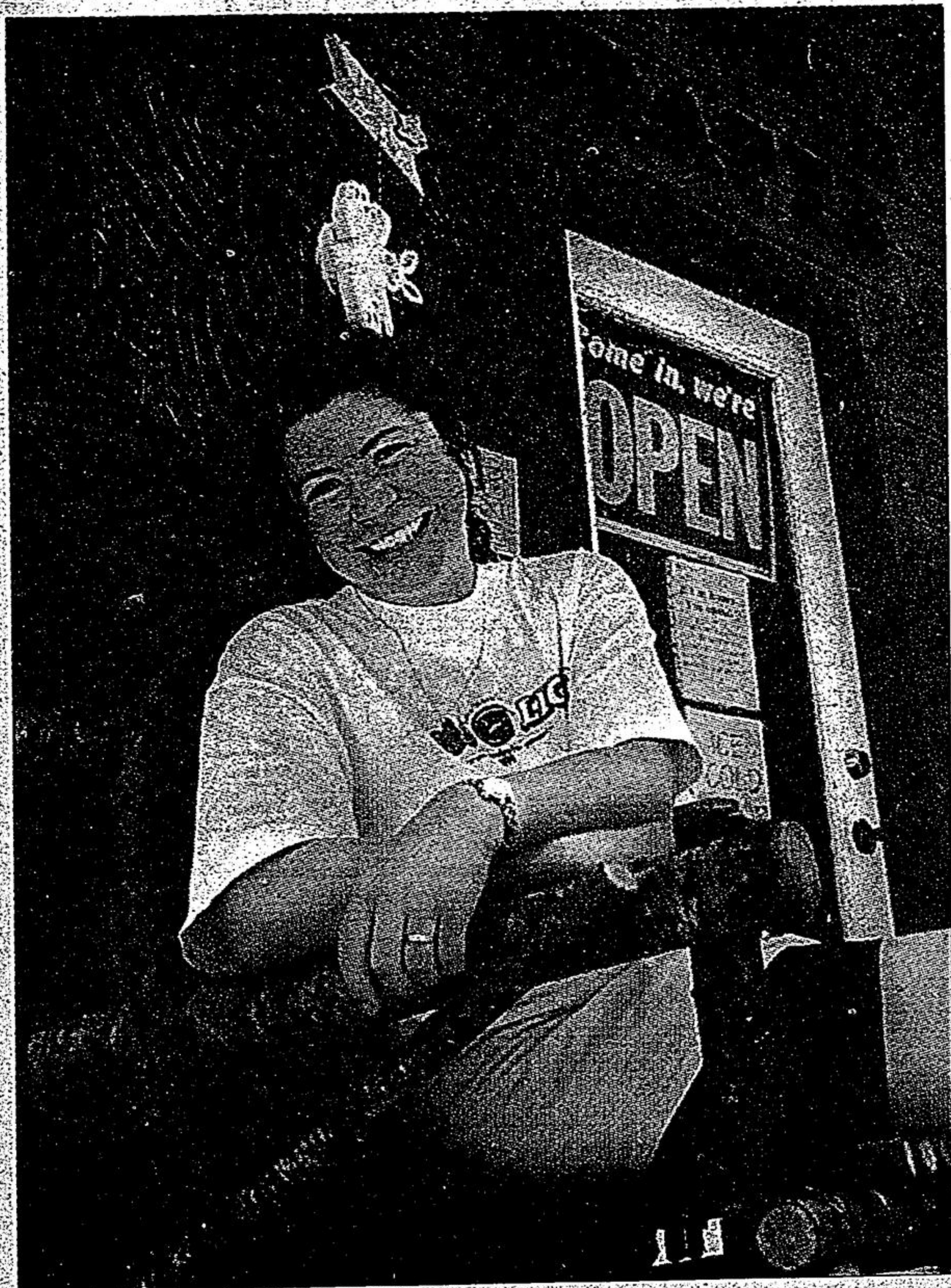


IN TOUCH WITH A PROUD HERITAGE

A glimpse of life on Georgina Island

The Chippewas of Georgina live in a community where Lake Simcoe is both their freedom and their isolation.



