Circles of Light

February 2001 – Number 9

Northern Lights Beef Jerky

Kitsaki Expands Markets for Nutritional Snack

by Heather Sherratt

Beef jerky, that staple of ranch and farm workers, has taken a new lease on life in the last few years. No longer is it only sold in the local village general store. Northern Lights is now distributing beef jerky across Canada to up-scale sports and tourist outlets, as well as to grocery chains across the country and markets as far away as Japan.

Located in La Ronge, Saskatchewan, Northern Lights is a division of Kitsaki Meats, and is owned by the Lac La Ronge Indian Band. "The company started in 1983 as a partnership between the band and a Saskatoon businessman," says general manager **Terry Helary**. In 1989, it regrouped under the name Kitsaki Meats, with the Lac La Ronge Indian Band assuming 100-percent ownership. The processing plant has 20 employees, most of whom are band members.

The business is a federally inspected meat-processing plant that has diversified into producing and marketing beef jerky and wild rice, in addition to fresh and frozen meat. The move into processing beef jerky was a successful attempt at value-added marketing. With the beef readily available, Northern Lights saw the potential for greater profit if they could process the product and aim at a relatively new niche market. So in 1999, Northern Lights decided to market their product to a new generation of consumers: the urban outdoors enthusiasts who are aware of their diet and fitness.

Beef jerky has long been known as a highly nutritional food source that is both portable and non-perishable. Made from all-Canadian, locally produced beef, it packs more energy per kilogram than most other products. Its value as a survival food has been known for generations.

Northern Lights took this idea and began promoting its beef jerky as a handy, nutritional snack. As well as the more traditional market of skiers, canoeists, hikers and other endurance athletes, Northern Lights' promotion also targets golfers, hikers and walkers, birdwatchers and even spectators at sporting events. By making beef jerky available in tourist resorts, outfitters' stores and grocery and department

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Producers in the Aboriginal agri-food and agriculture sector are building on the agricultural skills and knowledge of their ancestors. Today, Aboriginal agri-food businesses are establishing healthy markets at home and internationally. According to the 1996 Census, the agriculture and agri-foods sector provides employment to 13 percent of the Aboriginal labour force in Canada.

Lower Similkameen First Nation

Growing Apples Naturally

by Raymond Lawrence

When it comes to fruit, consumers are buying more and more organic produce. Their concerns are health and the environment, rather than the lowest produce price.

And according to Lower Similkameen First Nation grower — and Chief — **Moses Louie**, organic apples are every bit as profitable as those grown using mainstream approaches. More and more growers are saying goodbye to chemical fertilizers and pesticides, he confirms, as they seek to be certified as organic growers.

"It was about 1985 when I first started into organic growing," Louie explains of his orchard in the Nicola Valley area of the British Columbia interior. "It was a transition from there on to the fifth year, and then I was certified. I worked in orchards here for years, but when I put my first tree in the ground, that became my baby."

"If you want it to make money for you, then you have to look after it," he stresses. "But it can be made to work for you, which is where a good business sense comes in. You have to borrow enough money to keep you going through the first three years, and you have to figure out what you have to put in and what kind of returns you want."

When he planted his first trees, they were standard root stock. It took him eight years before he got a big crop. Now, however, the operation has a different kind of root stock whose high-density growth "starts paying you back in the third year."

Louie is a member of a local co-op that ensures growers work together, and get market exposure. "With all of us in the co-op, we have about 150 acres and not long from now we'll be looking at 200 acres of orchards. I have 11 acres and from that I brought out 325 bins this year with 400 pounds per bin," he says.

There are different methods of organic growing, Louie explains. "I prune trees and then we give them a little manure and water them, and you have to keep an eye on them to make sure there's nothing bothering them...the only problem I have is birds during the fall. The crows come and make holes in them." He hangs metal multi-coloured reflectors to keep birds away.

The codling moth is another pest for organic growers. But sterile moths have been introduced, keeping the moth population in check. "We use some dormant sprays on our trees but not the harsh things," Louie emphasizes. "We use dormant oils in the springtime when the blossoms first come out, but we don't use chemicals on the apples."

