christian name) not in school?' My mother says, 'She was sick, but she's feeling okay now,' and he says, 'You send her to school Monday—and tell her that the little girl that fainted is okay.' Of course I didn't know she had fainted. I thought I killed her! I didn't know fainting from nothing in those days.

"But I just went there that one year. I couldn't take it no more. I quit. A lot of the girls quit at almost the same time. The boys quit, too."

Madas sees one of the catalysts to change, along with the bridge, as being the young

people's experiences out in the larger world during and after World War II.

"After the army, they all got educated. They wanted to work in offices and wear high heels and strut around and typewrite and break their nails and everything. This is what they wanted. Nobody wanted to make baskets anymore. They brought white wives back and they told them they could get all this stuff.

"They never had white people on the reservation all the time I was growing up until our boys went into the service. That's when they brought all those white people here.

"There were too many people with this progress, this going ahead, that they couldn't go back a little bit. But I think after a while, they're going to have a cycle and they won't even know they're going back."

However, this return to a more traditional culture has not begun and Madas sees the price of progress primarily in terms of the toll it has taken on Indian language, religion and medicine.

"I tried to teach the Indian language here once. You don't know how much hell I got while I was teaching that. Woman comes in here and throws my door open and says, 'I want my children out of here. You're brainwashing my children.' I says, 'I'm only teaching them Indian'

"They've had classes upon classes but the young people wouldn't even go. And when you get to class and tell them something in Indian, they laugh. It discourages you. They laugh and make fun of you.

"Now Penobscot religion got lost long before my grandmother was a young girl. They had lost all that back then. We had a missionary up here, Father Joe we called him, and he told us when I come back to the church (Madas left the Catholic church for a time), 'If that Indian religion is what the Lord wants, it would stand up no matter what—it won't lie down.' But now it's dying down, you see. So that's not the right religion, right? If it was the right religion, it would



By Mark Emerson

stand up."

Madas told us that the tribe had not had a Medicine Man since her close friend, Senabeh Francis, died in the winter of 1980. (See *Salt*, spring, 1979 and fall, 1979 for articles on the last Penobscot Medicine Man.)

"A Medicine Man—it's born to him. We had a Medicine Woman, but the woman died, too. The medicine comes to them automatically and it's too bad that they don't teach other people about it. But they keep it to themselves. They shouldn't keep those things to themselves. They should let it out and they could learn. Now we got a girl up here, Debbie Mitchell, she's learning all the medicines, but she's taking hers from the book."

As Madas watches the influence of the elders steadily decline, she sees a younger generation growing up that has become more interested in becoming part of the larger society than in retaining the old Indian ways.

"The young people today, they want edu-



By Mark Emerson

cation—work in an office and do things like that. They don't want to work outdoors. That's something of the past. Now they can get an education and go."

Madasa's judgments on the land settlement are uncharacteristically harsh: "It's making our people not want to work. They want to sit around and just wait for the money to come in. They work a while and then they just quit because they know they've got money coming in.

"They didn't adopt people for years and years until now they're coming in by the hundreds. The land grant! People who never wanted to live here before are moving home. If they just took the Indians—the full blooded

I pity my Indian people."

Indians—you can count them on your fingers.

"I think our Indian people have gone greedy now. They want everything for themselves. It never used to be that way, but they're grabbing now like anyone else.

"They thought that the land grant would help them regain the old ways, but I think that it's just helping them buy into the white man's ways.

"I can't talk too long to them—I start to cry. When I go to the colleges to speak, I can tell them everything I've been through and it doesn't bother me. But here, when I talk to my people—oh, I get so compassionate for my people. I pity my Indian people.

"I say, 'Oh, Lord, they try to do something to better themselves, but this damn money makes them lazy. They don't want to do nothin'. They just sit and wait for that money to come in. They don't need money. None of us need money. They need friendship and love. That's what they need here."