Chief William McCue is the last person to be born on Georgina Island. He stands in front of the Chippewas of Georgina Island war memorial (below). Bev Warren (above) relaxes in front of her island crafts store.

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

As with everything on Georgina Island, it was the lake that determined where Chief Bill McCue would be born.

The chief of the island's Chippewas is the last person to be born on the island, his parents deciding it was easier to stay put rather than brave travelling over Lake Simcoe in their boat to the mainland and making their way to a hospital while his mother was in labour.

Journeying between the island and the mainland has become easier in the 42 years since McCue was born.

In addition to their own boats, the island's 200 permanent residents and 400 cottagers can rely on a passenger ferry to shuttle them back and forth.

A barge carries nine vehicles. And this month, a new ferry, which can carry 36 passengers and 15 cars or two transport trucks, begins operation. Too large to get down the Trent Canal in one piece, the ferry is being assembled at Virginia Beach in northern Georgina.

It will cut travel time by more than half, down to about 10 minutes.

The new boat replaces the old ferry, although the barge will still be used for backup and to travel to Fox and Snake islands, other Chippewa-governed islands.

Despite the modern conveniences, life on Georgina Island still centres around the trek from the island to the mainland.

And yet, from the young people to the elders, there is always a desire to return to the island.

"It's home," is the unflinching reply.

McCue is looking forward to launching the new ferry.

"That's one of the things that's going to make life easier," he said while sitting in his office in the band's two-storey administrative building.

"The big thing on the island is the isolation. Modern technology has helped us. We've come a

long way to making things safer for our people to travel. But the lake, although it's beautiful and nice to have, it's a sense of isolation."

Once on the island, the atmosphere is serene on a warm summer day.

Kids play at a day camp run out of the schoolhouse.

Down the road, women working in the band office chat at the front counter. On one side of the office building sits the community centre, on the other, the church.

Lining the dusty road along the shores of Lake Simcoe sit cottages and the houses the island's permanent residents live in year-round. Many would fit comfortably in any of York Region's posh neighbourhoods.

"Other than the lake, we're pretty much a normal small community. It's fairly middle class. We don't have anybody living on the street or homeless. We have our own community centre here. A general store opened last (month). You pretty much know everybody that's around. If there is a stranger around, you know there's someone around who's not from here. I can usually go away and not lock my doors," McCue said.

"I remember growing up, there would only have been one or two cars owned by people on the island. Now, there's quite a few families that own two cars rather than just the whole community owning two vehicles."

But McCue also acknowledges challenges facing the island.

The top one is attracting employment to give young people, who leave to go to college or university, a reason to return.

He would also like to build a nursing home so ailing elders can spend their last years at home.

Meanwhile, the band is working towards achieving self-government.

"Our whole plan is moving ahead towards self-government and creating a better lifestyle for all our membership. We have a

good lifestyle now but it can be better," McCue said.

"Although we're moving ahead, we can't forget the past. I would like to see our language taught because it's one thing we're gradually losing. I want to see us advance. But not advance so far that we lose our roots."



In the 1690s, the Chippewa and Mississauga first nations people attacked the Iroquois at Lake Simcoe and Rice Lake and pushed them down the Trent water system into what is now New York state, according to a history research paper by Georgina Island elder Wanda Big Canoe.

