there and back again (part 1)

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

We start off season two at the beginning: the creation of Epekwitk told by Mi'kmaq legends. Skipping centuries here and there, we learn about the many people this island became home to and follow their patterns of migration. Whether expelled by the English in the mid-1700s, looking for work, or yearning for somewhere new, not all islanders stay on PEI. We explore what that looked like, and more importantly, what it meant for islanders to have to leave home throughout the centuries.

Features guest interviews: Riley Bernard, Georges Arsenault, Dr. Ed MacDonald.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes
Italics = sound effects
Regular = my narration

Ocean sounds. Rowing in canoe. Theme music introduces.

Welcome to the hidden Island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name's Fiona Steele, and I'll be your host for this journey.

music swells up for a moment.

It sure feels nice to be back in this little rowboat after a year spent on land. It stored well too – no leaks or paint chips.

Something dropping.

Sorry, it's a little hard to row and hold a mic at the same time. Let me just set this down where you can still hear me.

Shuffling noise.

Alright, we're ready to find some new shores with season two of the hidden island by the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation. Today's episode is all about migration, patterns of living, and the many people this island has become home to. What better way to start than with the creation of Epekwitk for the Mi'kmaq, the first people to call this place home?

I talked to Riley Bernard, a Mi'kmaw comic book artist, who's been researching Mi'kmaq legends for a couple years now. His interest stems back to his involvement in the theatre production Mi'kmaq Legends in 2012.

Riley: And the show kind of would get a little stale over the years where it's like, most of the cast members wanted to do more legends, perform different stories. And we started looking into that a bit more. And I got really fascinated with the legends. And I wanted to do more with it... And then one of our managers he asked if I could make like a Mi'kmaq legends graphic novel. And I always thought it was kind of a cool idea. But the but it was like, it seemed like really ambitious to me. And I was like, Yeah, that sounds like that sounds cool. Shrug it off. And then, in 2019 I started making some comics and I started to figure that out.

Riley's first comic was The Stick Persons Collection.

So, I did more research, and I was like how do I not? How do I not make a graphic novel out of this stuff? It's like so fantastic, right? The stories that they tell of their of Mi'kmaq, like war heroes and chiefs and shamans and stuff. They're so mystical, like they have all these powers and all these powers and they're almost like superheroes, right?

Stories about hunters so great they could lie down next to moose, or warriors who were invincible, are just a few he told me. I'll attach a link to Riley's comic book in the shownotes so you can go check it out. Some of the stories Riley told me dated back to before European contact, so I asked about the creation of Epekwitk.

Riley: Kluscap helped create the island by placing a piece of land there that's pretty much all I know related to the creation of Epekwitk.

According to a story by John Joe Sark, a Mi'kmaw elder, The Creator turned to Kluskap and said, "It's time to create people, I think." So, the Great Spirit shot an arrow into a sacred birch tree and the bark fell away. The bark became the L'nuk, the people.

Next, The Creator shaped a handful of clay into a crescent and asked Kulscap to place it in the sea. That became Epekwitk, and then Kluskap shot another arrow into the scared tree. The bark that fell away became everything the L'nu would need for survival like canoes, wigwams and bows and arrows.

Then Kluskap taught the people everything they needed to know to survive.
Some people say Mi'kmaw people in pre-contact times would migrate according to the seasons, although that depends on who you ask.

Riley: I remember hearing that pre-contact my people didn't typically migrate. They didn't have a reason to right? They would just live, they would just live somewhere. And everything they need would be there – animals to hunt for their skins and their meat. That's how they survived... And then when contact happened, the men would come in their ships to the shore. So that's when it started. They would travel to shore to trade, whenever it was the summertime and stuff when the ships would come. And then they would go inland to hunt bigger game. And then in the summertime again, they would come back to shore to meet the sailors and trade. So, that's where I remember hearing that start, but yeah, it could be wrong. I'm not like a professor or anything, but I thought that was neat.

Riley: And then the French people came. And they just wanted to farm. So, when the French showed up, they asked for land. And then we gave it to them.

This would be in the early 18th century
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But if we skip forward to the mid-1700s, we'll find this island is being called Île Saint-Jean by many. Although Epekwitk remains unceded territory, thousands of French and English settlers have long since begun colonizing this Island.

This brings us to our second pattern of migration, although migration isn't the right word at all. Expulsion is more accurate.

Georges: My name is Georges Arsenault. I'm an island historian and folklorist.

Georges is well known for his research in Acadian history. It's common knowledge that thousands of Acadians were deported from the Island shortly after English forces took control of the land. Acadians from the Maritimes were sent all over, mainly to France and the southern states, although some did manage to stay hidden.

