

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to elucidate the pre-history and history of the Mississagi Indians through an archaeological-ethnohistorical review of the relevant literature. In order to clarify the culture history of the Mississagi, the lifestyle of the people<sup>s</sup> examined in relationship to the social and economic changes fostered by the fur trade.

In an archaeological context, the Mississagi material culture has been incorporated with the material culture of the Eastern Algonkians (Wright 1965; Devoreux 1962, 1963; Brizinski 1975; Bertulli and Kilpatrick 1977). According to Wright (1968:107), the archaeological record of the Upper Great Lakes reflects

patrilocal hunting and fishing bands (which) have occupied local regions associated with major drainage systems along the north shores of the Upper Great Lakes from at least the tenth century to the time of European contact. Throughout this period women exposed to different ceramic traditions in adjacent regions have been imported to accommodate a patrilocal residence pattern. The men, dependent upon their intimate knowledge of the limited faunal resources of a local area for survival, were closely bound to specified localities.

This view was originally conceived by McPherron (1965) and has been modified by Fitting (1970:194) who states:

I see a pattern of fluid macrogroup membership. Exchange of wives may have taken place between macrogroups but this might just be a characteristic of extended family groups. The extended family groups were free to join any summer macrogroup. They could have spent one summer as a Noquet and the next as a Saulteur or a Marameg. They could even stop being Chippewa altogether without creating strain on the fabric of Chippewa society.

Among ethnohistorians the social organization of the early historic Ojibwa of whom the Mississagi are a subgroup is the focus of a heated debate. Hickerson (1970:49) believes

... that aboriginal (Ojibwa) society was a clan society, with implications for intensive communal patterns, these in turn becoming disturbed by contacts, especially trade contacts with more advanced socioeconomic systems.

Hickerson is supported in his views by his student, Bishop (1971:2) who states:

groups of no less than one hundred persons living in at least semi-sedentary villages near Lakes Huron and Superior existed as corporate,

self-sufficient entities, each with its own territory and totemic emblem, but linked to other such units through ties of marriage, trade and inter-group ceremonials.

On the other hand, Smith (1974:11-14) argues that the Ojibwa were

organized in social groups based upon the ego-centred personal or bilateral kindred, structured through cross cousin marriage and seasonally forming larger hunting groups and regional bands exploiting the big game and other resources of a vaguely defined territory. The bands, rather structurally fluid or amorphous, were named after animals, geographical features, or for etymologically unknown reasons.

Indeed, as Smith (Ibid.:46) points out, a fluid social organization would be expected considering the size and nature of the territory exploited, the natural fluctuations in game, demographic age and sex skewing, and environmental accidents such as forest fires. Such characteristics would be adaptive to the long and harsh winters north of the Great Lakes.

Closely related to each argument concerning a type of social organization is the subsistence pattern. Implicit in Hickerson's and Bishop's hypothesis of corporate band

identity is the maintenance of large groups (greater than 100) through most of the year. These semi-sedentary villages were presumed to have been sustained by an economy focused upon fishing.

Rogers and Smith (1973) and Wright (1972) assert that the Algonkian subsistence strategy was based upon the hunting of big game animals (moose and beaver). Although fishing was seasonally important, it would not dominate the procurement system.