"I have Red Delicious, Spartans, and Macintosh apples," he says. "I'm in the interior (of British Columbia) but our main markets are in Vancouver, Victoria, and a lot of it goes across the line to the U.S.A. And when we get small apples, we fill up a shipping car and we send them to England. We have a market in Europe as well, and we also sell organic juice. We use the culled apples for baby food that we sell to Japan."

For more information, telephone the Lower Similkameen First Nation at (250) 499-5528. ✷

Raymond Lawrence is a freelance writer of Ojibway and European ancestry.

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stores, the company greatly increased its potential market. Another advantage for sales outlets is that this natural, healthy, alternative snack has no special storage or display requirements.

Northern Lights uses only locally produced, government-inspected lean Canadian beef. The company now offers the jerky in a variety of styles and flavours, all produced using only the finest herbs and spices. The jerky is naturally wood-smoked.

The company does not limit its marketing activities to North America, but is rapidly making inroads in the huge Japanese market where a more active, outdoor lifestyle is becoming popular.

Northern Lights is also aiming at increasing the number of grocery chains that already carry their product. "We are hoping to also eventually secure listings with Walmart, Canadian Tire and Safeway," Helary says.

For more information, visit the Northern Lights Web site at **www.ca-northernlights.com** ✷

Iroquois Cranberry Growers

Organic Produce Opening New Markets

by Raymond Lawrence

Armed with the best juice available, the Iroquois Cranberry Growers of Bala, Ontario are taking aim at the global market.

The 32-year-old business, run by the Wahta Mohawk First Nation, produces some 453,000 kilograms of cranberries annually. Health-conscious buyers are enthusiastic about their pure juice. The company is steadily opening other avenues for its cranberry products, including powder which is used in capsules commonly sold at health food stores.

"We have 68 acres here making it the largest cranberry farm in the province of Ontario. We're in the process of being certified as an organic grower," says **Terry Kanerahkeniate**, the company's general manager of farming operations. As an organic producer, the company will be able to provide the consumer with a product absolutely free of chemical residue from fertilizers and pesticides. "Organic produce will open up a whole new market but this is also how our community sees us taking care of Mother Earth," he says. "We do agri-tourism at our marsh with horse-driven wagon rides. It's been a plus for our company as it's brought about more awareness of our products."

Although Iroquois Cranberry Growers do not market through any chain stores, the company does good business selling its fresh fruit, along with its other products, through its own store on the reserve. Their juice is pure and undiluted whereas most market juices have other fruit juices and water added to them.

The First Nation's location is ideal for growing healthy cranberries. While areas farther south have longer growing seasons, those more southerly regions are also more prone to fungus and blight.

"There's 124 varieties of cranberries that people have developed from cross-breeding," he says. "Here, we grow four kinds and we have one experimental plot that we plant with different kinds of vines to see how they take and which ones are suitable to our soil." Cranberries like acidic soil, Kanerahkeniate explains, adding that there are two strains of wild cranberry indigenous to their area.

"You should be able to produce a substantial crop after three or four years, but there's a lot of work that has to be done first to make that happen," says Kanerahkeniate. "We have five full-time people and at the height of the harvest we have about 35 people employed here. Harvest can run for up to a month. Cranberries grow in cycles with bumper crops certain years so we run a pattern which gives us a constant harvest."

For more information, visit the company Web site at **www.iroquoiscranberries.com** ✷

BlackBear Company Store

Shipping B.C. Wild Salmon As Far As Singapore

by Ruth McVeigh

There's nothing quite like salmon, "caught wild — hand-filleted — traditionally smoked."

One person who knows this very well is **Tina Clark**, whose father runs Lox Royale, a Vancouver smokehouse. In December 1997, Tina kicked around ideas with other family members on how to build a family business. They decided to combine their smokehouse expertise with the experience of various family members in marketing, Web design and art. The result is the BlackBear Company Store, based on Bowen Island, where Clark now serves as managing partner.

Tina Clark is managing partner of the BlackBear Company Store.

