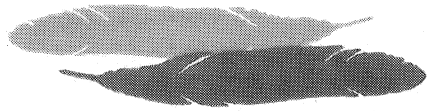

# THE IDYLLIC LIFE

THE CHIPPEWA CALL Grand Island Kitchi-miniss, or Great Island, and those living there called themselves *minissing-endanajig*, islanders. In the seventeenth century the first white explorers of the area, Jesuit priests from France, gave the French equivalents of Native American names to many of the places they visited. On a crude map of Lake Superior drawn in 1673 by Father Jacques Marquette the only islands of the lake shown with a name are Les Grandes Isles, the plural embracing what now is called Grand Island and the nearby smaller Wood and Williams islands. One of the explorers recorded the Chippewa name of the largest bay on the island as Namegossikan, Place Where There Are Trout; today it is known as Trout Bay. Similarly, the nearby small town is called Munising, an adaptation of Kitchi-minissing, At the Place of the Great Island.

The fifty or sixty Chippewa who lived on Grand Island in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before any white people had moved into the area, had no trouble finding adequate food. Fish were so plentiful that in the deep, clear water they appeared as shoals of silvery metal extending along the colored cliffs and brown beaches that ringed the island. The island Chippewa caught the

fish by going out in their canoes at night and holding flaming torches over the water; attracted by the light, whitefish and trout would swim to the surface near the canoes, and the Chippewa would spear and haul them in. Smoked or dried, the fish could be kept for months. The island also provided many other kinds of food: deer, moose, and bear and, during certain seasons, ducks and geese. In the summer strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries were abundant. The blueberries on Trout Bay were so numerous that, dried and preserved, they could be consumed all year round.

In the center of the island was a large lake, a mile long and almost half a mile wide. The Chippewa felt that there was something mysterious and unnatural about the lake. Its southern shore, where it debouched through a swamp into Lake Superior, was the widest and straightest part, stretching hundreds of feet in a way that suggested manufacture. Somebody or something had made that shore with its hands and feet. Perhaps it was a forest spirit, or perhaps it was a society, working for a common goal. Actually, it was both. For centuries the lake had been the home of an immense beaver colony, perhaps the largest in Lake Superior, and the beaver had built a dam extending fifteen hundred feet along the southern edge. Gradually, as the dam metamorphosed into an earthen shore, with trees and bushes growing upon it, the beaver moved their construction sites farther south, building additional smaller dams.

The island Chippewa called this large lake Puswawa-sagaigan, Lake That Resounds, because when they stood on the ancient dam at the south end and shouted to the north, after a few seconds the beaver spirit, *amik-manito*, would throw their voices back. Many years later Echo Lake would be featured in limnology textbooks as one of the largest "social lakes" (formed by a society of nonhuman animals) in the world. In the 1980s palynologists established through the presence of pollen deposits that the beaver dam at Echo Lake was approximately seven hundred years old.

For the Grand Island Chippewa this beaver colony was a source of great fortune, providing for their existence in many ways. Beaver meat was excellent, and beaver tail, *amikosow*, a delicacy sought

everywhere. Even more important, beaver furs made life during the cold winters endurable. Beaver furs were used as robes *(muttataus)* on frigid days, as rugs in the lodges, and as insulation on walls.

The lodges of the island Chippewa were constructed according to a standard procedure. Tall young saplings, usually of birch, maple, or beech, were cut and thrust vertically into the ground to form an oval. Then the saplings were bent over and fastened together in pairs with basswood cord. Young trees were tied horizontally to the arches to form crossbars. Finally the lodge, now resembling a large basket, was covered with overlapping rows of birchbark *(apakwei)* sewn together with split spruce. This arrangement ensured that rain would run off the walls instead of through them. A mat woven of cattail stalks served as a doorway, with heavy stones placed on the bottom edge to keep the wind from blowing it open. The lodges were left thus throughout the summer. With the advent of cold weather, several layers of beaver fur interspersed with cattail mats were added to the outer walls and covered by a layer of slippery-elm bark. With cedar boughs and beaver rugs on the floor, and robes to sleep in around the central fire, vented through a hole in the roof, the Chippewa could remain warm even when their lodges were blanketed by snow. This mode of life required a great number of beaver pelts, but the Echo Lake colony was so large, and the Grand Island Chippewa so few, that the beaver population was not threatened. The two societies lived in balance.