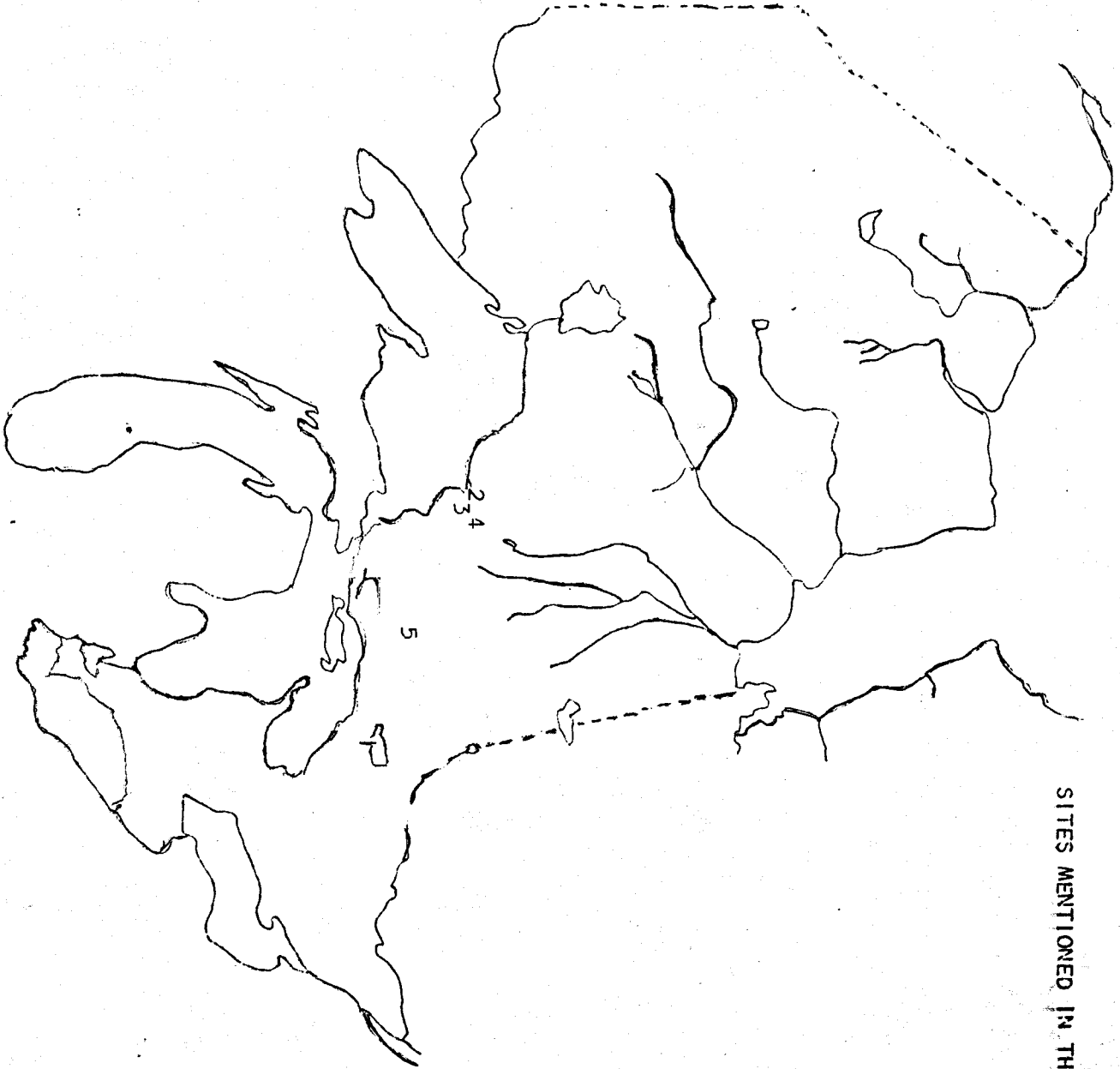
Before the nature of the settlement and subsistence patterns and the general lifestyle of the Mississagi Indians can be pursued it is necessary to point out that major changes have occurred in the cultural system as a result of direct or indirect involvement in the European fur trade. To understand the impact of these changes on the cultural system a study has been divided into three periods: The Prehistoric, A.D. 1200-1550; The Protohistoric, A.D. 1550-1615; The Contact, A.D. 1620-1700.

