



Fig. 1. Seasonal activities and movements of the Mistassini Indians.

THE YEARLY CYCLE OF THE MISTASSINI INDIANS*

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THE following description of the yearly cycle of activities of the Indians about Lake Mistassini in south central Quebec is based on thirteen-months' field work conducted by us during 1953 and 1954. We wish to thank the Arctic Institute of North America and the Office of Naval Research for their financial backing of the project. In addition, we wish to express our gratitude to the following individuals: Dr. Jacques Rousseau, Mr. Frederick Johnson, Dr. A. V. Kidder, Mr. Wendell S. Hadlock for their support of the project at its inception; Dr. W. W. Hill, Dr. Stanley Newman, and Dr. Harry Basehart for their assistance in the analysis of the field data; Mr. and Mrs. Wilfrid Jefferys, Mr. Jules Sesia, Mr. Jimmy Stephenson, Mr. Ron Thierry for their help and hospitality during the field work. Our greatest debt, however, is to Alfie Matoush and his hunting group of thirteen members, who allowed us to accompany them to their trapping grounds for the winter of 1953-4. Our 9 months of intimate association with this small group made the following study possible.

The Mistassini recognize six periods or seasons of the year, determined on the basis of seasonal climatic changes. The seasons are *pIpun*, *sikwAn*, *mIyuskAmu*, *nipIn*, *tAhkUwacIn*, and *micIskasIc*. Since there are climatic fluctuations from year to year, the dates for the beginning and end of each period vary.

pIpun, "winter", includes the months of December, January, February, and part of March. During this period the temperature is rarely high enough to melt the snow. This term is also employed to mean "year". Beginning in March or early April the snow begins to melt during the day, and *sikwAn*, or "early spring", is said to have begun. This season lasts until break-up, when the ice leaves the lakes and rivers. Today the period is considered by some Mistassini to begin with Easter regardless of weather conditions. Following break-up and extending for a few weeks, generally in the month of May, is *mIyuskAmu* (literally "good water"), or "late spring". The period of June, July, August, and part of September, is known as *nipIn*, "summer". This season terminates when the ice begins to form

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about the edges of small ponds. A fifth period, *tAhkUwacIn*, or "early fall", begins at this time and lasts until the ice on the smaller lakes is just thick enough to walk upon, generally at the end of October or early in November. The last period, *micIskasIc* or "late fall", begins when the ice on the lakes has become too thick to allow a canoe to be forced through and is barely safe to walk over.

The seasonal activities and movements of the people conform only in part to the native seasons. Accordingly, on the basis of these activities and movements, the year has been divided into eight periods (see Fig. 1). The Mistassini imply these periods in discussing their yearly activities even though they do not have names for them. Seasonal feasts mark several of the periods. For convenience of presentation the eight periods are designated as follows: fall travel, fall hunt, winter camp construction, early winter trapping, late winter hunt, spring trapping, spring travel, and summer activities. Dates assigned to these periods must be somewhat arbitrary, since various factors influence the cycle. The most important are the annual climatic fluctuations, distances to the hunting territories, game resources of particular areas, and the health of the group members.

The fall travel period begins about the middle of August and continues until the middle of September, when the Mistassini are engaged in moving from the summer post at the south end of Lake Mistassini to their hunting grounds. Each hunting group, composed of several nuclear families with perhaps a few related dependents, travels as a unit under the informal leadership of one man, generally the oldest male. At the start of the trip other families may join the group for a day or two when their routes coincide. Travel used to be by birchbark canoe, but in recent years large freighter canoes and outboard motors have been employed. One canoe with a motor tows several others. Caches of gas and flour are sometimes made at various points along the route to facilitate the return trip in the spring.

During this period the Indians travel only in fair weather in order to safeguard the health of the small children. If weather conditions are favourable the group leaves in the morning between six and ten o'clock. When possible the day's goal is an old camp site of the previous year. Depending on circumstances camp is made at some time between noon and seven in the evening. Stops for meals are spaced about 3 hours apart. The leader of the group is always the last to leave the camp site, and generally his canoe is last in line. If a canoe is damaged, the entire party may stop until it is repaired.

When rapids are encountered the canoes are poled or tracked or equipment and goods are portaged. Sometimes women, children, and dogs are set ashore to walk, while the men negotiate the rapids with equipment and supplies in the canoes. Often the work of negotiating the rapids is done in relays. The supplies are transported ahead while the women and children remain in camp. The next day the camp is moved ahead of the supplies, which are then brought up to the new camp.