The Chippewa were hunters and trappers and became part of



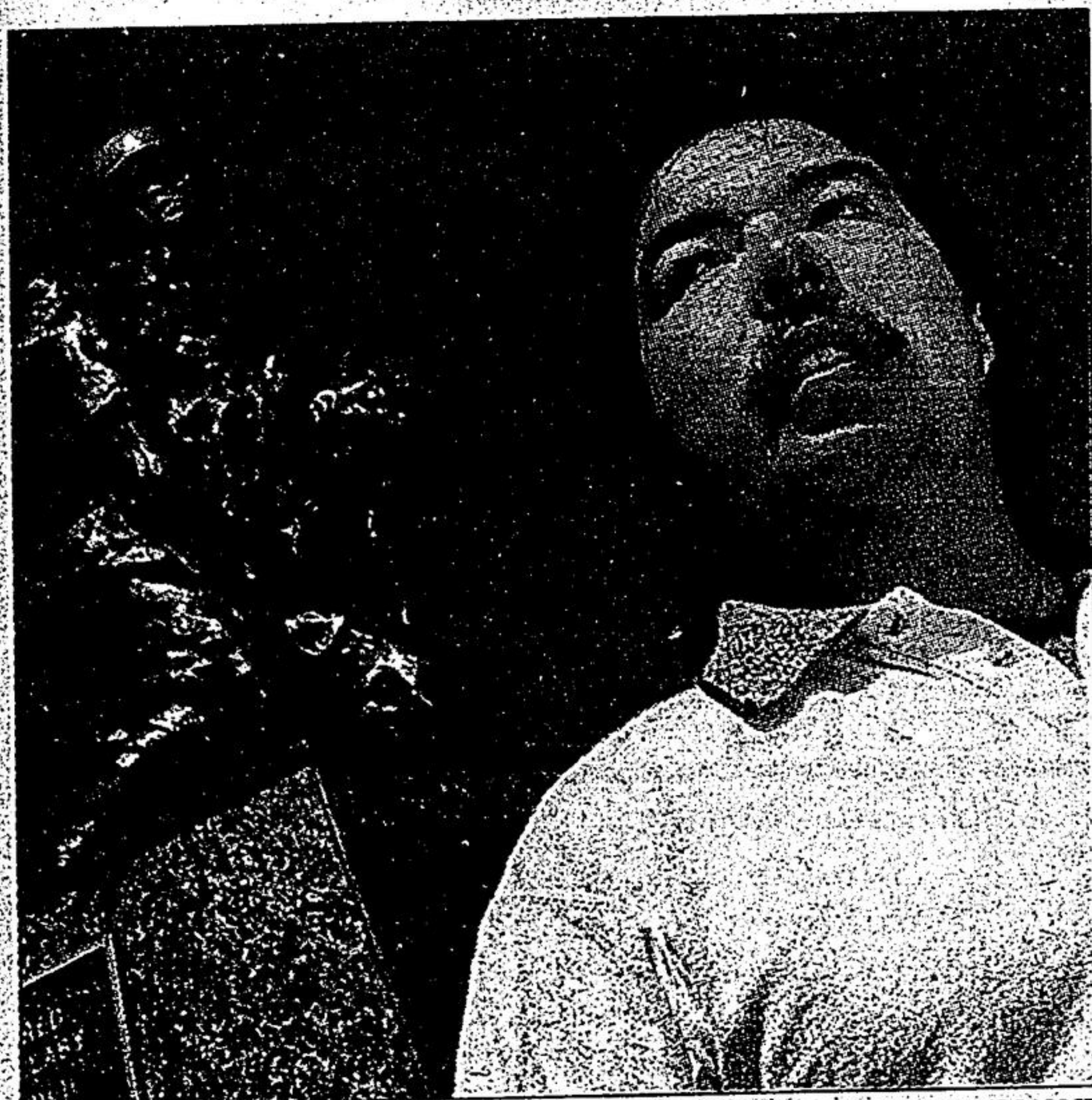
WANDA BIG CANOE

the fur trade. But by 1710, the fur trade was no longer viable.

