

# 'When we'd argue in Penobscot we got things resolved a lot quicker'

Small "X-Files" posters and a picture of the rock band REM, not to mention pennants for the New York Yankees and the New York Giants, line the walls behind John Bear Mitchell's desk at the Penobscot tribal school on Indian Island. There's even a red plastic Clifford the Big Red Dog house on top of the bookshelf. Make no mistake, though. The 33-year-old former electrician and current singer, drummer and storyteller teaches Native Studies to his charges — lessons in everything from uses of tobacco and fire to combating stereotyping. He invited *Maine Times* in to chat one afternoon after lunch.

*Maine Times:* How has life changed on Indian Island over the years?

John Bear Mitchell: It's a lot different now. I wrote a paper in college called "The Bridge" and it was using the bridge [between Indian Island and Old Town] as an analogy of attitudes. Before we had the bridge we had the ferry system, then the one-lane green bridge and



John Bear Mitchell

Aaron Flacke

## MAINE INTERVIEW

By BRENDAN WOLFE  
News Editor

then this bridge. And [the paper was about] how attitudes have changed and how the bridge has become more open and the community has become more open. Now there are no roadblocks. Ice going out, that doesn't stop us anymore.

*Q: Ice going out?*

A: When the ice breaks into big chunks in the spring. When I was a kid, people wouldn't go across the bridge because the mentality was, even when the first bridge was put there in the '50s, you don't cross the water when the ice is going out.

So what they used to do on the island [before the bridge] was put sawdust down on the ice. And they wouldn't plow the snow away. They'd just put more sawdust down on top of it. And they got what they call a sawdust bridge. The bridge was strong enough, it became so thick and so strong, almost like steel, that

and the feelings and the camaraderie. He misses the old issues, which were simple issues.

*Q: Like what?*

A: For instance, I remember my great grandfather telling me once, he said, "I remember we once spent two days arguing on one topic." I said, "What was it?" He goes, "Where to put a friggin' telephone pole." He said, "We don't know if we want a telephone pole on this side of the street or on that side of the street. We argued for two days on where to put that telephone pole." And now it's incredible. Used to be the tribe would argue over 20 bucks. The tribe'd have to spend 20 bucks and we'd argue and complain and bitch over that. Now they're arguing about a million, you know, and this is all in the course of 80 years. That's the kind of things that are missing, the dances, and the St. Patrick's Day events, and the talent shows, the goofin' off, and the playing cards and the cribbage tournaments and things like that. Now people just want to fly. Nobody wants to do that. Let's go to the mall. Let's go to the movies. Which is typical of any town, any place that's going to have a potential of being big.

*Q: Except that Indian Island isn't a town. It's a reservation.*

A: It's considered a reservation, although we've lived here for as long as we can remember. "Reservation" is usually land set aside, but we've already inhabited this land and we consider it the Penobscot Nation. So it's all a matter of that damn English language and how it describes things. You have to be specific and politically correct. But our language is simple and it's just basically descriptive, so you can't really go wrong. My great-grandfather used to say, "We used to argue forever in English and all of a sudden we'd look at each other and say, 'Let's argue in our language.' And when

pillars under it. It was condemned up there but it was good enough for us. And it lasted until about '87. So 30 years, it stood there. It was a one-lane green bridge with walkways on either side about two feet wide, maybe not even. And when the ice would go, people would not really go across it because the mindset was still the ice is going out. We need to stop going back and forth. But a new bridge is like a road. There's no water underneath it no matter what's going on. And with a new mentality and a new driver's age — you know the age of drivers here, they're younger, and this bridge they built in '87 or '86, so it's been there awhile. And some of the kids in school, they don't even remember the green bridge. The eighth graders, they probably weren't even born. This is the only bridge they remember.

*Q: Has the island grown a lot over the years?*

A: There's over 300 houses on the island. I'm 33 years old and in my lifetime I've seen more development happen on this little island than has happened in 500 years.

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So what they used to do on the island [before the bridge] was put sawdust down on the ice. And they wouldn't plow the snow away. They'd just put more sawdust down on top of it. And they got what they call a sawdust bridge. The bridge was strong enough, it became so thick and so strong, almost like steel, that you literally had a bridge, but then at some point it had to give way. So when the sawdust bridge would go out, people would just stay here for about a week or two without leaving the island. And the community became like a closed community again.

**Q: Where did the first bridge come from?**

**A:** We got a used bridge that was condemned from a town up above us. They floated it down here and put

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A lot of this village is very big now. It's so different. My grandfather often says, "You know, I miss my home," and he's lived here for 83 years. He's lived on the hill and looked over and watched everything grow. He misses the people, being able to walk down the street and feel comfortable, being able to walk down the street and know who you're walking past. There are a lot things like that in every town, I guess, now. He misses hunting up at the head of the island because now there's houses up there. He misses the attitudes

describes things. You have to be specific and politically correct. But our language is simple and it's just basically descriptive, so you can't really go wrong. My great-grandfather used to say, "We used to argue forever in English and all of a sudden we'd look at each other and say, 'Let's argue in our language.' And when we'd argue in our language, then things would be solved a lot quicker. Because you couldn't really go on and on and on and on because you'd made your point." That's the example I always remember. You can argue forever in English but when we'd argue in Penobscot we got things resolved a lot quicker.

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