

Hunting. and gathering

Writer Bunny McBride
helps Maine's Native
American women
unearth their lost history.

By Edgar
Allen Beem

BUNNY MCBRIDE IS LOOKING FOR SOME MOCCASINS. And she's scouring another woman's house to find them. The anthropologist, author, and Native American rights activist has flown to Indian Island, Maine, from her home in Kansas. She's at Jean Moore's yellow ranch house on a raw spring day to gather materials about Moore's mother, Mary Alice Nelson Archambaud, a famous Penobscot dancer. Under the name Molly Spotted Elk, Archambaud performed all over the United States and Europe in the early decades of the 20th century. The moccasins in question are ones she wore when she danced. McBride met Moore in 1988, when McBride was doing research for a biography of Spotted Elk.

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Bunny McBride (rear) with Jean Moore in Old Town, Maine. Moore's late mother is the subject of a McBride biography, *Molly Spotted Elk: A Penobscot In Paris*.

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In a few minutes, the curator of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor will be arriving to pick up the memorabilia for an exhibition in September based on Bunny McBride's 1999 book about the lives of Maine Indian women, *Women of the Dawn* (University of Nebraska Press).

Still missing are the moccasins.

"I've looked everywhere," says McBride. "In the closet, in the attic. They've taken a walk."

"Yes," agrees Moore, "they've taken a walk. But I've had several psychic

friends tell me they are definitely in the house."

Jean Moore, 67, grew up on Indian Island but returned only eight years ago after living away for 40 years. She is the keeper of her mother's flame, but she says she knew little about Spotted Elk's show business career until after her mother's death. McBride's 1995 biography of Moore's mother, Molly Spotted Elk: A Penobscot in Paris (University of Oklahoma Press), helped Moore fill in the gaps in her family history.

"In our Indian culture, ancestors are very important. Within our tribe and our people, our ancestors are spirits," says Moore. "We bring forth our ancestors to learn from them, not only in oral history but now with written history as well."

Moore says she was guided by her mother's spirit in choosing McBride to write the biography. Other researchers had approached her over the years seeking access to her file of letters, photographs, and diaries, but Moore had declined. Shortly before McBride telephoned her in 1988, Moore had been having trouble keeping a picture on her wall straight. The picture was a painting of the Indian saint Kateri Tekawitha, for which her mother had posed. "Mother, what are you trying to tell me?" Moore asked out loud the day that McBride called. After that initial phone call, Moore says, the painting hung straight once more.

So that means that Molly Spotted Elk, too, approves of the book Bunny McBride wrote about her? "I think if my mother disapproved, she'd whack me in the head," says Moore. "She's around."

And Moore clearly approves of McBride. "Bunny is not digging at you with questions all the time," she explains. "She is absorbing what you are talking about. She just lets you talk; she retains it and writes it down. I'm very comfortable with her."

But McBride isn't altogether comfortable being profiled. She is accustomed to being the storyteller, not the story. "This is not a story about a tall, blond woman who goes into Indian country," she says, an implied "Is it?" in her inflection. "This is just about me participating in a great opportunity to work with groups of Native American people, telling their story. They've told me these stories."

That she can hunt all over another woman's house for missing moccasins is a measure of how accepted McBride is on Indian Island and elsewhere in Maine Indian circles - no mean feat in the touchy arena of identity politics. For 20 years, McBride has been working with and for Maine Indians on a variety of fronts, including helping the Micmac tribe tell its story to the US government in order to win federal recognition and helping tribe basket makers tell their stories and find new markets. More recently, in two books

and the forthcoming museum exhibition, Mc Bride has helped Maine's Native American women rediscover their heritage and tell their stories.

2000 was designated The Year of the Native American Woman in Maine, and Bunny Mc Bride was honored by a special commendation in the state Legislature.

"What I saw that was special is that Bunny actually looked at the lives of native Penobscot women," says Donna Loring, a Penobscot tribal representative to the Legislature who introduced the commendation. "She looked, she studied, and she wrote. I don't think anyone else has done that. For me, she was the only one who chose to look at the lives and accomplishments of native women in Maine."

McBride's first encounter with Maine Indians came in 1981, shortly after she earned her master's degree in anthropology from Columbia University in New York City. She was living in Hallowell, Maine, with her second husband, Dutch anthropologist Harald Prins, and had holed up to write about African cultures.

In 1980, the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Maliseet tribes had signed the Maine Indian Land Claims Settlement, a move that gained them federal recognition and \$81.5 million with which to buy back 300,000 acres of their native lands. The Aroostook Band of Micmacs, a small tribe living along the Maine-New Brunswick border that also sought funding to buy back their ancestral lands, was left out of the settlement. McBride says it was primarily because "no one had done the ethno-historical research necessary to substantiate their claim" that their tribe had lived in Maine as well as in Canada.

A friend called up: Would Bunny and Harald do the necessary research?

"The idea of moving to the cold wilds of northern Maine to work as an anthropologist for a group of Indians I'd never heard of was not on my agenda," says Mc Bride. "I'd gone to grad school aiming to bring new cross-cultural insight and research methodology to my writing, not to actually do anthropology."