Although the company is only three years old, it built on the established reputation of Lox Royale smokehouse which has produced smoked salmon for years, selling top-quality product to almost 40 percent of the premier hotels in Vancouver. In the short time the family business has been going, it has already established an international reputation. They now ship to Russia, Paris, Singapore, India, Australia, New Zealand, South America and, of course, their biggest customer, the United States. The Trading Post at the Calgary Airport carries BlackBear merchandise as do a number of retail shops in Banff and Vancouver. There is even a specialty shop in Japan which features the products.

In the second year of operation, the company increased its profits 200 percent; profits went up another 300 percent in year three. BlackBear's Web site has been designed to attract both people who love smoked salmon, and anyone who wants to present a uniquely Canadian gift.

The giving of smoked salmon is a longstanding tradition among Pacific Coast First Nations. The Elders of the Haida and Thaltan First Nations people of the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) first smoked food in order to preserve it as a staple. But they also gave it as gifts which were always held in high esteem. A special blend of alder and other woods gives the fish a distinct flavour. When steeped in a brine before smoking, the result is the famous "candy" or "candied salmon."

For BlackBear Company Store, the product's presentation is almost as important as the quality of the food. The family decided to package the fish in hand-crafted cedar boxes, decorated by relatives who are well-known artists. One cousin, **Clarence Mills**, taught the family the art of silk-screening. The marriage of excellent smoked salmon and Haida art has proved a smash hit with corporations, whose logo can be imprinted on the boxes as well. These make ideal promotional and public relations gifts for businesses to give to associates and prospective customers.

The business has expanded to include other gift items, including traditional carved masks and wall plaques, art cards and jewellery in gold and silver. You can order a recipe book on the Web site, and there is even a section with wedding gift suggestions (copper tea or coffee pots, wooden bowls and salad servers, all with Aboriginal designs).

Tina's brother, **Nick Clark**, who has a marketing background, designed the storefront Web site. He runs his own Internet commerce business in Calgary, and has a Web design company called design-loft.net.

The future looks very bright indeed for the Clark family, as new markets keep opening for BlackBear products.

Visit the storefront Web site at **www.blackbear.net**

Parenteau's Gourmet Foods

Saskatoon Berries Transformed Into Chocolate Treat

by Edwinna von Baeyer

Most people wouldn't look at a few hectares of Saskatoon berries and think chocolate. But the Parenteaus did. **Colleen** and **Rodney Parenteau** have created and sustained a successful business by transforming the Saskatoon berry into a gourmet treat. In 1987 they purchased a farm in Langham, Saskatchewan, just north of Saskatoon, that included 1.2 hectares (three acres) of Saskatoon berries. Three years later, they attended a cousin's wedding where gourmet chocolates were served. It was then they had their inspiration for Saskatoon berry-filled handmade chocolates.

This was quite a brave experiment because neither had any experience with chocolate. Rodney Parenteau, a Métis from the Duck Lake area, said they "got some books and started working on the idea." The couple put a lot of effort into their culinary adventure. As a result, they have won many awards for their products, and have the satisfaction of running a very successful family business, now 10 years old.

Experimentation continues to characterize Parenteau's Gourmet Foods. Over the years, the Parenteaus have developed other delicious treats. They now offer various wild berry jams (blueberry, Saskatoon berry, raspberry and berry blends) and flavoured honeys. Their caffeine-free herbal teas include the Saskatoon berry, and their latest product is an alcohol-free champagne. Parenteau says that his Saskatoon berry champagne was such a huge success last year, that this year he added raspberry and peach champagne. The business is also slowly expanding into the large market for sugar-free products, such as jam.

The Parenteaus continue to grow most of the berries for all their products, although they do buy wild blueberries from First Nations and Métis communities. Efficient farming methods enable the couple to harvest berries on much less land than other berry cultivators.

The business keeps them busy year-round. In summer, the Parenteaus oversee the cultivation of various berry crops, and produce a range of products for the tourist market. They also have a contract to supply The Bay and Zellers stores in Western Canada, and some stores elsewhere in the country. In fall, they begin three months of intensive work to meet the Christmas demand. They spend winter and early spring on the road, travelling to trade shows.

