

Remembering Conrad Byers Part 2

By Sandra Stephenson
(Editor Note: Sandra is preparing a multi-issue account of Conrad Byers' impact on Parrsboro and his renowned worldwide reputation. She hopes to eventually turn her extensive investment of time interviewing Conrad into a book. Here is Part 2:

It's a journalist's job to distinguish fact from fiction, but Conrad Byers was not a journalist. He was a storyteller. He had been a tour guide since he was a teenager. He loved to tell the chilling story of the Maiden in the Cave. The daughter of a British captain, she had been captured by pirates who, seeing the British were hot on their trail, closed her into a cave with a few fish and some water and a rock over the opening, then got off to Isle Haute. They hoped to come back and get her. The maiden, despairing of her lot, wailed and moaned and called for help. Hearing the moaning (which can be heard today under certain conditions), some of the locals thought the spot was haunted, and steered clear. No one came to her aid, but a few days after she was found dead, some people who had travelled through the area, said they heard her but did not consider it their business to get involved. Though other versions of the story claim that the people were Mi'kmaw, but Conrad would not tell me whether they were native people. Sometimes he was silent if he did not know the answer to my questions, and sometimes Conrad's tales got tall. I was enthralled by every one, with questions swirling.

One day as we sat at Ottawa House upstairs in the Reading Room, Conrad told me:

The seashore at one time was at the hills all along near the Cross-Roads going up to Amherst. After the Ice Age, that was the shoreline. The land gradually rose up and drove the tides out farther. There wasn't any water in the Bay then. This was a big rift valley and so the coastline was 200 or 300 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia before you hit salt water. It was all land. Fishing draggers still drag up stuff, drag up Indian objects way off shore. It was all land then. People lived way out there where it's now all water." [Later, the water came back in and you have the story of Glooscap you'll find at the end of this article.]

I pointed out that the early peoples may have been in boats, so that artifacts were found far out from current shore-lines: "Indians travelled on boats too. Things could have fallen off, or a boat sank?"

He replied: "This was ancient stuff. They claim that the Mi'kmaw were the first natives in this area. They may have crossed the ice from farther west [or north - linguistic comparisons suggest a link with Innu and Algonquin], and gradually in all this area the glacier melted. From where the Cross-Roads is now, all the way out to low water it was land. If you go out to low water, you'll find fossilized trees, so it's been back and forth at least several times, the land going in and out.

"It's kind of interesting to think about how that happened, within 10,000 years. Those little hills, hillocks in Lakelands, just mounds, quite big, but not very high, they are all deposits that stuck to the bottom of the ice-field as it moved along. It was a glacier, and as it receded it left all those deposits of gravel. Great gravel pits all up through there.

"There was a place I'll show you on the way to Amherst. There's a little place on the right, it was a school-house at one time [demolished around 2022 to make way for a new residence. Had been used as an art shop]. That's on the Great Divide. When the ice melted, it melted back towards that area and then for several hun-

dreds of years it stopped melting. That line that's across the valley made a sort of a dam across there. Before that the river that came out where the Parrsboro river is, was part of the St. Lawrence River. It was all one river before the Ice Age, and it came out here in Parrsboro.

"In the evolution of the place, there were three ice ages. The Bay of Fundy didn't exist, no tides because of that. The Geological Museum has drawings. The land is just solid blocks floating randomly. All the land floats on magma. Cape Breton Island was not connected to Nova Scotia for thousands of years, and it gradually drifted. PEI same thing. If you go around the Cabot Trail, there's a sign there in the canyons and hills, and it says, 'The other end of this canyon is in Morocco.'"

Me: When I figure that the tides will always be here, that's naive too, isn't it?

Con: "It won't be that long before they start changing. A hundred, two hundred years, there won't be tides here because it's gonna wear through. It's getting nearer all the time. The Isthmus of Chignecto, that's flooding, and once that happens, it's gonna take about half the water that's jammed up the Bay, and it's going to go over [the Tantramar Marsh] all around Amherst and Sackville. That's sinking all the time. Once that breaks, across there, then that movement, the push on the tides: right now it's like a dam there, forces the water up the Bay of Fundy. Once that breaks, Nova Scotia will become an island, and the tides will be half the height they are now. It depends on how much erosion there has been. As the tide breaks through, it erodes more of the channels and gets deeper, it'll spoil the whole rhythm of the tides."