Only when absolutely necessary are supplies and canoes portaged. Along the frequently used routes of travel are well defined trails, which have been in use for centuries. Archaeological sites are common here. The trails rarely exceed 2 miles in length. Tumplines are employed for packing, with everyone in the group participating, even small children. A child who is old enough to walk over a trail will not go empty handed. Adults, especially the men, sometimes carry prodigious loads up to about 400 pounds for a strong man on a short, easy portage.

When a campsite is selected the canoes are beached. The first articles removed are the tents, stoves and axes. Each married man immediately erects his family's tent and stove while his wife gathers boughs. Once the tent is up, the women lay the floor boughs. A fire is lighted and food prepared if meal time is approaching. During warm weather the stove is generally erected outside the tent. Next, the bedding is removed from the canoes and usually carried to the tents by the women. The men cut saplings; these are placed on the shore, and the supplies are piled on them as they are unloaded. The empty canoes are drawn on shore and turned over, and the supplies securely covered with tarpaulins. The men now gather some wood if the women have not already done so. Sufficient bannock must be made by the women to supply the family until the next campsite is reached, if the group plans to travel the following day. The time required to set up camp, from the landing of the canoes until the bannocks are cooking on the stoves, may be as little as 1 hour. Fall-travel camps are located close to the water, except when an occasional camp is erected along a portage trail.

As soon as camp is established the personnel of the group may fish, hunt, or set snares if the time and location permit. The most important task is setting gill nets. Some of the fish taken are eaten within a day or two. The rest are partially smoked and dried and consumed within a week or two. Snares are set for rabbits; muskrats and ducks are hunted, and sometimes a search is made in the vicinity of camp for big game. Occasionally, blueberries are gathered by women and children.

The members of the hunting group normally reach their own land between the middle and end of September. Their arrival marks the beginning of the fall hunt. A base camp is established from which the men hunt big game, but it may be moved to another location after several weeks. Base camps are distinguished from travel camps by the erection of additional structures such as bedding racks, fleshing and beaming posts for the processing of hides, racks for drying meat, saw frames, cache racks for the ceremonial disposal of certain bones; they are located as close to good fishing grounds as possible. Since protection from the weather is not so important in the fall and spring, camp is often established within a mile of a place where nets can be set. In winter protection from the northwest wind is desired, often necessitating a camp location several miles from the nets. Old camp sites may be used for base camps during fall and spring, and sometimes one camp site is used during several successive years. This

is not usually true, however, of base camps used during the winter, when new lodges are generally constructed and camp sites are not used more than once during a period of some years.

During the fall hunt as much game as possible is taken, dried, and stored for the winter. The Mistassini leave the summer encampment early so as to take advantage of the favourable hunting conditions during the fall.

The men hunt each day, usually in pairs, occasionally individually. The principal animals sought are bear, moose, and caribou. When a kill is made and the meat has been processed, hunting may continue if time permits. If no kill is made the camp will be moved and re-established in another location. The men are gone during the day, generally from early morning until dark. They travel as much as 20 to 30 miles a day, going perhaps 10 miles from base camp and returning by another route. On occasion they leave the base camp for several days and establish a hunting camp 10 or more miles away, from which they make day hunts. A small canoe, pointed at both ends, is used for transportation where necessary, but much of the hunting, at least in the open boreal forest, is done on foot. In addition to hunting muskrats are trapped and occasionally ducks are shot.

In the past large quantities of whitefish and lake trout were taken. Fishing was sometimes continued into November. One informant stated that about a thousand whitefish were taken by his family and thoroughly dried for the winter. Nets were set at the mouths of streams and in shoal water around islands, since trout and whitefish come to these locations to spawn. At present both men and women set and tend the gill nets, but no attempt is made to take as many fish as in former years. The nets are examined every day or so and the fish secured are partially dried by the women. The fish are used by the men for food while hunting. (According to Burgesse (1945, p. 23), fall fishing at Mistassini was carried on communally before the hunters moved inland to their respective wintering places. This is perhaps correct in that certain families secured and dried fish for the trip inland, but we found no evidence of communal fishing.)

Women and children gather blueberries; formerly large quantities were secured, cooked, and dried for the winter. Recently less emphasis has been placed on berrying and the few gathered are made into jam, which is soon eaten.

