

THE BRIDGE

BY JOHN B. MITCHELL

Growing up on an Island in a fresh water river is much different than growing up on an Island in a salt water bay. All my life I have lived on an Island which sits directly in the middle of the Penobscot River. Connected to the "mainland", Indian Island has only one entrance and exit. The Indian Island bridge connects the nation of Indian Island to the state of Maine at Old Town, Maine. The bridge is a link to Indian Island's past and present. Through stories of the past, told by my grandfather and great grandfather, of life before and after the construction of the Indian Island bridge I have begun to realize the rich heritage of my community.

The people of Indian Island incorporated with the living conditions on the island have played an important part in making Indian Island what it is today. The ferry which ran trips to and from Indian Island is history because of the building of a bridge in 1950. The "old" bridge was replaced by a handsome new one in 1987. The bridge has changed the culture of the island in everyday life and has meant change in the lives of the people in my family. I would like to talk about life on Indian Island before the building of the first bridge which my great-grandfather,

Bunny Ranco, (deceased) had told me about several times during my adolescent years. He would sit down and we'd start talking, he would say one thing about something that happened in his life which would remind of him of the "old days" and from there stories would appear.

Bunny was born in 1901 and died in 1985. The bridge was built in 1950 so he spent over half of his life on the island before the building of the bridge. My grandfather, Theodore Mitchell (Ted) was born and on Indian Island in 1919 and still lives on Indian Island today. His perspective of life on the island is also very interesting because he has lived during the ferry system, the first bridge, and the new existing bridge. The third and final person to offer their insights into the aspect of what life was like on Indian Island is myself. I was born in 1968 which allows me to offer an aspect of life on the island having not experienced the ferry system.

The Penobscot people have inhabited Indian Island, first called "Oak Hill Island", because of the many oak trees growing on it, for hundreds of years. During times of attack from Wabanaki enemies the island acted as a defensive tool. Any invader was easily sighted and dealt with before any real big problem could take

place.

Commuting to and from the island was accomplished, at first, by the use of canoes. Later on the commute was made by the use of a ferry. The ferry was not very big, in fact it was just a bateau. The bateau, a french wooden boat used in swift water, was the main transportation for Indian Island's people. The ferry could seat up to 16 people at one time plus the ferryman. Every two (2) years a ferryman was elected to the job of transporting the island's residents to and from the island (as well as the many tourists who would visit the Penobscot people).

For my grandfather Ted, many ferrymen came to mind; Joe Thibeadou, Gabe Paul, Peter Glossian, Herbie Ranco, Ralph Nichola, Sylvester Francis, and my grandfather's uncle - Nick Soloman. All these ferryman solicited votes from the Indian Island community in order to obtain the "ferryman" status for a two year term. The job of a ferryman was tedious, and back breaking work, but at the same time rewarding in the value of the service provided. The Penobscot River is approximately 150-200 yards at the point where the ferry crossed and ferry crossing was continuous. The ferry docks were located on the southern tip of Indian Island and on the opposite side next to the old shoe factory at the north end of Brunswick Street in Old Town. The existing bridge sits exactly where the old ferry docks once sat.

Bunny told me Indian

Island was a very caring community of close-knit families. Everyone did what they could for each other and life was simply "one big happy family". Bunny told me, at one time, there was a big difference between winter life on the island and that of summer during the reign of the ferry. During the summer months, travel on and off the island was routine and for the most part, simple. On Monday through Thursday mornings the ferry started its off island commuting at 5:30 am and ran all day until 6:00 pm. On Fridays and Saturdays the ferry ran from 5:30 am through 9:00 pm. This late night ferry run allowed people to "go out on the town" and dance. This ritual was and still is a favorite past-time for Indian Island residents. For the most part summer ferry runs were routine and expected.

Winter, on the other hand, was a different story. It brought about a lost sense of "islandness". Indian Island no longer had the same defensive security it so much loved in the non-ice seasons. Instead of being a place of tranquil retreat it now had grown an "open door" to the neighboring towns. The ice, when completely frozen gave the island residents a sense of "connectedness" to Old Town and Milford (the neighboring towns off the southern tip and east side of Indian Island). When the sheet of ice connected the banks of Indian Island to Old Town and Milford, life became far from what was known as "island life".

Island life was routinely walking (or horse riding) from the shore of the island to your home. In winter cars were driven across the ice, onto the island, and right up to your house. If you needed something back in the "old town" then the routine was to jump into your car and drive over to the store.

Fall and spring held their difficulties. For a few weeks in the fall, the thin freezing ice would make travel on and off the island difficult. Sometimes travel to and from the island couldn't take place at all simply because the ice would be too thick to break or at the same time too thin to walk across. As a result, the people of the island depended on each other for acquiring basic commodities. The arrival of spring was embraced by all.