McBride and Prins did, however, take on the job as co-directors of research and development for the Association of Aroostook Indians in Houlton, Maine.

"On Monday morning, we'd get up at 4 a.m., drive north, and arrive by 8," McBride recalls. "We'd stay for two or three days, working deep into the night, sleeping on a foam mattress on the office floor. We each took home \$80 a week. We spent a lot of time with Micmacs in their homes, sometimes overnighing with them." Later, they worked on a consulting basis. It took 10 years before their research established that the Micmacs, whose native lands

were largely in Canada, had actually ranged widely enough that their ancestral territory overlapped that of their Maine neighbors.

In 1991, Congress passed the Aroostook Band of Micmacs Settlement Act, granting the tribe federal recognition and \$900,000 with which to purchase 5,000 acres of Maine land.

In the course of championing the Micmacs' cause, McBride became convinced that "federal recognition would not be won without self-recognition and a stronger sense of self-worth." Thus, she went looking for what she calls "a position of strength" for the Micmacs.

"It turned out to be baskets," Mc Bride says. "For generations, Micmacs had made an array of wood-splint baskets for harvest and storage and various household uses. They were so poorly paid for them that few Micmacs still made them for a living, but almost every Micmac had some family connection to the craft. They took pride in these beautiful containers and in the skill it takes to find and fell the right tree and to transform a trunk into smooth pliable strips for weaving. Best of all, they felt comfortable talking about baskets. So baskets literally became the containers in which Aroostook Micmacs took their cause to the public."

They sold baskets at fairs and presented them to dignitaries and political figures. The baskets became a focus for their public life outside of the Native American community.

McBride worked with the tribal council to set up the Micmac Basket Bank. She wrote a grant to obtain start-up funds, established quality-control guidelines, persuaded Micmac basket makers to sign their baskets, designed and wrote promotional materials, and helped identify prospective buyers. Prins made a film and McBride wrote a book about the Micmac basket makers, both of which are titled *Our Lives in Our Hands*.

"Bunny and Harald definitely laid the groundwork for national recognition of Maine Indian basketry," says Theresa Hoffman, a Penobscot basket maker and the executive director of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance.

"Bunny and Harald brought us the recognition," adds Micmac tribe member Donald Sanipass, one of Maine's best-known Indian basket makers, "then she got the basket project going. I can never thank them enough."

Bunny McBride's life would seem destined from the beginning to become that of a cross-cultural bridge builder.

She was born Carol McBride, but because she was born on Easter Sunday, 1950, she has never been called anything except Bunny. As an art and English

major at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, she discovered a love of writing that initially translated into journalism - something of a birthright, since her father, Bob McBride, was the news director of the CBS affiliate in Detroit.

After graduating from Michigan in 1972, Mc Bride moved to Boston, where she became the director of the Boston Forum, a center for low-income children, and married Stewart Dill, a staff writer for The Christian Science Monitor. Bunny also wrote for the Monitor, contributing articles, poetry, and essays from such far-flung places as Africa and China between 1978 and 1988.

A lifelong Christian Scientist, McBride credits her often-misunderstood faith with instilling in her a sense of social activism. "Most people just think of Christian Scientists as the people who don't go to doctors," McBride says, "but it's really a faith in which there is no separation between thought and body, thought and experience. Your vision shapes your view of the world. Christian Science teaches that there is a graceful fitting of all God's creation. Our task is to live in that grace and to translate it into what we do. You start, I believe, from the idea that there is an answer. There must be a graceful fitting."

It was an experience in West Africa that really propelled her toward what she calls "solution-oriented journalism."

In the winter of 1978-79, while doing research on nomads in the drought-devastated Sahel region of Mali, McBride contracted malaria, yellow fever, and hepatitis. She was delirious when friends brought her to a hospital in Dakar, Senegal; when she woke up, she found herself in what she called a death ward.

"I became aware of other bodies in other beds, and my own body felt terribly alien and frightfully ephemeral," she recalls. "I struggled to collect my thoughts. I tried to pray but couldn't. Then a woman two beds over from me began to moan and cry, an awful, hopeless wail. I heard myself speak and try to comfort her. I think that was the answer to my unuttered prayer, because every effort I made for her comforted me. For a long time, I'd known that we grow stronger reaching out to others, but in this case it felt like it saved my life."

That experience in Dakar changed McBride's life. "Like so many other people who have turned broken hearts and near-death experiences into a new resolve about life," she says, "I started down a new road."

That new road led to a divorce, to New York and to Columbia, where she earned her master's degree in anthropology. She undertook these studies, she says, in order to bring greater cultural understanding to her writings. She was particularly intrigued by the problem of balancing objectivity and subjectivity

when studying another culture, the topic she chose for her thesis.

"For me," says Mc Bride, "the balance comes through collaboration, through bringing to the fore the voices of the people I'm profiling - finding ways to talk through them rather than about them."

Now Bunny McBride is bringing Maine's Native American women the stories of their lives.