THE PREHISTORIC PERIOD, A.D. 1200-1550; CHANNEL FORMATION AND THE INITIAL OCCUPATION OF THE MISSISSAGI DELTA

#### ORIGINS

Perhaps the earliest historic account of the Mississagi Indians is in their creation myth recorded by the Reverend Peter Jones (1861:33). To paraphrase it briefly: two

SITES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT



MAP-1

STUDY AREA

- 1 FRANK BAY SITE
- 2 MICHIPICOTEN SITE
- 3 NY/IAN SITE
- 4 MORRISON SITE
- 5 SEMIWITE LAKE SITE

mythical creatures, one a horned lynx and the other a toad were quarrelling. The horned lynx stabbed the toad in the side, upon which water from the side of the toad started to flood the earth. Nanahbozhoo saved himself and several other animals by building a raft. In order to form a new world he would need soil from the old. Several animals failed in their attempts to secure the necessary soil for Nanahbozhoo from the bottom of the lake except the muskrat. Upon receiving the soil, Nanabozhoo was able to make the earth grow and subsequently created various Indian tribes to populate it. Jones (Ibid.) is sceptical in accepting the authenticity of the myth because of the close parallels of the great flood recorded in the bible. Because of the universality of the flood myth among Native groups throughout North and South America it is considered valid, but, unfortunately, no information can be elicited from the myth that may suggest an actual migration of Mississagi to this area. In this respect, Schoolcraft's (1851, v. V:144) statement may be of significance.

To such of this people as had migrated down the French River to Lake Huron, and along the north shores to the Mississaging or Big Mouthed River, they gave the term Mississagies-- a people who, at a later day, migrated eastwardly to the head of Lake Ontario, and the valley of the river

Niagara below the Ridge, where they were in bonds of close alliance with the Iroquois and aided them in exterminating the Wyandots from the territory in Canada, which is still occupied in part by the Mississagies...These three local tribes, that is to say, the Niperclineans, or Algonquins proper, the Mississagies, and the Saulteur or Ojibwas, were originally one and the same people. They spoke, and still speak, the same language.

In 1904, Paudash (1904:7), a Mississagi chief, disputed Schoolcraft's claim of an eastward migration by reiterating the following.

The Mississagas were so named because they settled on a river on the north shore of Lake Huron, about seventy miles from Sault Ste. Marie, the word Mississagi meaning river; but, they were Shawness, part of the great Ojibwa tribe, of which the word Chippeway is a corruption. In what is now the Ohio Valley, the Shawness dwelt in peace and power till such time as their sachems became disturbed and divided by party strife. One party thereupon went north through the country of the Michigans, and crossed into Canada, at Boweeting, now known as Sault Ste. Marie, settling down on the north shore of Lake Huron.

The picture presented by Paudash has close parallels to some Iroquoian groups while its applicability to the Mississagi is dubious.

Several archaeological investigations of the Mississagi Delta (Wright 1961, 1964, 1968; Devereux 1962, 1963; Brizinski 1975; Bertulli and Kilpatrick 1977; Bertulli and Buchanan in preparation) have delineated most if not all of the prehistoric occupations of the river mouth. It can now be conclusively stated that the earliest inhabitants camped on the banks of the Mississagi River Delta no earlier than A.D. 1200. The absence of earlier sites is a result of changing water levels of Lake Huron and isostatic rebound of the land.

The topography of the delta is generally flat but can vary from two to fifteen feet above present sea level of Lake Huron. In areas where the height of land is near lake level, the flora is characterized by marsh conditions. At higher elevations, a mature pine forest exists (Rowe 1959). The height of land above the lake level is a result of two major factors: isostatic rebound of the land mass and lower lake levels due to the down-cutting of the main discharge sills (Lewis 1970:665). At A.D. 1200 Lewis (Ibid.) estimates that the water levels of Lake Huron would be five to seven feet higher than present. In other words, prior to A.D. 1200 the Mississagi Delta would either have been flooded or characterized by marsh conditions.

After A.D. 1200, the land area suitable for habitation was dependent upon two factors: alluvial deposition to form the islands of the delta; and the formation of river channels to shape the islands.

The Mississagi River rushes south from the height of land in Northern Ontario, tumbling over waterfalls and cutting deep groges into the hard rock of the Pre-Cambrian Shield along its route to the Great Lakes. As it slows down, meanders slightly, and just before it spills into the North Channel of Lake Huron about two miles west of Blind River, it forms a crow's foot delta approximately seven miles in area.