The main Chippewa village was located near the south end of the island, amid large pine trees on the stretch of sandy land extending from the main part of the island to the Thumb (Kitchionindjima). This place, too, had its own spirit. According to Chippewa tradition, the Thumb had once been separate, but many centuries before, one of the forest spirits had taken pity on the lonely smaller island and joined it by a sandy isthmus to the larger one. Geologists would later confirm this history in its broadest outlines and describe the sandy stretch as a tombolo, a formation with distinctive characteristics and vegetation. Fresh water lay only two or three feet below the surface, and the sand of the Thumb was cov-

ered with interconnected islands of lichens and moss, which the Chippewa gathered and placed under their beaver rugs to help them to sleep without bad dreams.

Not far from the village was another small, shallow lake, which the Chippewa called Migisi-sagaigan, or Eagle Lake. The imposing birds would gather there when they wanted easy catches of bluegills and small pike, snatching them when they came too close to the surface. The name Eagle Lake persisted through the last decades of the nineteenth century. Early in the twentieth century it became known as Duck Lake after an industrial tycoon from Cleveland purchased the island and converted it into a private game preserve.

Between the small lake that enticed the eagles and the large inlet, now called Murray Bay, which separated the island from the mainland, stretched about a thousand feet of land. To the island Chippewa this was a sacred place, to be visited only on special, and mournful, occasions. It was their burial ground. On the death of one of their band, close relatives washed the body, dressed it in the person's best clothing, and painted a round brown spot upon each cheek and a horizontal line of vermilion extending from the brown spots to the ears. The body was placed in a low peaked wooden structure, or spirit-house, with the feet pointed to the west, the direction of the spirit's journey. Markers placed at the grave indicated the totem of the family. For four days after burial, fires were kept burning nearby and food was placed on a ledge at a small hole in the western end of the spirit-house where the spirit could emerge.

The Chippewa burial ground was located among great white pines that to this day have never been logged. In later years Abraham Williams, the earliest white settler, and his family and descendants were buried not far away, a little closer to the great lake. People who live in the area and go there by boat for picnics still refer to the spot as Cemetery Beach.

In their hunting, eating, and festivities the Grand Island Chippewa took advantage of all the island's peculiarities. One of these was the rock formations that underlay the island and engirdled most of its coastline. The Chippewa often spoke of the island as a place "where the soft rock meets the hard rock." Their observation

would later be supported by geologists. On the mainland to the east of the island the rock is primarily sandstone, which the Chippewa called *pingwabik;* on this shore in sight of the island are great cliffs, stretching three hundred or more feet high, which the Chippewa called the Painted Rocks and today are known as the Pictured Rocks and are now a national park. These sandstone cliffs were easily chiseled by water and wind into a great variety of shapes. To the west of the island the sandstone gradually disappears, to be replaced by crystalline rocks in which white settlers frequently found ore. The Marquette Iron Range, forty miles to the west, and the Mesabi Range, much farther in the same direction, would become the sources of the iron ore for much of America's steel. The harder rocks to the west were also rich sources of copper and even of gold; in the late twentieth century Marquette is the site of the only gold mine in the United States east of the Mississippi.

At Grand Island three different rock formations meet, two of them Cambrian sandstones of varying hardness (the Jacobsville and Munising formations) and one of them crystalline rock of the Ordovician period. This convergence produced remarkably parallel rows of red and white rock, extending from the shore of the island into the lake. The Chippewa were convinced that these lines, like the big lake in the center of the island, were of supernatural origin: one of the forest or water spirits, a *manito*, had created Grand Island in a fit of playfulness. Geologists have explained them as "clastic dikes," the results of an opening up of a set of shear joints in the limestone of the Jacobsville formation and the injection under hydrostatic pressure of a slurry of limestone from the younger Munising formation.

But not all the designs on the island were rectilinear. Midway up the western side, cliffs rising almost four hundred feet above the lake formed gray corduroylike layers of differing hardness. Farther north these yielded to red and white twists and sworls that recalled heavenly, human, and animal shapes. Here one could see the moon, there a bear, and even an "evil eye" demonically staring at trespassers.

For the Chippewa the meeting of rocks of different hardness,

working against one another in such wondrous ways, produced useful as well as entertaining results. Along the rocky shores of the island several sandstone shelves or tables extended into the lake, standing two or three feet above its level when it was calm. Over the years waves formed shallow depressions in these flat shelves. Whenever a small piece of granite or another hard material was washed into a depression or fell into it from the cliffs above, the action of the waves during a storm would cause the little hard rock to scour the soft walls of the dimple, wearing away the stone like a pestle in the mortar of sandstone. Eventually these small holes were enlarged to as much as three feet deep and a foot or two across.