The exhibition, which will inaugurate the Abbe Museum when it opens in September, will be called "Four Mollys: Women of the Dawn" and will include artifacts from cradle boards to beads and tools to diaries. The native people of Maine are collectively called Wabanakis (People of the Dawn), and the four Mollys are the heroines of Mc Bride's Women of the Dawn. Molly Mathilde (circa 1665-1717), the beautiful daughter of Chief Madockawando, married Jean Vincent d'Abbadie, the French Baron de St. Castin, and became a peacemaker during the French and Indian Wars. Molly Ockett (circa 1740-1816) was a legendary medicine woman and healer in the Fryeburg area. Molly Molasses (circa 1775-1867) was a well-known basket maker and reputed witch in the Bangor-Brewer area. And then, of course, there is Molly Spotted Elk (1903-1977).

Bunny McBride became interested in these women when she spotted a newspaper photograph of the lovely Indian dancer. It piqued her curiosity about the most recent of the Mollys, and from there her interest spread to the other Mollys. (All four of the women were actually christened Mary, a name that Indian pronunciation renders as Molly.) McBride's research revealed that Molly Spotted Elk had lived a fascinating and conflicted life, one foot in the small Penobscot reservation in Old Town, Maine, and the other in the glamorous entertainment capitals of New York and Paris.

In the 1920s and '30s, Spotted Elk was a featured Indian performer with a traveling show, danced frequently at a posh nightclub in New York, appeared in *The Silent Enemy*, a 1930 docu drama of traditional Ojibwe life, and traveled to Paris, where she danced at the 1930 International Colonial Exposition. In Paris, she met and married French journalist Jean Archambaud. After Archambaud's death in 1941, Spotted Elk suffered a mental breakdown and retreated to Indian Island, where she lived in obscurity until her death in 1977.

Jill Shibles, a Penobscot woman and a distant relative of Molly Spotted Elk, is a lawyer and the executive director of the new National Tribal Justice Resource Center in Boulder, Colorado. Spotted Elk's story struck a chord with Shibles. "Bunny has helped to raise our self-esteem, give us pride in our heritage and hope for the future," says Shibles. "I found her book on Molly Spotted Elk so gripping, because it mirrored a lot of my own struggles. What

is my place as a Native American woman?"

Even in the shifting ground of Native American-white relations, McBride manages to keep her footing. "What's remarkable about Bunny," says Marge Bruchac, a Missisquoi Abenaki singer/storyteller from Northampton, Massachusetts, and a consultant on "The Four Mollys" exhibition, "is that she is able to put flesh and bones on history. She really gets inside these women. For an ordinary non-Indian writer to do that could come off as invasive, but a lot of native women turn to Bunny's work for an understanding of their own history and culture."

To "get inside these women," Bunny McBride blurs the line between objectivity and subjectivity, writing an unusual blend of anthropological scholarship, nonfiction, and historical fiction, often filling the voids in the lives of the four Mollys with imagined detail based on her understanding of their culture.

"My goal is to have my work pass muster among scholars," she says, "but also to be accessible to the general public and useful to the people I'm writing about. I'm writing in the cracks all the time, and it's tricky. I want honest scholarship, but if it's not accessible, it's not useful."

In 1990, Bunny McBride and Harald Prins left Maine for Manhattan, Kansas, to teach at Kansas State University, but they return to the Northeast regularly to continue their work with local tribes.

After seeing the Molly Spotted Elk artifacts off to Bar Harbor (she did not find the moccasins), Bunny McBride drives across the island and pulls her rental car up a steep, muddy driveway to the mobile home where Penobscot basket maker Caron Shay lives. Shay is the daughter of one of the last native Penobscot speakers and the niece of the late Lucy Nicolai Poolaw, a Penobscot activist who helped persuade the state to build the bridge to Indian Island and who performed across the United States in the 1920s and '30s as Princess Watahwaso.

Shay greets McBride with a split-ash basket she is weaving for her. McBride gives Shay a copy of the biographical essay about Poolaw she has just written for an Oxford University Press book about Native American women. During her last visit, McBride gave her an autographed copy of *Women of the Dawn*.

"For non-Indians, this book gets rid of stereotyped ideas they have about native women," says Shay, sitting in her living room, surrounded by baskets that she has woven and boxes of ash splints waiting to be woven. "For natives, it gives them more insight into what it was like back then."

With great excitement, Shay unrolls a vintage photograph she came across since McBride's last visit. The 1919 photograph shows members of her family in full ceremonial regalia as they wait in a canoe to greet visitors to Indian Island back in the days before the bridge. As Shay identifies each of her relatives, Bunny McBride smiles and nods appreciatively, absorbing images and information that may one day find their way into her writings.

"As a woman, I gain strength from these stories, and surely that is all the more true for native women, because the stories are their heritage," says McBride. "I think the books help fill a certain blank spot, for native women in particular but also for native men and readers in general.

We all suffer from a blatantly one-sided perspective on what happened in the past. To make sense of the world in which we live and for which we share responsibility, it's vital to understand the roles and views of all of the players."

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