

# **Maliseet Braves Baseball Team**

**c. 1946**



**Among The Best**

# **Maliseet Braves Baseball Teams - Among The Best**

## ***The 1920s-1950s teams traveled on the backs of trucks***

by Robert LaFrance (2008)

The Maliseet (or Malecite) Braves baseball team was among the best within a radius of hundreds of miles. They played on dozens of diamonds in the northern half of New Brunswick, in Quebec province and in the State of Maine and when they arrived in town - almost always on the back of a truck with the big "Malecite Braves" banner on the side - it was a big occasion for that town.

They were good - very good. Barry Nicholas, who played outfield on the Braves in the late 1940s and 1950s, said that some other teams even thought there was a little cheating going on, the Braves were that good. "One weekend the Presque Isle team thought the bats were loaded, we had so many long hits," he remembered, "but they weren't. They were just good bats and good players."

Last Wednesday he and several other alumni of the Braves stopped by "The West Wing" of the Seasons Restaurant in the Tobique Truck stop. They talked about the heyday of the Braves - which covers several decades beginning in the 1920s - and about the bats that Simon Paul had made for the team.

"He made them of ash he chose himself," said Tobique historian Barry Nicholas, "and he made them about 38 - 40 ounces for the bigger guys. The regular players like me and my brother Andrew would only use 32 and maybe 33 ounce bats." Simon Paul was a basket maker and also made axe handles, peevees, and barrel hoops. The local school basement was often a busy place because the women of the reserve made the team's uniforms there. "We had no money to equip the team," said Nicholas, "so we had to make our own things." At that time, before Mah-Sos School the 2-room school was located between the community hall and ball field.

During World War II when many young men were off to Europe the Braves were not active, but a women's team provided a lot of entertainment during that time. In the late 1940s the Braves were back in business with most of the players now war veterans. They traveled extensively during this postwar period and played teams from Edmundston, Grand Falls, Maine, Campbellton and many other areas.

One place they played every year was the Johnville Picnic. "The game was organized by the Sisters in Johnville and in Tobique," said Barry Nicholas. "It was a big field day and the people really came out because we were going to play. In the afternoon after the game we had a big meal and after that some of us did Indian dancing. You could say we went native; it was a lot of fun. The

games in Johnville always stood out in my mind because the people were so nice. They always seemed to be glad that our team came from the reserve to play in Johnville."

## A Nighthawk Was Coach

After the war, the team was almost unbeatable. Peter Sappier, one of the former Braves players who gathered to talk last week, said he had had a great time. "I joined the team before war," he said, "and I went to Europe in 1942. I didn't play much ball until I came back from the service. Then I used to catch. We traveled all over the place to play. We hired a truck from Percy LaFrance, George DeMerchant, or a fellow from Medford. We rode on the back of the truck to the games and even took passengers to pay for transportation. Percy Innis was coach and Abner Paul was the manager for a long time. We used to get paid for playing ball I think and we had a lot of fun. One summer I think we only lost two games."

Coach Percy Ennis had another sideline too as well as baseball and his day job. He was a well-known local musician whose band, The Nighthawks, played their country and western music in many halls of Maine and New Brunswick including for the Johnville Picnic. Besides occasionally traveling with their own band, the Maliseet Braves even had to bring their own umpires, a job done by Gabe Paul and in later years Charlie Paul.

Spike (Donald) Moulton was one of the players of the great Maliseet Braves teams. "I started playing before the war," he said, "and I joined the old team. I was a pretty good shortstop, played with older fellows like my grandfather Andrew Nicholas and William Ennis. I played in army too. After the war the team was almost all veterans like Peter Sappier and I and Raymond Nicholas. We were in good shape; we just got out of the army. Beat pretty near every team around here. We were real good.

"Grand Falls used to give us good competition though. One game they had an umpire who was on their side and we lost that 1-0 but then we had had the return game it was different. People came from all over to see that game. The diamond here on the reserve was too small so we had to play in Andover. Talk about people around there coming to that game. I don't remember the score but we beat them pretty bad that time."

## Plaster Rock Rivalry

The only times the Maliseet Braves used the traditional baseball signals were the games against rivals who also spoke the Malecite language and there was a good reason for that. Using the same theory as that was used by the American military in their Pacific Ocean war 1941-45 - Navaho Code-talkers as radio operators - the Maliseet Braves only had to shout the words 'steal' or 'bunt' in their own language and it worked just as well as signals.