Parenteau says that although their business success is like a dream come true, it was only realized through hard work. Nevertheless, he does not advise others to follow his particular entrepreneurial route. "It was costly and there is a lot of room for mistakes," he explains. "It is better to have someone teach you the basics, which will save years of teaching yourself and hardships." Because he never had a mentor himself, Parenteau is pleased that he can give his children (who are 10 and 14 years of age) the benefit of his experience. "They are already talking about running a business when they grow up," he says.

Rodney Parenteau is always looking for new products. His latest venture is marketing kinnikinnik — an additive (like willow bark) that many Métis have used in tobacco for healing and other cultural purposes.

The Parenteaus' willingness to explore new areas remains the prime reason for their business success.

For more information about Parenteau's Gourmet Foods, telephone (306) 283-4960.

Grey Owl Marketing Ltd.

Selling Wild Rice to the World

by Joanna Warwick

Wild rice is in demand by gourmet cooks and diners around the world. Over the past decade, the commodity has become a mainstay of the northern Saskatchewan economy. All this is good news for Grey Owl Marketing Ltd., a "for-profit" marketing organization created in 1984 by the non-profit Saskatchewan Indian Agriculture Program, Inc.

Because the primary market for wild rice is the United States, the Aboriginal-owned company decided in 1989 to form a U.S. division with a distribution centre in Minnesota. This division — called Grey Owl Foods — generates gross sales of $3 million a year from the sale of Canadian wild rice and other wild rice products. Sixty-five percent of the growers are members of the Lac La Ronge and Peter Ballantyne Bands, and of the First Nations that make up the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, including Canoe Lake, Waterhen Lake, Birch Narrows and English River.

John Hemstad, general manager of Grey Owl Marketing Ltd. in Prince Albert, explains that wild rice was traditionally the main grain portion of the diet of Aboriginal people in Manitoba, Ontario and Minnesota. "From the start, it was considered a precious commodity because of its high nutritional content," he says. "Early explorers thought it was a rice, though genetically it is a lake grass."

Hemstad is proud of the fact that the wild rice of northern Saskatchewan is world-renowned. "The ancient, certified organic product that we grow today is known for its exquisite flavour and large kernels," he says. "This variety has been harvested for thousands of years, and is unaltered in any way."

Over the years, Grey Owl Marketing Ltd. has expanded its product range to include quick-cooking wild rice, wild rice blends, gourmet pilafs, cracked wild rice for soup and stuffing, and gift packages.

Although not indigenous to Saskatchewan, wild rice had been planted in the 1930s on a small scale to feed muskrats for the local fur trade. By the late 1970s, the price of wild rice on world markets had soared. "Local band members were looking for agricultural development to supplement the income generated from the harvesting of wild delicacies such as mushrooms and berries, and from fur trapping and commercial fishing," Hemstad explains. "They wanted to produce a viable food product. As wild rice required only a single planting and could be harvested annually afterwards, it was a perfect fit for a population with little agricultural experience."

In the past, wild rice was harvested using sticks, a method Hemstad describes as "harder and slower than farming with oxen." Plants were laid across the side of the canoe, and beaten to release the grains. Today, air boats skim over the surface of the lakes, pushing collection trays that dislodge and catch the kernels. Each patch is harvested several times.

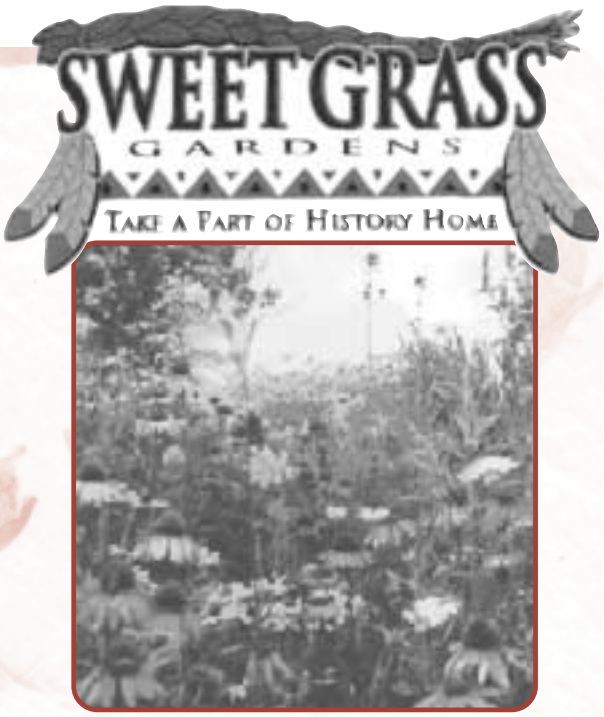
Grey Owl Marketing Ltd. is continuing to expand its markets around the world. And although Canadians were slow to appreciate this indigenous product, wild rice has become steadily more popular at home over the past few years.