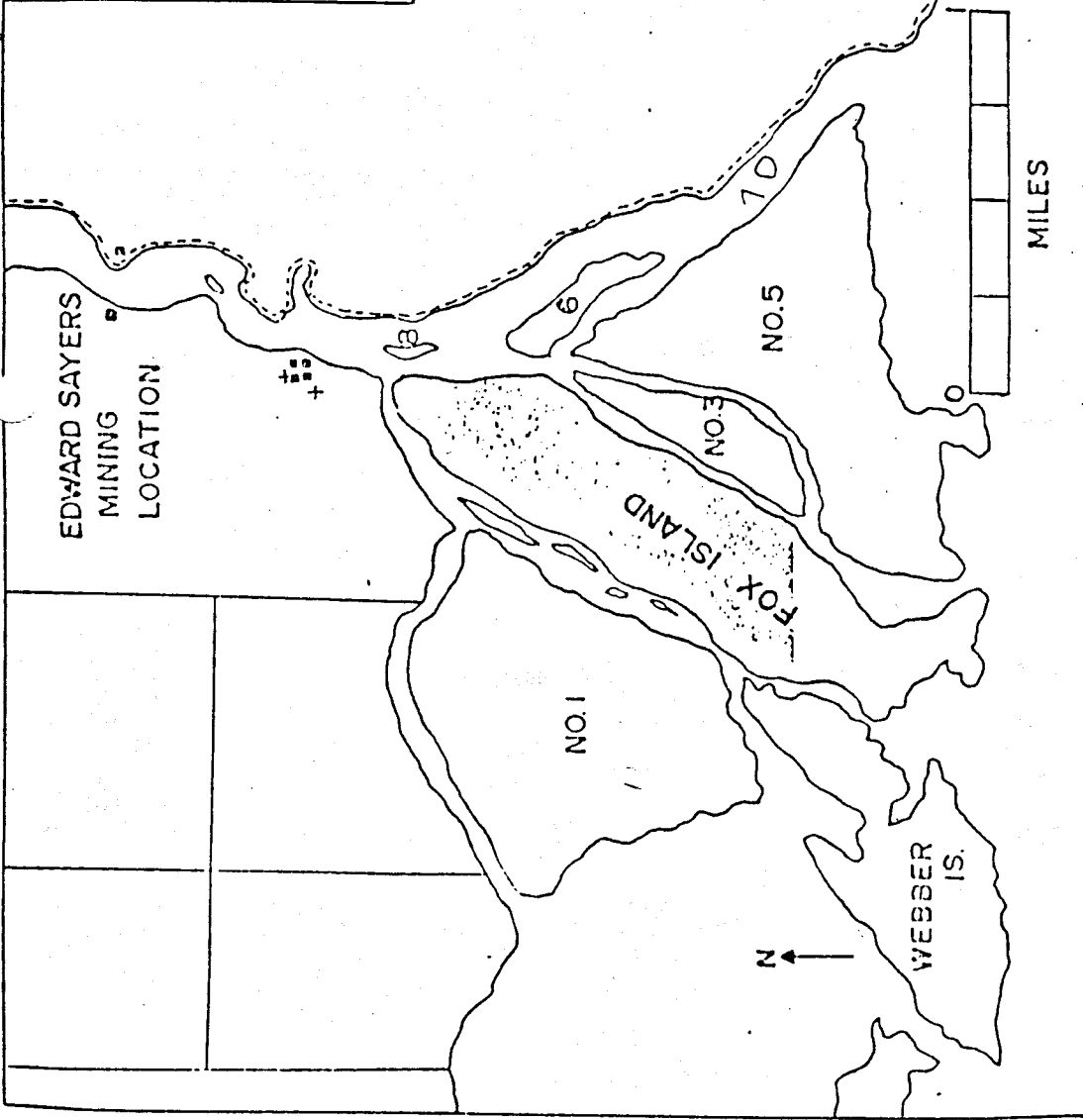
(Samulski 1972:1)

Presently, the delta is characterized by three main discharge channels that form several islands (see Map 1). Channel formation is an ongoing process (as indicated by Maps 2 and 3) the cause of which can be related to several factors: easy erosion of the banks of the islands; seasonal increases in river velocity and volume; damming of functional river channels; increased silting of the delta over time; and changing water levels of Lake Huron.

