

VIOLET FRANCIS

An elder



By Mark Emerson

Violet Francis, wife of Clarence, is a small woman with a strong voice and equally strong opinions. Though she welcomed us as outsiders into her home and shared her views openly, she is highly critical of the effect that increasing contact with the outside world has had on her island and her culture.

She is a full blooded Indian in her late 70's. She was born on Indian Island, and except for a few years during high school, has lived her entire life there. One of a handful of elders who are still fluent in the Penobscot language, she was raised with a strong sense of Indian identity and taught the importance

of passing on her full blooded Indian lineage to the generation to follow.

"I was brought up entirely on basketry, the sales from it. Our home was run by it, our food and everything. I used to make baskets after school hours in the winter. My work was sold the same as my mother's was sold. I'd get the money from it and that was for my school clothes and my books and it lasted me all winter.

"I made baskets up until 25 years ago—until I learned to work in the shoe factory over across the river. Then that was more money by the week. It was hard making money by basketry because you wouldn't get the money it was worth. We spent an awful long time, night and day, on baskets to make a living.

"When I got work in the shoe factory, I said, 'I'm through with making baskets.' I never made another one again. It was too hard to earn money that way. So I stopped right there. I only had to put in eight hours a day at the factory, five days a week—and you made more money that way. After we learned to make the white man's money, we never went back to any of our Indian work again."

When Violet Francis began speaking of the old days on the island, the dividing line between the past and the present was the building of the bridge. This was true of nearly every Indian we spoke with.

In 1950 a single lane bridge was constructed which joined Indian Island to the mainland at Old Town. One reason for its construction was the increasing number of drownings while crossing the ice during the spring and fall. The larger reason for building the bridge, however, was to make a more solid connection between Indian Island and the mainstream society—to make it easier for Indians to seek education and employment.

Most Indians who were born before the bridge was built have since come to view it as a mixed blessing. It has taken on a signifi-

cance beyond its mere physical presence and has become a symbol for the tradeoff of economic development for cultural dilution.

"I can remember back on this reservation when I was just a child. We never had a bridge. We had a bateau to take the workers across the river to the canoe factory. That bridge has made a big change.

"We used to walk the streets on hot nights to stay cool. We used to be able to sleep in our homes without locking our doors. You can't do that now. People coming over here all hours of the night. You don't know who's coming over."

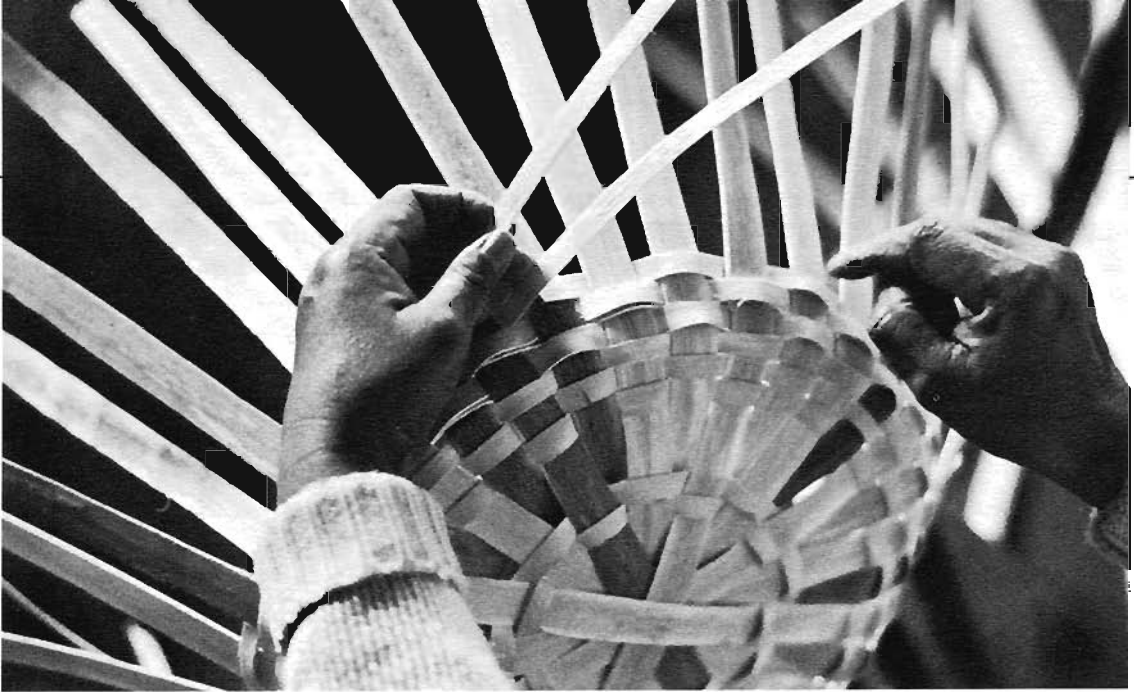
"After we learned to make the white man's money, we never went back to our Indian work again."

"So in one way that bridge has been an asset and in another way it's a drawback. There's not the contentment over here since we had that bridge. We've taken on a lot of the white man's way of living."

Like many of the Indians of her generation, Violet feels that important aspects of the culture have begun to disappear as the younger generations are becoming more engaged in the modern world.

"One thing that's dying out among us, and it's too bad, is our language. It's too bad—really too bad. We're trying to keep it up, but we can't do it ourselves, just the two of us talking between ourselves, if there's nobody younger to learn it."

Violet's comments about the Indian religion made it clear that this was one of the first aspects of the culture to change. This began almost 300 years ago.



"The missionaries came in a long time ago and that ruined our Indian religion and beliefs, because from then on we were taught that it wasn't right. 'You do it the way we do it', and you were almost compelled to do it and forget everything else. And I think that was the breaking down of our beliefs, which was very wrong. But it happened. That's progress.

"Another thing that has hurt us a lot is intermarriages. We have so many now. Of course you can't tell anybody who to marry and who not to, but they're not conscience stricken enough to try and keep the blood."

"I call them paper Indians."

The dilution of Indian blood is being accelerated by the large number of Indians who are joining the tribe after the Maine Indian Settlement Act of 1980. According to a new membership formula adopted by the tribe, many of these members are one quarter Indian or less. Violet sees the sudden surge of new members as the direct result of the quarterly per capita payments received by members from interest on the tribe's cash settlement. At present, this amounts to

about \$360 quarterly, or \$120 monthly.

"New people. Quarter blood, that's all. One quarter blood—that's not very much. I call them paper Indians. I'm on the census committee and there are over 100 new people we're putting on this census list." The tribe numbers about 1,500 now, more than doubled since 1980.

"People want to get on because of this money we're getting. Per capita! Per capita would be a good idea if they cut it (membership) off at the very beginning when we first started to get it. Those that were on the census remain there and not take on any more. But the way it's going now, next year there will be some more who want to come on and the next year again and in the end, we'll be receiving about \$5 apiece.

"And that's tragic. We're not gaining anything by it. It's not helping us out at all."

Violet's assessment of her own relationship to the tribe's traditional past was a bold one and articulates the balance her own generation has found in dealing with the encroachments of the modern world.

"I can't say I'm 100 percent traditional, because I'm not living that way. I live in a modern world now. I have electricity, a washer, a furnace. No, I can't think of myself as traditional.

"In my thoughts maybe, yes, but not in the way I'm living."