Visit the company Web site at **www.greyowlfoods.com** ✷

Sweet Grass Gardens

Helping Indigenous Plants Flourish

by Wendy MacIntyre



Iroquois potato, nodding wild onion, wild licorice and prickly pear cactus are just a few of the indigenous North American plants available from Sweet Grass Gardens. The plant nursery, located on the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, is owned by husband-and-wife team **Ken** and **Linda Parker**.

The Parkers believe in growing plants that fit naturally in their environment. One of the many highlights for visitors who come to tour the gardens is the "underwater meadow." In a pond the couple created by digging out clay, there is a flourishing "meadow" of white water lily, wild rice, pickerel weed and spatterdock. Altogether, the tours cover planting settings that the Parkers have created in wetland, prairie, bog and clay conditions.

"We let the site dictate the plant materials," says Ken Parker of the ecological gardening principles on which his business is founded. This means growing swamp plants in swampy areas and woodland plants on woodland sites. It also means cultivating plants in a "drug-free" environment — no chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

The Parkers' primary vision is to restore, preserve and maintain the plant species that were indigenous to North America before the arrival of Europeans. These include medicinal plants like boneset, food plants like wild strawberry, dying plants like blue wild indigo and plants used for ceremonial and traditional spiritual practices.

Ken Parker began growing indigenous plants in 1992. Because he was unable to obtain certain indigenous plants locally, he and his wife decided to go into business for themselves. Since the company was founded nine years ago, Sweet Grass Gardens has attracted plenty of media attention. The nursery — and the Parkers — have been the subject of articles in *The Toronto Star*, *The Buffalo News* and *Canadian Gardening Magazine*, as well as being featured on various radio and television programs.

A former music teacher and U.S. Marine, Ken Parker is a Seneca raised in Buffalo, New York. In preparation for his gardening business, he spent two years taking horticulture courses at Mohawk College. These days, he lectures at the college himself, as well as giving educational workshops and presentations on Aboriginal plants.

Linda Parker, who grew up on a farm on the Six Nations Reserve, pursued her education in computer systems technology. Her experience teaching computer programs is a big asset when it comes to developing Sweet Grass Gardens' multimedia educational workshops. She also handles all the company's information technology needs, administration and promotion, including the information-packed Web site.

In the busy spring and summer months, the Parkers hire staff from within the Six Nations community.

Sweet Grass Gardens offers potential customers a wide range of services, including advice and project management related to Aboriginal planting, and landscape installation and landscaping design. The retail side of the business encompasses the sale of seeds and plants for small- and large-scale projects, and the popular garden tours.

"We pride ourselves on being North America's first Native-owned and operated Native plant nursery," says Parker. Landscaping with indigenous flora is not only low-maintenance and economical, he adds. It also creates a beautiful setting that can tolerate drought, and attract songbirds.

Visit the Sweet Grass Gardens Web site at **www.sweetgrassgardens.com** ✸

Northern Delights Inuit Teas

Inuit Teas Preserve Tradition

by Annabelle Dionne

Northern Delights Inuit teas are an initiative of the Avataq Cultural Institute. Created in 1980, the Institute was inspired by the Inuit Elders of Nunavik, who wanted to preserve their language, culture and heritage. The Institute is now seen as an international resource on Inuit culture.

In 1998, the Institute's president, **Robert Watt**, had the idea of creating a commercial enterprise based on products that Inuit used. The goal was to find new sources of financing for the Institute, as well as to promote Inuit culture internationally. Given the Inuit fondness for drinking tea, and the Institute's research on medicinal plants, the Institute decided to undertake a marketing project for teas based on five plants originating in the tundra.