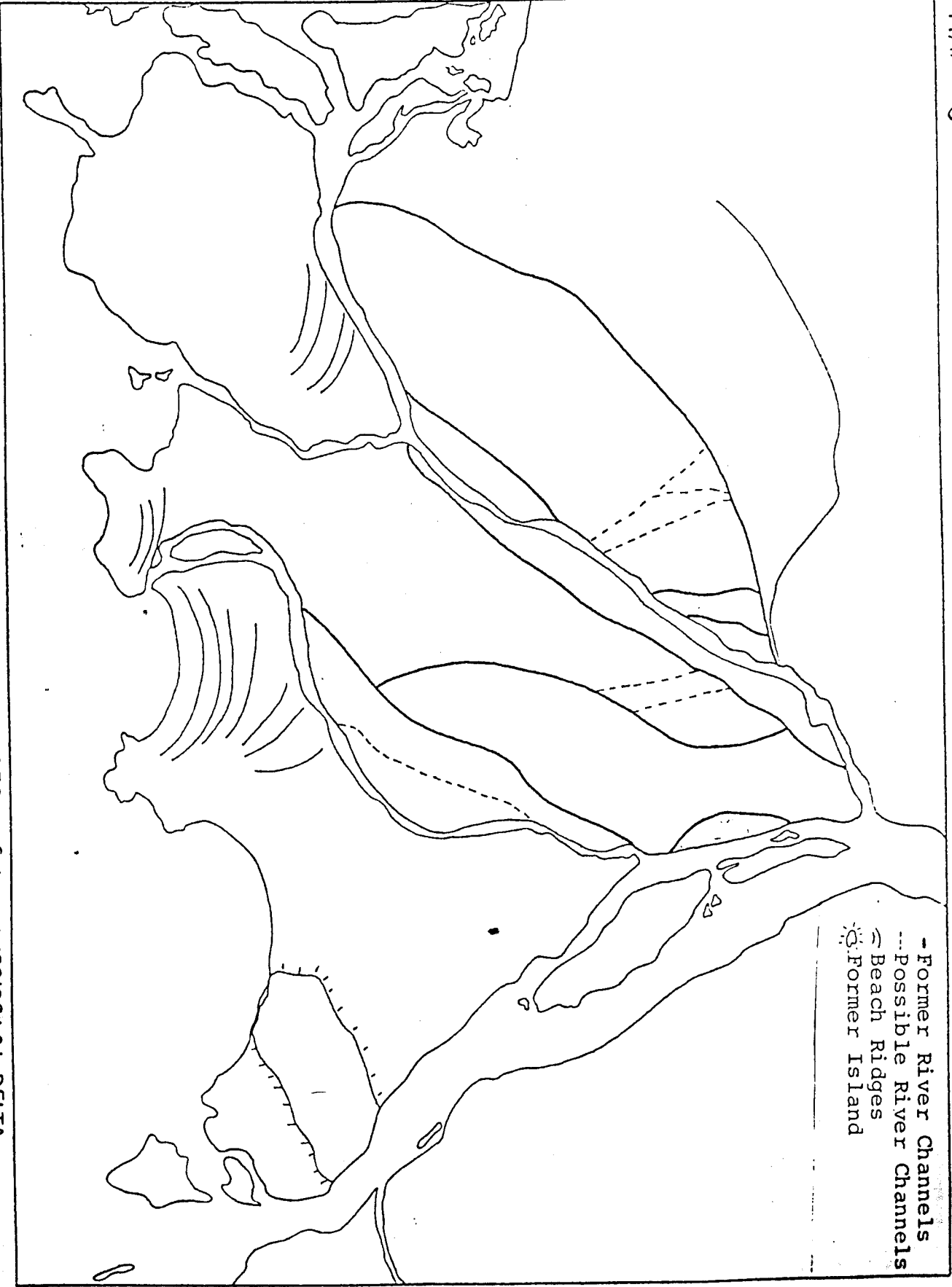
It was on an extinct island, now called the Renard Site, that the first occupants of the delta camped. The site was initially tested in 1975 (Brizinski 1975) and partially excavated by a Laurentian University field school of that year (Bertulli and Kilpatrick 1977) and re-excavated in 1977 (Bertulli and Buchanan, in preparation).