It's hard to tell fiction from fact in some of Conrad's stories. He chose to espouse certain theories of geology which are still disputed, though becoming more widely accepted. He told me, for example, of caribou coming down the pass above where the Sunshine Inn is now, "their antlers clicking", coming down to the beaches in huge herds and walking along the shore to summering grounds in Debert, with native people following them. I don't know where he got that story, but according to Mi'kmaw knowledge, there were no Barren Ground caribou in Nova Scotia. Mastodon remains have been found, from 20,000 years ago, indicating there was tundra at that time. Tundra caribou are the ones whose feet (not horns) click as they walk, and they migrate in large herds. But according to Don Awalt, Mi'kmaw historian and linguist, the First Peoples, the Mi'kmaw depended on Woodland caribou, which did not migrate, were quiet, and hung out in small groups. The Mi'kmaw did not follow migrating caribou in Nova Scotia.

My exposure to Mi'kmaw history and lore, however imperfect, came first through Conrad, and I was fascinated. With most oral story-tellers, it can be hard to tell whose story is being told, the teller's own or one (s)he's heard. In the interests of the story, the teller can't split an audience's attention to acknowledge sources, though often Conrad did. No story-teller claims absolute historical accuracy. Conrad added to and helped develop the story-telling mode into the fine tradition we find along the Parrsboro Shore to this day. Some born-and-bred Nova Scotians have said that oral stories should not be recorded or written down. It is a performance art unto itself, and Con's stories led me to return annually to Parrsboro, and to invest in the community with its now fading art of story.

That day in the Conrad Byers Maritime Library at Ottawa House, I read to Conrad from a book

about fish weirs. They were used for capturing fish near the mouth of rivers, as far back as 8000 years ago. Remnants of old weirs have been found mostly in southwestern NS. I asked Conrad about pilings I had seen in the river mouth at Cape Chignecto, and he replied that if it was a weir, it would have thinner poles than an old wharf.

In another book, Kekina'muek, put out by the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (2007)

(<https://docslib.org/doc/1284299/kekinamuek-learning-about-the-mikmaq-of-nova-scotia>), I read aloud to Conrad, and he confirmed as I read:

The Mersey river was lowered in 2004 to repair power dams, and many artifacts were uncovered in more than 100 camp and fishing sites along the river. 10,000 artifacts were collected - spearpoints, axes, gouges - some dated between 500 and 6000 years old.

There are important archaeological sites in Debert area, and petroglyphs in Kejimkujik. Hundreds of pictures were carved into stone on shorelines: animals, lodges, crosses and hieroglyphs. Some show women in traditional clothing, including the unique (Pict?) peaked cap, as in the photo. It's a simple design, a square of cloth with a single seam joining two of the corners, worn like a bonnet. (photo from Kekina'muek, from the "National museum of the American Indian.")

Mi'kmaw people and their ancestors have lived in many different places. There's a petroglyph of a ship. I comment that my family drove right past Kejimkujik, but didn't see a sign about petroglyphs. Conrad replied that for a lot of them, "You're not allowed to go without a guide. You have to go into a park site to know about it."