A small feast is given before the fall hunt begins. (Formerly the food for this feast consisted of a beaver, which was first singed and then boiled (Lips 1947a, pp. 7-8); sometimes it was obligatory for the participants of the feast to remain until the entire beaver was eaten (Lipps 1947b, p. 389)). The men drum and sing, and if the drum "talks" and the drummers feel "good", it is believed that the coming winter will be successful. If a bear is killed before or during the fall hunt (or, for that matter, at any time of the year) another feast is held. This happens also when moose or caribou are killed.

When a successful hunter returns to camp he does not immediately advertise his success. If he returns by canoe he generally leaves his game

bag in the canoe for his children to bring to the tent and their excitement is usually the first indication that a big kill has been made, for the hunter will bring in his game bag a few tidbits, such as the liver and a small quantity of meat. All the men and older boys help to bring the meat to camp, unless it is decided to move camp to the kill, and for some days the entire group is occupied in butchering, hide working, and the cooking, drying, and packing of meat.

During the middle of October base camp is moved to a new locality, which is to be occupied until January. More substantial lodges are erected, often communal dwellings for the entire hunting group. Cache racks are constructed in order to store meat and supplies, as well as animal bones. Canoe storage racks are built and supply tents erected. Later other equipment is constructed, such as hide stretchers and toboggan planing boards. The work of erecting the camp takes from 1 to 2 weeks, everyone working from dawn till dark. When the operation is completed men and women concentrate on gathering a supply of firewood, which women and children later augment as need arises.

After the first winter base camp is erected a feast is held. This is a small one if the fall hunt has been poor and food is limited. The men sing and drum to predict their well-being during the winter.

In the last days of October or early November the lakes and rivers begin to freeze and the snow begins to accumulate. The period of freeze-up, which lasts only a week or so, marks the climatic shift to winter. Fish nets are retrieved to prevent them from becoming frozen in the ice. Nets are not used again until the ice is safe to walk over. During the winter the men examine the nets about once a week.

Formerly, if food was scarce, the men resumed their hunting, but today, after the early winter base camp is established, they begin trapping beaver, otter, mink, marten, and weasel. Daily trips are made from the base camp or from outlying temporary camps. When temporary trapping camps are used the men rarely remain away from base camp for more than 10 to 14 days at a time. Traps are usually set in a circuit of from 10 to 20 miles. The men work in pairs and alternate setting traps. Each man has his own traps and the furs taken are his own property. An attempt is made to examine the traps every weeks or so.

When in camp the men are busy constantly, manufacturing various items of equipment. Snowshoe frames are constructed during this period, swallow-tails in the late fall, and beaver-tails during the winter. Other items manufactured include toboggans, sleds, snow-shovels, skin stretchers, and axe handles. The men also tend the fish nets, often accompanied by their wives or older children.

Women engage in various tasks about the camp. The collection of firewood is very important, and an attempt is made to provide a reserve supply, especially during the winter. Wood is transported to camp on a sled or a toboggan. Women generally draw the sleds themselves, men employ dogs. After the logs are brought to camp, they are sawed into stove lengths,

split, and piled inside the passage to the lodge or in front. Women and children do most of this work.

Women collect the boughs for flooring. These are gathered in the immediate vicinity of camp and hauled in on sleds or toboggans. Other duties of the women include lacing snowshoes, making mittens and moccasins, mending, cooking, and preparing pelts. In addition to these regular tasks they hunt ptarmigan and spruce grouse and set a few traps in the neighbourhood of the camp. Hunting carried out by the women is of vital importance to the larder, especially when big game and fish are scarce and the men are concentrating on trapping.

Although the entire winter period is a time of intensified activity, the time of the early winter trapping is exceptionally strenuous. Everyone works from early morning until late evening. Outside work is limited by the number of daylight hours and occasionally by extremely low temperatures. The men rarely set traps or travel after dark.

The work routine continues until early January, when the mid-winter feast is held. Today this feast tends to be replaced by a Christmas feast. Shortly after Christmas the traders arrive by plane to buy fur.

In early January the traps are collected and preparations for moving begin. A shift is made to another section of the hunting territory that has not yet been exploited. Now more time is spent hunting big game, although trapping is resumed. The move is made with sleds and toboggans and may require a month, even though the distance does not exceed 30 miles. Intense cold and wind prevent extensive travel with small children. In addition it is necessary to stop early to establish camp, which task often consumes 4 hours at this time of the year. If there is much equipment, additional trips are required. Work is limited by the relatively few hours of daylight. There is little or no trapping, since the cold weather forces the animals to seek cover, where they are difficult to capture. At present, when money is available, the group or a family within the hunting group may charter a plane for the move, but the practice is rare.