The Chippewa used these holes as cooking pots. Before the arrival of white traders, such items were difficult to come by. Even these Grand Island pots were by no means convenient, since there was no way to build a fire under them and they were located on the northern shores, far from the village on Trout Bay, and accessible only by canoe. The Grand Islanders contended with these problems by heating the pots in an unusual way and by using them only on special occasions.

STONE POT

On these feast days everyone from the village would gather on the rocky shelves, clean the pots of debris such as leaves and sticks, and fill them with water carried from the nearby lake in birch containers called *watabi-makak*. Then they would build a bonfire nearby and place many hard blue-black stones, each about the size of a man's hand and brought there specifically for the purpose, among the red-hot coals. When the stones glowed red-hot, the cooks quickly pushed them into the pot, usually with deer antlers. When the stones had dispersed their heat into the water and cooled, the Chippewa retrieved them with the antlers or with birch scoops and returned them to the fire. By repeating this activity many times, the islanders could bring an entire pot, or several pots, to a boil.

Into the hot pot the Chippewa placed whitefish, potatoes, corn, mushrooms, herbs, and, best of all, their two delicacies: tender cheeks of giant lake trout and small pieces of beaver tail. The result was a bouillabaisse that, until the iron pots of the white man's civilization arrived, only the Grand Island Chippewa could produce in enough quantity to feed a large crowd. They regarded these Stone Pot Feasts as an important part of their culture. The only outsiders who participated did so by special invitation, an honor extended by the island band as a whole.

Native Americans had lived along the southern shores of Lake Superior, and on Grand Island itself, for centuries, and they left scores of legends behind. Almost every promontory on the cliffs and every bay along the shores had at least one legend connected with it. Several of the legends centered on Grand Island itself. The favorite legend of the island Chippewa was about Mishosha, the magician of the lake. Many years earlier Mishosha had made Grand Island his home. He possessed a beautiful canoe that, if the proper magical words were spoken as one slapped its birchbark side, would sail so rapidly through the lake that within a few minutes one could go anywhere in Lake Superior. Once Mishosha had uttered the secret words, he could direct the canoe merely with his thoughts. The wish to go to a certain island on the lake would bring him to that very spot within a few minutes. Mishosha used this great power to

rule all the islands of the lake, extending his realm from his home on Grand Island. Each of the islands had its own attractions and treasures, and Mishosha reaped the benefit of them all. In a few seconds he would go to one of the small islands west of Grand Island, now called Williams Island, where he would gather seagulls' eggs, a great delicacy, from the large rookery that had always been there. Or he would order his canoe to go to distant Michipicoten Island, a mysterious and isolated place with eagles so large that a person could ride on their backs. Or Mishosha would direct his canoe to the smaller Adikiminis island, now known as Caribou Island, which was at the center of the lake, hence remote and rarely visited. Adikiminis was surrounded by sands that were said to contain much gold. It was sometimes called the Island of Yellow Sands, and its treasure was protected by enormous snakes. Mishosha could even travel in a few minutes to the farthest and largest island of all, Minong (actually an archipelago now called Isle Royale), where there were sturgeons so large they could swallow a human being in one gulp. On Minong he obtained bits of soft copper. Once returned to Grand Island, Mishosha would direct his canoe along the shoreline and little bays where in secret spots he gathered beautiful stones and pebbles—agates, carnelians, hornstone jasper—that he used to make fine jewelry, placing the stones in the soft copper from Isle Royale.

For many years Mishosha employed the great powers of his wondrous canoe in a benevolent way. Throughout the Lake Superior region Grand Island was known as Enchanted Island because it was the home of the magician of the lake. But as Mishosha grew older he began to take his power for granted and to believe that he was omnipotent, becoming selfish and vindictive. He would capture his enemies and take them in his charmed canoe to some distant island to be devoured by wild beasts. On Michipicoten the victims would be killed by giant eagles, on Adikiminis by fierce snakes, and on Minong by enormous sturgeons. Eventually he kidnapped a young man named Panigwun (Last Wing Feather), who was determined to overthrow him. Each time Mishosha took Panigwun

to a far-off island where a beast was supposed to kill him, Panigwun would outsmart Mishosha with the aid of sympathetic wood and lake spirits, who had grown tired of Mishosha. Eventually Panigwun learned from Mishosha's daughter the magic words that controlled the canoe. Panigwun wrested the canoe from Mishosha, and defeated him in winter combat, on the snow and ice. Mishosha froze to death; the feathers in his headdress turned into leaves, and his legs grew downward into roots. Mishosha became a giant birch tree on the edge of Grand Island, leaning toward the water.