This project is a national first in economic development. "This is the first time the Inuit have used their native flora to create a commercial product," notes **Bruno Pilozzi**, who manages the project. "Since only a few elderly people still know and use plants in the traditional way, it was important to preserve their knowledge before it disappeared along with them."

"Tea bags are easier to handle than plants in their natural state," Pilozzi explains. Thanks to the *Northern Delights* initiative, Inuit will at last be able to fully savour their natural heritage.

A pilot project for the teas has been under way in Inuit communities for the past two years. "We wanted to be sure that the Nunavimmiut, the inhabitants of Nunavik, actually liked the flavour of the teas and that they were proud to see this product on the market. It will be an effective way to promote our culture," Watt says. So far, the teas have been very well received. Many Inuit said drinking the teas took them back to their childhood.

The plants used to make the teas are hand-collected by Inuit in the vast wild territory of Nunavik between July and September. "The plants are harvested without ever being uprooted. This actually promotes their growth, and it makes them an unlimited renewable resource," Watt explains. After the plants have been harvested and dried, they are shipped to Montreal where they are processed and packaged in individual teabags.

"This project could have a significant economic impact on the Avataq Cultural Institute, and by the same token, on the region," says **Suzanne Beaubien**, the Institute's Financial Director. For now, the plants are being collected in the Kuujjuaq region. By next summer, four other Inuit communities are expected to participate in the project. "The profits from the business will be reinvested in other projects, in order to pursue the goals of the Avataq Cultural Institute and offer cultural services to the whole population of Nunavik," Beaubien emphasizes.

The *Northern Delights* teas will be officially launched in the marketplace at SIAL, the International Exhibition of Food, Beverages, Wines and Spirits in Montréal in March 2001.

For more information, visit the Web site of the Avataq Cultural Institute at **www.avataq.qc.ca** ✷

Traditional Teas of the Inuit

QISIQTUTAUYAK, juniper tea

Traditionally, boiled juniper was a medicinal tea used to treat colds, lung disorders, blood loss, bladder problems and general malaise. This golden brew tastes of camphor, with a top note of lemon-mint.

MAMAITTUQUTIK, Labrador tea

Without a doubt, the most widely used tea in Inuit history. It was originally prepared to treat breathing problems, bleeding and general malaise.

PAURNGAQUTIK, black crowberry tea

Traditionally, black crowberry tea was helpful in reducing gastric pain. This deep violet tea gives off a fruity perfume; it has the slightly acid, astringent taste of spiced berries.

ARPEHUTIK, cloudberry tea

The leaves of the cloudberry produce a delicious tea that was once used to treat kidney disorders, stomach aches and general malaise. Steaming produces an amber-coloured tea whose woodsy taste hints at maple. A superb, one-of-a-kind tea with ideal flavour and aroma.

UKLURTATUQ, Arctic blend

The stem, leaves and flowers of the Uklurtatuq are all used in the recipe for Arctic blend. This tea was used to counter the effects of stomach ailments and illness in general. This lovely golden yellow brew has an intense flavour of spices and evergreens.

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Portrait

From The Earth

Chief Charles Sark
Mi'kmaq
President, Mamemigew, Inc.

by Fred Favel

If somebody gets a degree, make something of it. And if they want to come back and work in the community, give them some responsibility. Give them something they can apply their education to.

For most people, Prince Edward Island inspires thoughts of a summer place, Anne of Green Gables, Cavendish, huge potato fields, red cliffs overlooking the ocean and succulent lobster sought by hungry tourists as they drive through this little piece of heaven.

Prince Edward Island is also many other things. If you take Highway 2 from Charlottetown almost due north, after a couple of hours and a couple of turns, you will find yourself in a little hamlet inhabited by the First Nations people of Lennox Island on Malpeque Bay. The Lennox Island people are very much involved in building and repairing homes, a new day-care centre, plans for Lennox Island eco-tourism, a new cultural centre and a million-dollar extension for the community's school. In the centre of the community sits the Lennox Island First Nation office complex, which administers the day-to-day business and services of the community. At the controls, from his modest office on the second floor, is Chief Charles Sark. Charles "call me Charlie" Sark runs a pretty tight ship and the community is better off for it. But Sark is more than just Chief of his First Nation. He is also President of Mamemigew, Inc., a company which harvests peat moss and serves an international market. Sark is very much responsible for Mamemigew's existence and despite its ups and downs, he is determined that it will be successful. In fact, it is well on its way.