THE MISSISSAGI DELTA IN 1882  
SOURCE: CORDEN DISTRICT  
OF ALGOMA, 1882

- HUDSON BAY PROPERTY
- - - INDIAN RESERVE BOUNDARY
- BUILDINGS
- ⊠ CHURCH
- + CEMETERY



- Former River Channels
- - - Possible River Channels
- ~ Beach Ridges
- ⊙ Former Island



FORMER RIVER CHANNELS and BEACH RIDGES of the MISSISSAGI DELTA

Based on the seriation of artifacts and the expansiveness of the site (twenty-four acres), the site was determined to have been seasonally occupied by Algonkian speakers between A.D. 1200-1500 (Brizinski 1975:85; Bertulli and Kilpatrick 1977:68). In terms of their material culture they are indistinguishable from those people located at Sault Ste. Marie or at Lake Nipissing, in which case Schoolcraft may be correct when he states (v. VI:306):

They were divided into numerous local bands bearing, generally some local name, but differing in scarcely any appreciable degree (except in those minute tribal peculiarities known only to themselves) in language, looks, manners, or customs...

In this respect, the Ojibwa culture history for this area extends for several thousand years (Wright 1972), but as yet the ultimate origins of these people remains a mystery.

#### POPULATION

In interpreting the population of the Mississagi, there are several problems encountered. As noted previously, several bands assumed the name Mississagi after 1652, and in the later 1700's and early 1800's, it became synonymous with the word Ojibwa (Smith 1975). Further, there is a

lack of documentation in the early accounts of census figures, and if there is mention of number of people it is usually in the form of number of warriors or canoes... Finally, the size of the band is never static. It fluctuates within the year from a macroband to a microband and between years the occupation of the delta may be discontinuous. In spite of these problems, an attempt will be made to estimate the population of the Mississagi Indians.

Population figures compiled by Schoolcraft (1961, v. VI:272,275) list three censuses taken in 1776 by Madison, Bouquet, and Johnson who indicate the gross population to be 1250, 2000, 2000 respectively. For the most part, these figures are meaningless because reference to the locality in which the censuses were recorded was not explicated. However, in 1764 Captain Hutchins (Schoolcraft, v. III:555) estimates there were 30 warriors living on the Mississagi River, or a total population of 150 people.

Raudot (Kinietz 1940:371), writing in the early 1700's, said "they (Mississague) have from forty-five to sixty warriors and are almost all thieves." Apart from the ethnic slur, a population of 200-300 people can be derived from this statement.

In 1670, Father Louis Andre (Thwaites, J.R., v. 55:134) "conferred baptism on seven little children but recently born." If each child represents one family, and using the five people per family ratio, a figure of thirty-five people is calculated. This would be the minimum number of

people since it would not be expected all women to be pregnant at the same time, and therefore, not all families would be represented in the calculation.

As mentioned previously, in 1659 six Mississagi canoes laden with furs arrived at Three Rivers. If four men per canoe is an acceptable figure, and using the five people per family ratio, then a total of 120 people would be accounted for.

More substantial data are given by Father Dablon (Thwaites, v. 54:133) who stated the following: "The people called Achiligouiane, the Amicoures, and the Mississague fish here, and hunt the Islands and in the regions round about Lake Huron; they number more than four hundred souls." This would intimate that there were approximately 140 people per band.

By employing archaeological evidence, population density is estimated on the basis of the clustering of artifacts within spatially discrete units and the variation in numbers of artifacts within these discrete units.

By comparing the range in site size within the Mississagi Delta, it would seem reasonable to estimate the macroband (MacNeish 1964) population to range from 50 to 150 people.