All the Grand Islanders considered Mishosha and his magic canoe a part of their history. They even knew the secret words, *chemaun poll*, that Mishosha uttered to make his canoe fly over the water, but they would not reveal the words to any outsiders. Sometimes when Grand Islanders were out on the lake and a storm endangered their return, they would slap the side of their canoe and exclaim *chemaun poll.* The Grand Islanders admitted that at such moments their canoe would not fly with the speed that Mishosha had been able to summon, but they were convinced that it went faster than before.

Life on Grand Island for the Chippewa in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also presented occasional dangers and hardships. Injuries during hunts, especially bear hunts, were common. Fishing in the great lake was treacherous; sudden shifts in the wind could blow light canoes far out into the lake or capsize them. The bodies of the drowned were almost never recovered. The Chippewa said of their lake, Kitchigami (Great Lake), what white people say today: "Lake Superior never gives up its dead." The waters in the depths of the lake were so cold, varying no more than five degrees from winter to summer, that bodies did not putrefy and rise to the surface from the gases of decay, but remained on the bottom in a deep freeze. The Chippewa believed that a person to whom this happened was doubly condemned, since without a proper burial the spirit could not escape.

The winters, despite the warm lodges, were a special trial. Famine was almost unheard of, but sickness was common. Old age was

MISHOSHA

particularly cruel. The elderly usually could not see well, their bones ached from the cold, and they were dependent on their children for food and care.

The Grand Island Chippewa were free from one affliction that visited most other Native Americans. No one could remember when a Grand Island Chippewa had fallen in battle, nor could anybody recall when one of them had taken the scalp of a rival group or tribe. Secure on their island, they did not engage in war. Perhaps because they did not have war heroes, the Grand Islanders placed special emphasis on the sport of running. Speed of foot was highly honored among the islanders. All the young men, and many of the young women, practiced running on the island's beaches, and the best of them were celebrated by all the other Chippewa.

Running was not only a sport but also a means of hunting, called "running down the game." In the winter, groups of the island Chippewa would drive the deer in a small herd by pursuing them on snowshoes while the deer struggled to get through the deep drifts. Since carrying a dead deer back to the village on snowshoes was difficult, the Chippewa had a strategy to make the task easier. They would chase the deer until one was exhausted. Then they would wait for it to recover a little, while getting their breaths themselves, then resume the chase, each time directing the deer toward the village. When the hapless animal was a short distance from the Chippewa lodges, the hunters would close in on it and kill it, usually with no larger weapon than a stone knife or a small spear.

Late in the second decade of the nineteenth century, before any permanent white settlers had come to the area, and the moment when the Grand Island Legend begins, the fastest runner on the island was a boy approaching manhood named Pangijishib, or Little Duck. His father, Pikwakoshib, or Autumn Duck, was the chief of the Grand Island Chippewa. His mother was Medweackwe, or Sound of Wind in the Trees.

Early each morning Little Duck would go for a run on Trout Bay beach, which extends for a mile between two great arms of cliffs to the east and the west. For him this run was as much an emotional as a physical experience, sustaining him through the rest of the day.

He sped along the line where the water met the sand, splashing his bare feet noisily. Once he gained speed, he would tilt his head back and look at the sky, and try to make the splashes occur closer and closer together. His parents and other villagers would stand and watch, marveling at his speed. Occasionally another Chippewa would try to pace Little Duck but would always fall far behind.

Little Duck always ran his first lap to the west. Every morning, about two-thirds of the way, as he came abreast of a certain pine tree standing back from the beach, he would lower his head and look to the northeast across the bay toward the point at the north end of the Thumb, until a large promontory on the mainland suddenly emerged. This rock, standing three hundred feet high, was a great arch later known as Grand Portal. It was a part of the long stretch of colorful cliffs and ramparts known today as the Pictured Rocks. The arch of Grand Portal was so high that photographs taken in the last part of the nineteenth century show two- and three-masted schooners sailing right through it.

Little Duck would run his three or four laps back and forth along Trout Bay beach, take a quick dip in the lake, and then return to his lodge. It was a ritual that everyone in the village knew. Other young men and women also often ran along the beach, but they usually did so at a different time, when their speed would not be compared with that of Little Duck.