Georges: There's 3000 islanders that were deported towards France. But half of them didn't make it. They either drowned or died during the crossing of sickness or malnutrition. Three, two of the ships sank and one shipwrecked. So in those three boats, the Violet, Duke William and Ruby, there was about 900 people, and it's about over 700 now who died, who didn't make it to the shore, of course. So that's a big chunk of the Islanders, people who were living here on the island, Île St Jean in the 1750s.

By the time many Acadians were finding their way back to the Island's shores, the atmosphere wasn't a whole lot better. Acadians were able to live on Île St Jean, but their opportunities were limited.

Georges: When the island was divided up into 67 lots and then given to large landowners, mainly British, the Acadians couldn't own their land, like many of the other settlers who came to the island. So that caused problem because they knew that they could get free land in Cape Breton or even in New Brunswick or elsewhere. So that's when many Acadians started leaving the island to find farms or land that they could own and not have to pay rent, you know, every year.

Looking forward to the nineteenth century, this island now knows a new name: Prince Edward Island. It's named in honour of Prince Edward, Duke of Kent. Prince Edward is the commander-in-chief of British forces in North America. But he's never been here. In fact, he recommends the Island be re-annexed to Nova Scotia, although Islanders don't know this. But that's a side note.

In the early to mid 1800s, many Acadians were still leaving to create a life elsewhere.

Georges: Between fall of 1860 and 62 there's about 50 young families that left Rustico to settle on the Matapedia Valley here that's just north of Campbellton in New Brunswick in the Gaspé Peninsula... If you go to one of the communities, they're settled by the Acadians, you see a street called Rustico, another one called Gallant.

The mid-1800s is also when outmigration really begins in general on PEI. By outmigration, I mean a voluntary decision to leave. Sure, many islanders felt they had to leave – as we'll find out. But that's different than being forced to leave or exiled.

Ed: My name is Ed McDonald. I teach history here at the University of Prince Edward Island. And my expertise is in island history.

You might remember Ed from season one.

Ed: Considering the topic we're going to speak about today, I come from a singularly unadventurous family, because there are nine of us and all nine of us still live on Prince Edward Island. Some of us left to go to school, some of us left to work. But every one of us ended up back here. And that is not the island story.

I wanted to dig deep into what Ed called the “Island story” of outmigration.

Ed: Well, it's a regional sort of pattern. But arguably, the pattern starts a little earlier on Prince Edward Island. So, there's a significant recession in 1857. And you do see a little impulse of migration as a result of that. But really, it begins together way in the 1870s. And then it flows strongly in the 1880s and 90s, through to the depression. And during the Depression years, it basically shriveled up. Because if the major reason people were leaving was economic opportunity, there are no jobs anyplace, so there was no reason to leave.

That’s the thing: people weren’t leaving because they didn’t like this island. They left because they needed work. Between 1891 and 1901 the Island’s population fell by 6,000 people. In the next ten years, it decreased by another 10,000 people, despite having one of the highest birth rates in the nation. When you only started with roughly 110,000 people, losing 16,000 leaves a huge mark.

But what happened to all the jobs? Here’s what happened:

Shipbuilding was no longer a prime industry on PEI.

The ambitious railway-building project proved to be a financial disaster in Canada.

Once all the land was cleared, no new farms could be created. And you can only subdivide a farm so many times and still make a living.

But the most important aspect: elsewhere paid a lot more money. Especially the Boston states.

Ed: the concept of the Boston states that's a colloquial term. Essentially, the boundaries are fluid, but they encompass the northeastern part of the United States. We're talking as far south as Rhode Island and Connecticut. But getting into New York State, to Pennsylvania places that are considered part of New England. But the Boston states, I've always equated with the New England area. So it's a little bit larger than that. And it's called the Boston states because of many out here migrants went to Boston.

The Boston States were common destinations for Acadian Islanders as well.

Georges: you know the Acadian leadership of the time, most of the leadership would encourage them not to go to New England to Boston states, but to stay in the Maritimes and settle and create new Acadian settlements. But of course, young people knew the difference, you know, of going out and cutting down the trees and clearing land – there was tough work. And it was not, you know, a very easy life. And they knew, because some of their friends or neighbors had gone to work in the factories in New England that life was easier.

So, people left for harvest excursions, the lumber industry, other seasonal work, or jobs you might find in PEI with higher wages. This isn't a gendered issue, either. Both men and women left, although the nature of their work was different.

Ed: While increasingly women were welcomed into the workplace, it was still understood that when they married, they would leave their job in order to raise their family. And so that still meant that women were looking for employment. They were looking for careers during that time period between childhood, and marriage, even if they subscribe to that kind of ethos. And so there were limited opportunities for employment for women, because employment for women, generally speaking, was an extension of the accepted kinds of work that women did in the home.