With the departure from the early winter camp each family moves into a canvas tent for travelling and usually at base camp as well. When the new base camp is established, fish nets are placed under the ice and traps are set. For both sexes work is similar to that at the early winter camp. Hunting camps are established when caribou are sought, but few hunting groups today hunt caribou, since the animal is rare in the area. If possible, all the men co-operate in making the kill. If the kill is large, camp is moved into the vicinity and a communal lodge erected in which the meat is dried and the hides are processed. It is considered easier to move the entire camp than to transport the meat if large distances are involved. Furthermore, the communal lodge is considered best for drying meat in winter.

In early April an Easter feast is held and the group begins the return to the canoes. Failure to reach them before the spring thaw might prove disastrous. In March and especially in April it is necessary to travel early

in the morning before the crust on the snow softens, since at this time even snowshoes are of little value. Often camp is broken by 4 o'clock in the morning.

The period from the freezing to the thawing of the lakes (November to May) is the most difficult part of the year. During this period it is hard to secure the necessities of life. The large quantity of firewood required is obtained only by a great expenditure of labour and time. Hunting is hazardous because of climatic conditions, and game is often difficult to find. Fishing is curtailed. This is partly due to the fact that fish remain somewhat inactive in deep water, but in addition the ice is so thick that in February it sometimes takes nearly a whole day to set one net. Formerly the small amount of European food brought in by the group in the fall had been consumed by mid-winter. Even today some families have no flour by early spring. Illness during this period is particularly disruptive, since a husband curtails his hunting if his wife is ill, or ceases hunting if sickness strikes him.

During the later part of April the group returns to the vicinity of the early winter encampment to await the disappearance of snow and ice. Prior to the thaw the men aid the women by collecting sufficient wood and boughs for a period of several weeks. This is done because movement is difficult in melting snow. The snow conditions do not, however, prevent hunting and trapping. As soon as open water appears in the lakes and streams traps are set for muskrat and otter. Ducks, geese, and loons are hunted, and limited canoe travel is now possible.

During the early part of this period fishing is important. Two factors assure a good supply of fish: first, gill nets can now be set with a minimum of labour in the open water, and second, many species are moving into shallow water to spawn. At this season nets are examined about once a day. In April the hunting group may camp near good trout ponds and fish with set lines.

Outside activities increase with the additional daylight hours. The men often leave to go hunting and trapping by 5 o'clock in the morning and do not return until 8 or later in the evening, when they may continue to work indoors.

In May, when many ducks, geese, and loons are killed, a spring feast is held. The remaining bear meat and fat is cooked and served. (In 1808 McKenzie wrote that the Montagnais had a feast in spring in order to congratulate each other on their success during the past winter (McKenzie 1808, p. 416). The feast was apparently held after they had all gathered at the summer encampment. At Rupert's House this feast was a petition and thanksgiving to the supreme being (Cooper 1934, p. 228)).

Toward the end of May preparations are made to leave for the summer encampment. Canoes are repaired and paddles made. Winter equipment is stored on cache racks. When the ice disappears from the lakes and rivers the hunting group begins the return trip. They may wait until the water-level has lowered sufficiently so that any rapids encountered can be

negotiated easily. The trip is made in a minimum of time. Whereas 4 weeks are necessary in the fall, only 4 days are now needed if travel is down stream. Camp is struck early and made late. Personal comfort is forgotten in the general eagerness to reach the summer post. By the first part of June all hunting groups have, as a rule, gathered for the summer.

During the summer little work is done. The contrast with the isolation and strenuous activities of the winter is marked. Summer is the time of social affairs, with dances, marriages followed by feasts, and church services every day except Saturday. There is time now for conversation and gossip with relatives and friends.

A little hunting is done, especially for moose. Loons and ducks are taken when possible and a few rabbits are snared. Fishing is of major importance and each family sets one or more nets. Because of the large number of people at the summer encampment, about 500 in 1954, there is a heavy drain on the fish population. Nets may have to be set several miles from camp. They are examined almost every day. Much food is obtained from the trading companies during this period. Formerly birch bark was gathered during June for the manufacture of canoes and boxes.

Some of the men work as guides for fishing parties, in mining camps, and for the government. In addition to regular camp chores, women make gill nets, smoke moose hides, and make mittens and moccasins for sale to the trading companies. Toward the end of their stay at the summer encampment the men recanvas canoes and make paddles and axe handles. During the first part of August supplies are purchased and equipment is packed in preparation for the fall travel. By the middle of August a new cycle begins.

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