Photo credit: Fred Favel

Sark spent his first 11 years in Lennox Island, the youngest of eight children. His father, John Sark, taught for 30 years at the local community school, after earning his BA. His mother, Elsie, a war bride and nurse, had met his father and married him in England while he convalesced from injuries sustained in the war. Sark was close to his father, who taught him the Mi'kmaq language. "I didn't get any preferences because I was his son," he says.

Following two years at the Shubenacadie Residential School in Nova Scotia, an experience he abruptly dismisses, he attended school in Halifax, Moncton and Summerside, always boarding with family or friends. Sark finished high school at St. Dunstan's in Charlottetown, where his father had graduated in 1909. He chose to continue his education in a non-university environment, and his first career was as an electrician. He eventually became an electrical engineer for the CNR ferry system.

Sark then followed his father's vocation, teaching students in math, science and the electrical trade for 10 years at the Prince County Vocational High School. Then he returned home to become director of education for his community. He first became interested in the peat moss business through involvement with Mamemigew's board of directors. "It was a new thing and I thought it would be good for the community," he explains.

The peat moss business had started in P.E.I. in the early 1970s, when deposits of this richly organic material were discovered in bogs thousands of years old. Lennox Island had mounds characteristic of peat moss: treeless, covered in sagebrush, and of a very wet and loose composition. The First Nation conducted tests, and the results confirmed that there was a huge deposit of peat moss in their territory. In 1980, Mamemigew (literally translated as "from the earth") was incorporated, and five First Nation members were appointed to the board.

In the beginning, Mamemigew's peat moss was shipped to a packaging plant in Foxley River. Sark saw the value of retaining all aspects of the peat moss business in the community, and by 1983, with financial assistance from the federal government, Mamemigew had its own plant.

Soon thereafter, a series of disasters struck the fledgling operation: "We had an enormous high tide one night, and about half the bog was flooded. So once you have salt in your peat moss, that is no good for horticulture." The next fall, high tides washed out the entire 20-hectare (50-acre) bog. In keeping with the old saying, "opportunity often comes disguised as misfortune," the First Nation was forced to seek out a new supply, and found a larger bog in nearby Poplar Grove. Sixty hectares (150 acres) of bog was purchased, through financing arranged by the chief, board and band council. "We had a number of successful years because we had a bigger bog and we seemed to be getting better weather every year," Sark says. They soon achieved their annual target in sales, and expanded into the Japanese market: "Because of a lack of top soil in Japan, peat moss is in high demand, so it didn't take long for Japanese interests to find Mamemigew as a supplier."

Sark has been directing Mamemigew as its president for the last 12 years: "The whole aim of Mamemigew was to make sure it would provide employment for the people, and it served its purpose over the years, although it has had its ups and downs." Mamemigew sold all of its 120,000 bales in 1999. Last year, despite bad weather and only 29 days available for harvesting, the company still managed to produce and sell 90,000 bales.

Mamemigew employs 30 to 37 persons on a seasonal basis, mostly members of the Lennox Island First Nation, and has revenues of almost half a million dollars. Sark advises new entrepreneurs to seek the expertise of the best possible technician: "And don't just take somebody on his word for advice...there's too many of those fly-by-night people that come in!" The Sark family are entrepreneurs themselves. Sark and his wife own a successful arts and crafts shop and his son owns MigMaw Kayaking, geared for the tourism industry.

Photo credit: Courtesy of Charles Sark

Sark became Chief of his band in 1998. But even with a successful career now under his belt, retirement is not on his agenda. "I must confess that I feel really good, and somewhat proud of the work that has been accomplished in this short period of time," he says. "I do not resent the sacrifices or going that extra mile for my community and the people who placed their trust in me."

Fred Favel is an Aboriginal writer and communications consultant.

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