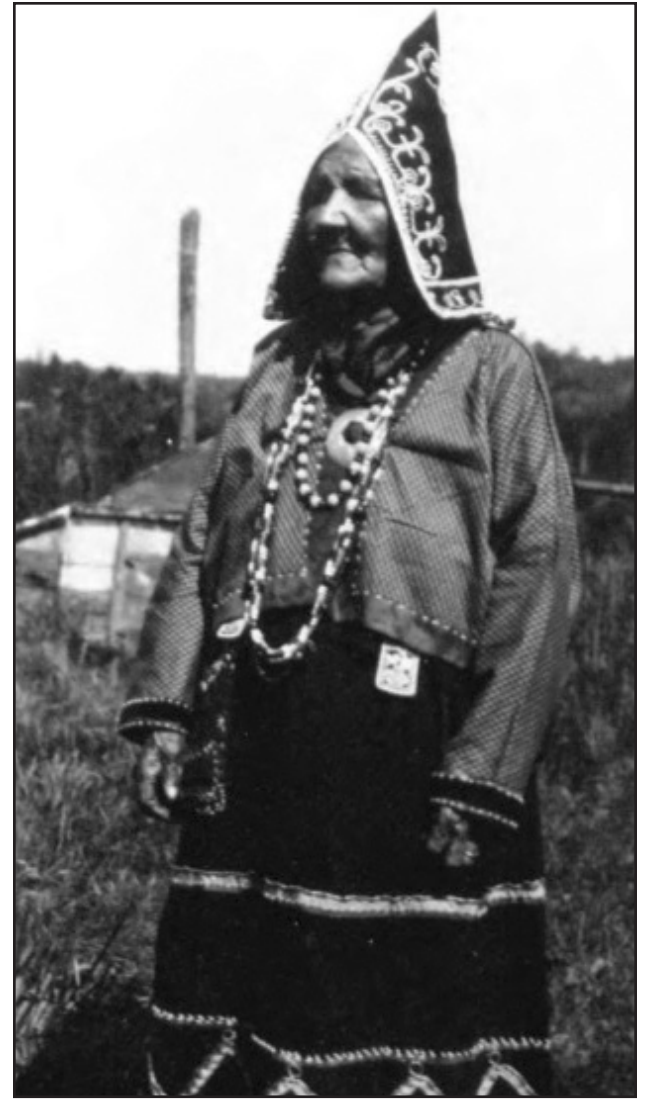
In the chapter, Mi'kmaw of yesterday and today, I learned there are 7 districts called: Foggy lands; Lying in the water, Pictou; Skin dressers' territory; Wild potato area; Last flow; Drainage area [the area on the Parrsboro Shore, draining largely into Parrsboro harbour]; and Last land. The book includes the Mi'kmaw hierarchy of leadership at time of contact. There is a Treaty Day on October 1 that Nova Scotians should know about. The book says: "Mi'kmaw communities look like any small rural community in Canada today." I laughed reading that, because in my experience most native communities look poorer than other rural communities. They are divided by provinces, politics and restrictions. Thirteen bands in NS, each led by Chief and council, occupy specific areas. Conrad con-

firms for me that there's "basically nobody left" in the reserve that's closest to us, called Franklin Manor.

Conrad says he always found it interesting that Jacques Cartier and Champlain "were met by the same Indian Chief. There was a Chief in Gaspé when Cartier landed, and later when Champlain came over, he met the same Chief in Nova Scotia! Shows how far they travelled."

Oral language involves telling the same stories over and over again at gatherings and powwows. A story can last for all of a four-day gathering. They don't always sink into your memory the first time, and their deeper meaning can take decades to be understood. I read again: "In the days of Glooscap the river water from the Bay of Fundy was clear and fresh. A monster eel swam down the river and pushed all the fishes and all the fresh water into the salty Bay. Turtle told Glooscap what had resulted. Glooscap gave great powers to Lobster, who grew in size and strength and fought the eel. The long battle stirred up much mud in many waves. Eel was killed, and even today in the muddy river with an elbow bend the battle scene takes place twice a day.

"Glooscap, the giant legendary Mi'kmaw figure, wanted to take a bath. He called his friend Beaver and told him to find some water. Beaver built a huge dam across the river [probably Cape Split]. Water backed up behind the dam and stopped flowing into the sea. As Glooscap stepped into the water, Whale asked, 'Why have you stopped the water from coming to my domain?' Not wanting to anger his



friend, Glooscap got up and walked back to land. With a stroke of her mighty tail, Whale destroyed the dam and sent water flooding up the river. As she turned and swam back to sea, she set the water sloshing [out and

back in], a movement it has kept to this day."

As I finished reading the story and looked up at him (even sitting, he was a tall man), Conrad replied, "Seems logical to me."



**6 McFarlane St., PO Box 250
Springhill, NS B0M 1X0**

1-902-597-4039
Toll Free 1-833-597-8679
Fax: 1-902-597-3310

toryrushtonmla@bellaliant.com



**TORY RUSHTON, MLA
Cumberland South**

The Season of Giving is here

A Wonderful Gift for the whole year...

12 Months of the South Cumberland News

Please send this Personal Gift Subscription to:

Name: _____

Street: _____

Town: _____ Prov: _____ Postal Code: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

If RENEWAL: Sub # _____ New: _____ Gift: _____

Country/Special Mail Instructions: _____

This Personal Gift Subscription comes from:

Name: _____

Street: _____

Town: _____ Prov: _____ Postal Code: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

HST: 890564404RT0001

Enclose Cheque or Money Order payable to **South Cumberland News**

LOCAL SUBSCRIPTIONS: B0M / B2N / B6L - \$23.00, PLUS HST = \$26.45 • OTHER PARTS OF NS: \$28.00 plus HST = \$32.20

ALL OTHER AREAS OF CANADA: \$30.00, plus HST = \$34.50

MAIL TO: South Cumberland News, P.O. Box 41, Bass River, NS, B0M 1B0