#### THE SEASONAL ROUND

The point to be made by providing documentary evidence in the changes of the seasonal round is that a

certain richness is established by sometimes very astute insights and oftentimes vivid descriptions from people who not only witnessed, but participated in the Algonkian cultural system.

A cautionary note is that the observations have taken place against a background of dramatic socio-economic change brought about by European contact 100 years prior to recorded history. Although changes are posted in the scheduling of activities, certain basic "bread and butter" pursuits would remain intact.

The general seasonal pattern is described by Perrot, a French trader, who states (Blair 1911, v. I:279):

In the month of June they disperse in all directions along Lake Huron, as also do the Mississakis and the Otter People. This lake has rocky shores, and is full of small islands abounding in blueberries. While there they gather sheets of bark from the trees for making their canoes and building their cabins... While the children are gathering a store of blueberries, the men are busy in spearing sturgeon. When the grain (that they have planted) is nearly ripe, they return home. At the approach of winter they resort to the shores of the lakes to kill beavers and moose, and do not return thence until spring, in order to plant their Indian corn.

The emphasis on planting corn is interesting since some scholars intimate that this process of domestication provides an example of how early Iroquoian groups might have initiated horticulture.

There are at least three reasons why the Mississagi grew corn. First, it provided a staple food resource to combat starvation in the dire months of winter and early spring. Second, an alternative explanation proposes that the process of incorporating people from a tribal nation--Huron, Petun, Neutral or Ottawa--took place among the Mississagi prior to 1650, and it would be these people, probably out of habit, who planted the corn. Third, the corn attracted game animals, such as ducks, geese, and deer, which then could be stalked with little physical exertion.

Raudot (Kinietz 1940:364) is in general agreement with Perrot and adds the following:

All the savages leave their village and the bank of the rivers and lakes where they are established and go inland in the winter, deep in the woods to hunt. They separate from each other in order to find more easily something to live on. They take with them their women and children, leaving in the village only those who absolutely cannot march.

The ability to split into small family groups does not appear to be restricted to the winter months as Lalemant (Thwaites, J.R., v. 23:205) points out:

They (Algonquins) lead the nomad life of people scattered here and there, whenever the chase of fishing may lead them, sometimes in the woods, sometimes over rocks, or in Islands in the middle of some great lake, sometimes on the banks of rivers--without a house, or without a rood, or a fixed residence; and without gathering anything from the earth beyond what it yields in a barren country to those who have never cultivated it... but as they continually divide themselves up.

The subsistence strategy of the Algonkian basically revolved around the hunting of game animals but during spring to fall fishing was popular as Dablon (Thwaites, J.R., v. 54:131) notes:

The convenience of having fish in such quantities that one has only to go and draw them out of the water, attracts the surrounding Nations to the spot during the summer. These people, being wanderers without fields and without corn, and living for the most part only by fishing find here the means to satisfy their wants.

Perrot (Blair, v. 1:276) adds some important observations concerning the obtaining and processing of fish:

The savages surmount all those terrible cascades, into which they cast a net which resembles a bag, a little more than half an all in width and an ell deep, attached to a wooden fork about fifteen feet long...and when they feel their nets heavy they draw them in. It is only they, the Mississakis, and the Nipiciriniens who can practice this fishing. This kind of fish is large, has firm flesh, and is very nourishing. The savages dry it over a fire, on wooden frames placed high above, and keep it for winter.

When there was an absence of game, the Algonkian would resort to plants as Father Louis Andre (Thwaites, J.R., v. 55:143) experienced the hard way. "I went into the woods, as did most of the savages, to hunt for roots, acorns, and a kind of moss called by the French as rock tripe."

In the spring, the Ojibwa would take advantage of the sweet and tasty maple sap as suggested by Father Dablon's (Thwaites, J.R., v. 55:101) chance discovery.

...have inadvertantly baptized him, not with natural water, but with a certain liquor that runs from the trees toward the end of winter, and which is known as 'Maple-water', which I took for natural water.

A similar, but admittedly blurred perception of the procurement system, is offered by the archaeological