Accepted jobs could include teaching, nursing, sewing in textile factories, typing in an office. That sort of thing.

Ed: Apparently, while your women and men both left in large numbers, some research has shown that women tended to not go as far from home. And they didn't go as far from home not because they liked the adventurous spirit, but because they were on call if you will. So, they were more likely to be called back home, if mother got sick, or if there was a crisis in the household. Whereas the males who migrated out tended to have less restraint that way, or less sense of obligation imposed on them.

While opportunities may have been plentiful for women in the late 1800s, it still came with limits. But that's like anything else in society at the time. No voting. No divorce. No work while married. You get the picture. Another side note.

So, we've covered how people left. You know, PEI wasn't special in this way. People left all the time in other provinces too. The reason why this matters in PEI history is because no one replaced them. Instead, the population just dropped. The loss of these people was felt so much more because of it.

Ed: Many Islanders, whether from necessity, or restlessness or spirit of adventure, left the island, sometimes quite reluctantly, and not many who did shook the dust of the island from their feet and never felt any longing to go back. There are certainly exceptions, and I can cite exceptions. But many people, expatriate islanders tend to like other people who migrate or other people that emigrate. They straddle two worlds. One world is the one that they have moved to, and the other world is the one they came from.

In a way, many Islanders never fully (completely) left. Take this club for example: in 1900, Boston's Prince Edward Island Benevolent Society Association was formed. Its goal was to allow expatriate islanders to reconnect and help each other. It was popular too – their 1909 annual reunion had up to 1400 people in attendance.

As well, by 1907 there were enough Maritimers abroad to publish a magazine just for them. Michael McInnis was an expatriate printer from Summerside living in Oakland, California. He created The Maple Leaf, a monthly magazine with news from back home and stories on what other expatriates were doing.

Ed: And it was chock full of stories every year about someone living in New York or living in California or living in Saskatchewan, who motored home to Prince Edward Island to visit the home place and regale the readers with stories about how things hadn't changed and how they saw their old friends and their old scenes and haunts. So was filled with nostalgia, but also filled with success stories. Because the population decline in PEI caused a crisis of identity or confidence, if you will. And so every time someone from the Maritimes, especially anytime anyone from the island, succeeded someplace else, it was a sign that our failure to grow as an economy wasn't our fault. Given an opportunity someplace else, Islanders prospered and succeeded. And in The Maple Leaf was how you found out about that.

This cycle of outmigration became a way of life until the Great Depression in the 1930s. With no jobs abroad, many Islanders returned home.

When World War 2 began, many Islanders left – this time to fight. PEI had the second highest rate of enlistment in Canada. That's interesting because in the first World War, we had the second lowest enlistment rates. However, no group provided more recruits per capita than Mi'kmaq soldiers from Lennox Island. In World War 1 alone, 32 of 64 eligible men left. It's also important to note that these men fought for a country that didn't consider or treat them as citizens. If you want to learn more about this, check out L'nuey's podcast, "Juk'e" and the episode, "Stories and Highlights of Epekwitk Mi'kmaq Veterans."

Besides leaving for War, many Islanders left to work in factories. Instead of the Boston states, Ontario and Quebec were now the places to be.

Georges: Even during the Second World War, I was told by some people moved to Montreal to work, there were they left and middle of the school season, they left there were teachers and left their schools and middle of the year to work in Montreal, in factories where the pay was much better.

Ed: Then the oil boom comes along in the 70s. And whenever the oil does boom, people go to Alberta because it employs all kinds. So, it did employ people with low education, it employs people with high education. When I graduated from high school in 1974. Many of my classmates went out west.

Ed: But the curious pattern that's emerged in the last number of years, is the phenomenon of people who continue to live on Prince Edward Island, but they work at West. And so they're gone fo r a month at a time. And then they're home for two weeks.

Theme music comes up for a moment.

And that's a current reality for many people and Island families. When we return, we'll be talking about who gets to be an islander – do you have to be born one, or can you become one? We'll also hear from some islanders who returned, and what keeps some people away from PEI today.

Talk to you in part two!

ADDITIONAL READING

"Logjams and Widow-makers" *J. Clinton Morrison*

"If You're Stronghearted" *Edward MacDonald*

"The Island Acadians" *Georges Arsenault*

"The Garden Transformed" *Verner Smitheram*, *David Milne, Satadal Dasgupta (Editors)*

"Mi'kmaq Campfire Stories" *Julie Pellissier-Lush*

"An Introduction to Island Studies" *James Randall*

"Ni'n na L'nu" *A. J. B. Johnston and Jesse Fancis*

Thinh Nguyen's Blog: https://thepeithinhker.wordpress.com/