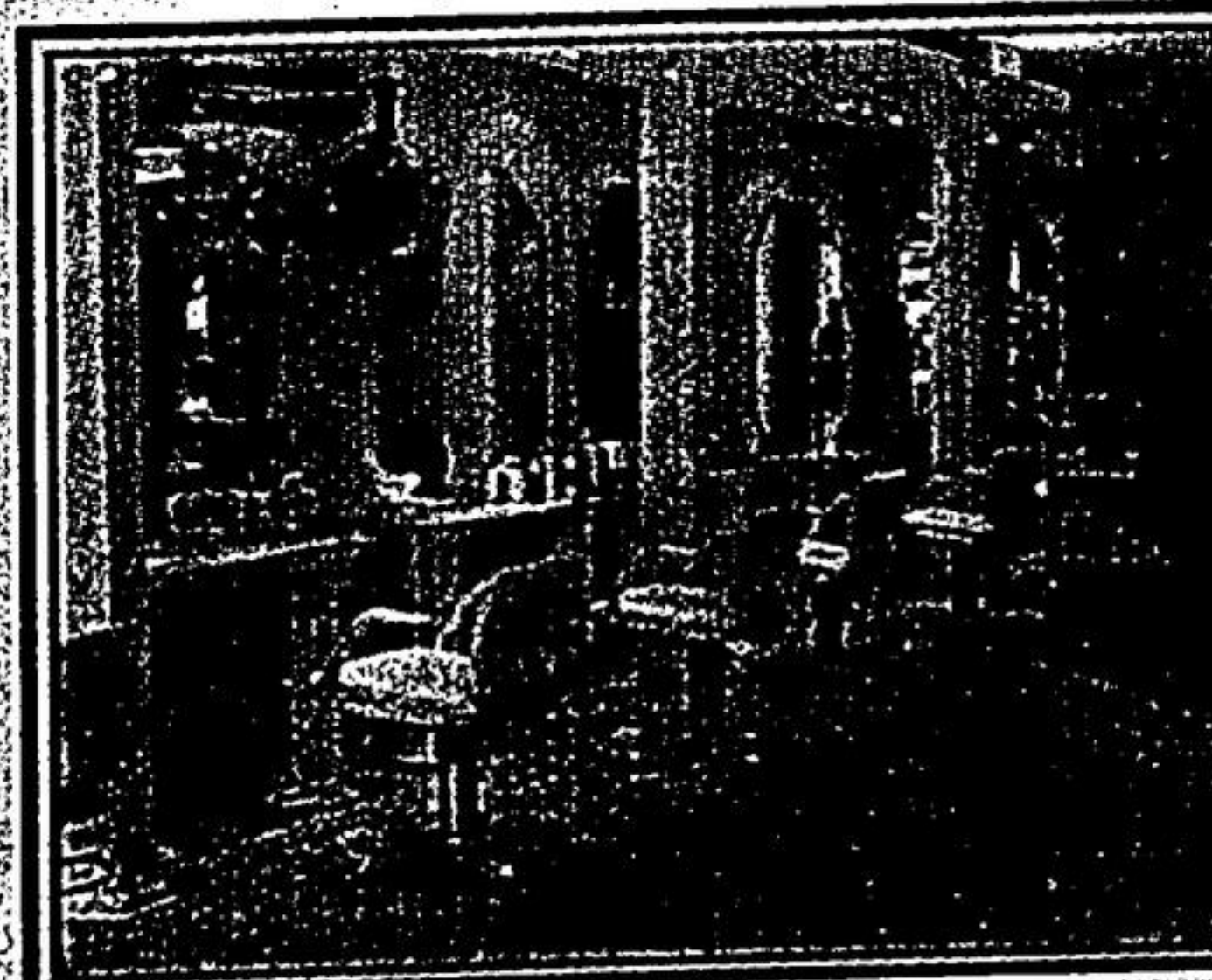
The Chippewas turned to fishing on Lake Simcoe, Couchiching and Georgian Bay.

In her report, Big Canoe detailed land treaties with the British. But she goes on to explain how land was subsequently taken from first nation bands.

"Simultaneously and (as a) result of land surrenders for white settlements, the indigenous economy was ruined and social organizations undermined. Christian missions were established among bands, the reserve system was instituted and assimilationist policies were developed by the government."



STAFF PHOTOS/MIKE BARRETT



DARE TO COMPARE

- Ontario Colour Trophy Finalist - 4 consecutive years
- Rusk Master Designer
- Voted Best Salon in Markham, Unionville & Stouffville
- Our Salon team members continually educate themselves to provide leading edge hair care.

Back Stage Hair Design

CALL US FOR A COMPLIMENTARY CONSULTATION!

137 Main St. North, Markham Village • 294-8392

Plenty of Free Parking at Rear