Except against Plaster Rock. That formidable team had a host of stars including Gib Simpson and Donnie Hollins and a lot of smarts. It wasn't long before they were reading the Braves' 'signs'.

"Gib Simpson's father was an old ballplayer," explained Barry Nicolas. "He would listen real good. If you repeated "A-lee! A-Lee" enough times he knew the guy was going to go. We had to change this to "Na-muud-ney!" - steal. We went back and forth. Usually we didn't need hand signals; we used the Malecite language and the guys knew what to do. We'd just talk to him in indian - "Jint-a-hunt" meant 'bunt' - but we couldn't do it with the Passamaquoddy Indians because they understood Malecite."

Every July 4th the Braves would play baseball in Princeton, Maine against the Passamaquoddy team and the Maine team would usually come to Tobique for St. Anne's Day in late July. The Braves were invited to the Northern Maine Fair every year, Old Home Week in Woodstock and to many other events because they were a huge drawing card.

In an upcoming issue of the Victoria Star we will describe some of these big games and events surrounding the Maliseet Braves baseball team, one of the sports legends of this area. This will include a game in Campbellton before which the local people thought the Braves players looked a little small to take on their hometown heroes. Wrong.



1920s Braves Team

The Maliseet Braves baseball team had its origins in 1910 according to Raymond Nicholas, who joined the Braves in 1935 and again after he returned from the war to become a star of the team. A November 1937 National Geographic article featuring First Nations activities across North America included a picture of Nicholas, now an elder of Tobique First Nation, swinging at a pitch during a game in Princeton, Maine.

"My father used to tell us about the first team they had here," he said during an interview last week at his home. "William Ellis was the manager and his son was one of the best hitters they had. My father said every time he went to bat they would lose the ball and they never had very many of them. In those days they didn't have gloves, only bare hands, and most of the time they used sawdust balls, remember them? After a couple of innings they busted."

Like some of the players who had nicknames like 'Bell-Bell' (Clarence Bear) and "Die" (Clarence Sappier), the team itself had a nickname - "The Hungry Nine" and that stemmed from the players' lack of money: "Every time we went to play ball somewhere it was always that we didn't have a ball, and half the time we were hungry," explained Nicholas. "They called us 'the Hungry nine'. We played ball in Juniper, way up to Riley Brook - all over. The first time I played ball they hired a truck - Bernard DeMerchant's - and we went to Restigouche. They found places for us to stay. We played Restigouche, two games and beat them, the Indian team and the white team, then we went to Moncton and beat them. On the way back we played Sussex and beat them. We were pretty good.

"George Bernard would tell them if they wanted us: 'Yeah, we'll play ball but we got to have a ball and the winner has got to take the ball home and you got to feed us' so they all fixed us good things to eat. The hungry nine."

During several interviews in researching this story we found the opinion that Raymond Nicholas would have been one of the most likely members of the Maliseet Braves to be able to play major league baseball, but he just shrugged about that and mentioned others. "We had two ballplayers who were really good. They could have made the majors. Gregory Saulis and Clarence (Bell-Bell) Bear. I'll tell you how good Gregory was. He'll go to bat and point where he's going to hit it and that's where he hits it. Playing shortstop he would turn around and catch a pop fly behind his back." He said he didn't try to get to the majors because his wife was against the idea but he did play on several other teams for money. He often received \$25 a game, which was a substantial sum of money in those days. He played for the Fort Fairfield Wanderers, teams in McAdam and Princeton, Maine. "I'd hitchhike there but they had a place for me. I played first base in the all-star game in Fort Kent and we won. We played against Skowhegan, Bangor and we beat Bangor all to hell."

Raymond Nicholas remembered that Plaster Rock and Grand Falls were always tough opponents. He said one Plaster Rock pitcher had a bit of a temper. "I think his name was Shields. He used to get mad. When we started hitting he would hit us with the ball. He hit me twice. Donnie Hollins was a good player and Simpson. Our team broke up in the 1950s. Our problem was we didn't have enough players. The best team I played on we had Bell-Bell as catcher, George Bernard, Donald Saulis, Gabe Perley, they were all pitchers but could play anywhere. Sam Deveau and I played first base but I was only a kid. Second base was William Ennis, he pitched too. Shortstop was Gregory Saulis. Third baseman was Louis Ennis, outfield Frankie Sappier. Philip Sockabasin his brother Lowell played. Philip was a good pitcher and hitter. Percy LaFrance used to take the team on his truck."