The new season held its own problems for on and off island travel, according to Bunny. In the winter, the ice trail from Indian Island to Old Town was covered with a thick layer (about 6 - 8 inches thick) of sawdust. The sawdust bonded to the ice, creating a stronger sheet of ice which made walking the trail much safer. The change in seasons would bring about the melting of the ice. The water would simply flow under the thick frozen ice which was being held together by a trail of sawdust. At a certain time of the spring season, usually early on, the ice would break up - up river. The floating "blocks" of ice would come down river making their way towards the sawdust

bridge. These ice chunks would make travel to and from the island very dangerous. The bateaux were in danger of being crushed into small splinters of wood and the sawdust bridge was cleared away. The ferryman would not make trips and endanger his livelihood with the destruction of his boat. Once again, life would slow down and the dependence on neighborly assistance would prevail.

In the late 1940's a Republican to the Maine legislature was very interested in helping the Penobscot people. Frederick Payne was intent on getting a bridge for the residents of Indian Island. However, the government of Maine would not allocate monies for the building of a bridge. Mr. Payne decided to run as Republican candidate for Governor of the state of Maine. He promised the residents of Indian Island that if he were to be elected as Governor, he would "with all his might" find the monies and pressure the Maine legislature to allocate the needed funds, to the tribe for a bridge. The structure would connect Indian Island and Old Town. Fredrick Payne became Governor and in 1950, Indian Island had a single lane bridge, just as he had promised.

Life changed on Indian Island. With the ferry system gone and water conditions no longer an issue, the Island became a much easier place to live. No more paying for ferry trips at 4 cents round trip for residents and 10 cents round trip for non-residents.

Commuting was a free ride now, "an open boarder". Life was to change for the inhabitants of Indian Island for "better or worse". The "better" was the obvious basic fact of getting to the other side 24 hours a day - 7 days a week. A resident could now drive or walk to the store with the ferry burden gone. According to Ted, the bad part was the simple fact of "rubber-neckers" coming over to "see what the Indians were like". Now tourists didn't have to walk on the island. Instead they could drive over in their cars with their windows rolled up tight and doors locked. They could look out their windows at the residents of Indian Island as if they were in a movie. Some less insecure guests would sometimes stop and buy crafts which consisted of baskets, carved walking sticks, or porcupine jewelry. A new avenue to earn money came to Indian Island. Now the traditional crafts were sold to provide the much needed income for its residents.

In the winter of 1987 a new bridge was erected in place of the decayed green metal structure that stood there once before. This new bridge, with shiny rails, contains two lanes and a wide walkway (which is about half the width of the old bridge). The wide black topped surface of the new bridge is arched upward like the back of a turtle unlike the flat gray surface of the old bridge. New huge white cement pillars hold up the expansive red beams in which the tar surface of the new bridge is supported. This

new bridge (composed of solid materials) stands with all its many parts together in brotherhood. This new bridge stands like the people of Indian Island, the Penobscots, once did.

The new bridge replaced the old one. The old bridge was rusted beyond repair. The old cement pillars which supported the bridge began to crumble and fall apart into the river below. Just cause was given to the construction of the new two lane bridge.

Bunny and Ted felt the construction of the bridge changed life tremendously on Indian Island. More and more people came to the island, all for their own reasons. Some for business ventures some for governmental issues and some came in order to find their "roots". These new guests may not have come if the bridge had not been constructed.

Life, as it was known, on the island had changed. New houses were constructed. Likewise, non-traditional lifestyles were adopted by the Penobscot people of Indian Island. Factory work, paper mill work, and general laborer became the trades of Indian Island's people. New social problems arose such as alcoholism, and various pressures of acculturation. Penobscot people who had lived in Bangor or other surrounding towns and cities came back to again live on Indian Island. The old people say the "real" reason these people came here to the island was so they wouldn't have to pay land taxes, water, and sewage

(benefits the island's residents all enjoy). Others think they are just trying to build back their sense of "Penobscot Pride". No matter what the reason the simple fact is Indian Island's population has multiplied five times that of which it was when I was growing up here in the 70's and 80's.

As a result of the huge population growth a wide diversity of people on the island has contributed to the island community life. The island, even though it has a bridge, was very secluded to me. I was never allowed to go

off the island and that made me think there was something undesirable on the other side. To me the place at the other end of the bridge was an entirely "mysterious" place which seemed very foreboding. The bridge has brought the unknown "part" to me. Now there are no more questions about how the people on the other side act, what they do, or their thoughts of us. I suppose I would have found this out even if the bridge wasn't built but growing up holds its little mysteries for every child.