## Great fans of the Braves

The Maliseet Braves had their many fans and among them were three lads from Tobique Narrows. Before the dam was built brothers Peter and Jack DeMerchant and neighbour Jim Wallace used to canoe across the Tobique near the mouth to save several miles of walking via the bridge that was removed in 1952.

"We just went down to the shore and got dad's canoe and paddled over to the game," remembers Jim Wallace of those Sundays in the 1930s and 1940s. "They played teams from Plaster Rock, South Tilley and Grand Falls. The hometown fans made lots of noise and the Braves won most of their games. I remember going to Grand Falls for a game too. The players were kind of hard looking, and that might have intimidated other teams who didn't know them but they were harmless, they wouldn't hurt anybody, they were good sports.

"I remember Raymond Nicholas was their best batter, he hit a lot of home runs. Don Saulis was their pitcher, William Nicholas used to pitch before Donald, He was a smart fellow, was in business and used to have a poolroom. Sam Deveau was first base I think. Spike Moulton played shortstop." Asked if they took their lunch or bought lunch over at the game, Jim Wallace replied: "We didn't have any money. You could buy pop over there but we didn't have that much money usually."

Peter and Jack DeMerchant, born in 1928 and 1932 respectively, were always avid fans of the Braves and went to every Sunday game, canoeing across to the three islands that used to be in the Tobique before the dam was built. In later years Peter even played one game with the Braves. "I was in high school, I would say it was 1945 or 1946. I don't remember why they came to get me to play; they must have been short of players. We went on the back of George DeMerchant's farm truck to Limestone. I hit a long ball but it was caught. I ended up on second but was out. That was my only game of baseball with them."

Peter and Jack lived with their family on a farm located where the Tobique Narrows Dam is today. "When I was five or six we'd go over past the islands and on a track up on the flats - every Sunday they had a game. The big hitters were Sam Deveau, Raymond Nicholas, Tom Sappier (catcher), and Don Saulis (pitcher). I know Don Saulis hit a home run down in Andover there where the racetrack was and gee, it went a long, long ways. They were good ballplayers and a bunch of nice guys. They could all play almost any position.

"I think George DeMerchant, drove them. I think it was a dollar and a quarter to go to Woodstock Island," remembered Jack DeMerchant whose earliest day, in fact his first day, was associated with baseball. When he was about to be born on August 7, 1932, the family physician Dr. MacIntosh was over watching the Maliseet Braves play a touring team of black players from the southern U.S. "Someone went over to get Dr. MacIntosh," said Jack DeMerchant. "Dr. Mac was over there all the time watching the games."

## Brave character

Andy Nicholas, who joined the Braves in the late 1940s, said one of the great Braves characters was a player named Henry Bear who, before many games, would walk out to the mound and mime several innings of plays, even arguing with an

imaginary umpire. "It was what we would call a 'pre-game show'," said Nicholas. "We had this character on the reserve who would (mime) the whole motions of a game, pitching, and everything but no ball, just himself on the mound and he'd pitch this imaginary ball to an imaginary batter, catcher and umpire. Henry Bear. He had a cyclone type of windup. He would wait for the umpire to call a ball and if that imaginary batter hit the ball then a dog named Kruger ran around the bases. Kruger was owned by Willie Nicholas. If Henry went BANG! the dog would start running around the bases. It was quite a pre-game show for every team."

The Maliseet Braves were one of the great drawing cards of those decades when they were at their peak and places as far away as Campbellton had heard about them. Andy Nicholas said one game he attended there had been well advertised but when the Braves arrived the local people looked at them and didn't think those slim guys, many not very tall, would be a match for their big lads. "We had travelled up there on the back of the truck," he remembered. "They looked at us, we looked small. They had called us American Indians, I remember that. They said 'We've been advertising you fellows. There's an ad on the radio every fifteen minutes.' We didn't look to be any good. He said: 'Well, you do your best'."

"We had the Malecite Braves sign on the side of the truck and talk about the crowd of people who followed us right to the diamond. It was all filled up and we couldn't even practise before the game. It was the biggest crowd they ever had at that diamond. We beat them, and then went to Bathurst two games and won, and then played the all-stars in Campbellton and won. We were a pretty hard team to beat. We were all young and strong."

This series about the Maliseet Braves 1910-1950s is dedicated to the Negootkook Elders.