

# Abenakis' Chief Pursues Cause Through Conflict

By SALLY JOHNSON  
Special to The New York Times

SWANTON, Vt. — The Abenaki Tribal Council is housed in the old railroad station on the outskirts of this town five miles south of the Canadian border. The station is run down and too small to accommodate the tribal chief's vision of an Abenaki nation.

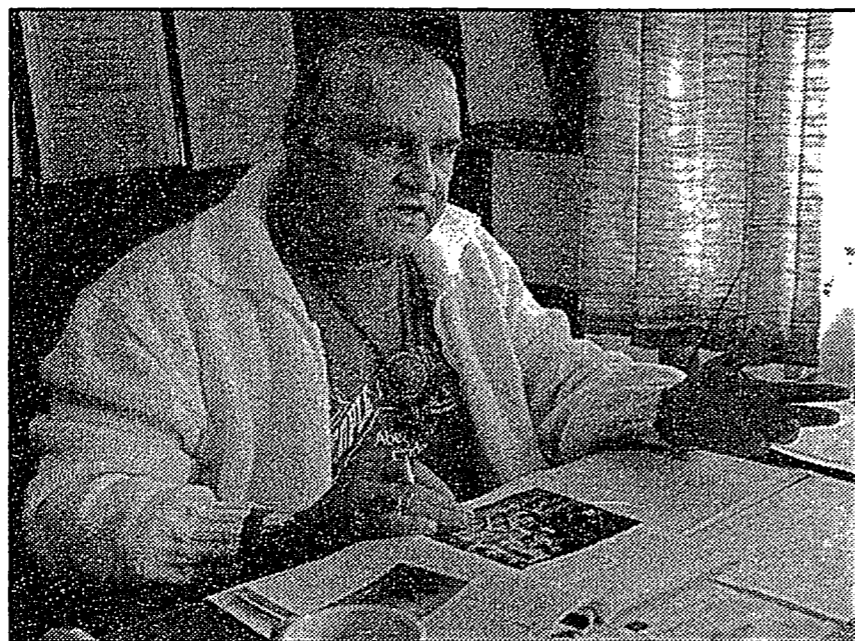
The chief, Homer St. Francis, envisions a sovereign political entity encompassing millions of square miles that Abenakis claim were originally settled by their ancestors in what are now New England and Canada. Abenaki children would attend tribal schools and patients would be treated in Abenaki hospitals. Abenaki businesses would support the economy.

But the Abenakis, of whom there are more than 1,500 in Vermont, have obstacles to overcome, including lack of Federal recognition as a tribe, internal turmoil and, some say, Mr. St. Francis himself.

In the year since he was narrowly elected chief after a bitter political contest, he has sought with some success to call attention to his cause.

### 'I'm Not Going to Back Off'

"If you're not visible, they don't know you're there," he said. Referring to his predecessor, Leonard (Blackie) Lampan, Mr. St. Francis added, "Chief Blackie was too soft on them. They know I'm not going to back off." Last October, Mr. St. Francis led a group of Abenakis on an unlicensed fishing trip to challenge the state's refusal to allow Indians unrestricted



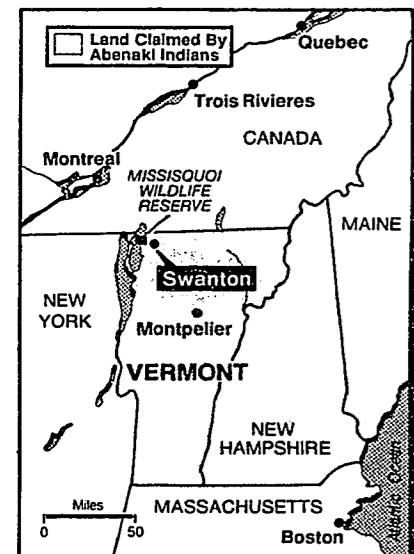
Homer St. Francis, who was elected chief of the Abenaki Indians of Vermont after a bitter political fight.

## The Vermont-based Indians seek recognition as a tribe.

hunting and fishing. It was the third such trip; on two previous occasions, the prosecutor dropped the charges. A hearing on the latest charges is set for Dec. 5 in Vermont District Court.

The Abenakis contend that as descendants of the original inhabitants of much of Vermont, they have aboriginal rights to hunt and fish. But the issue has taken on added importance because state officials say recognizing such rights could establish legal principles helpful to a claim of land ownership.

In the summer, Mr. St. Francis sent an eviction notice to United States Fish and Wildlife personnel on the nearby



Effort to claim land in shaded area is based in Swanton, Vt.

Missisquoi Wildlife Reserve. He then sent another notice to the Police Department and the trustees of the Village of Swanton, along with a bill for \$100 million which he said represents 200 years of back rent.

"It's going to cost that much just to clean up the pollution they've caused to our lakes and rivers," the chief said in an interview.

### Judge Warns the Chief

When Mr. St. Francis printed Abenaki license plates and put them on his car, the Swanton Police Chief, Clyde Yarnell, briefly impounded the car and kept the plates as evidence. Mr. St. Francis brought the matter before the tribal court, which fined Mr. Yarnell \$500 for illegally seizing the car and harassing the chief.

Mr. Yarnell said, "I'm not planning to pay anything."

There are some who think Mr. St. Francis's approach is the correct one. In a newspaper column Sept. 23 William Howland, director of the Northern Studies Program at Middlebury College, came to the chief's defense, arguing that "the license plate, the demands, and the 'fines' he has imposed — all have gotten our attention without causing anyone injury." He continued: "This is creative communication, and immensely preferable to the kind of Winchester standoff that has happened elsewhere."

Last week, however, after the state's attorney for Franklin County said Mr. St. Francis had threatened to burn down his house and to harm several law-enforcement officers, a Vermont district judge ordered the chief not to harass any of the officials involved in prosecuting the current cases.

The state's attorney, Howard van Benthyssen, said Mr. St. Francis threatened last month to burn down all non-Indian churches in the area.

### Government Is Petitioned

As he presses his case against the authorities, Mr. St. Francis is also trying to gain recognition from the Federal Government. For this, the tribe, the St. Francis-Sokoki Band of Abenakis of Vermont, has petitioned the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Michael Lawson, a bureau historian, said the Abenaki petition is next in line for review. The evaluation by a research team is likely to begin next year, he said, and should take a year to complete.

"We don't have any recognized Abenakis now and this is the only petitioning group," Mr. Lawson said.

He said that since the bureau instituted its recognition program a decade

ago, it has evaluated 19 documented petitions and rejected 12.

Such formal recognition is needed before the Abenakis can make a land claim. Land claim settlements have been won by several tribes in the area, including the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy Indians in Maine, who received \$54.5 million; the Naragansetts of Rhode Island, \$3.5 million; the Gay Head Wampanoags of Massachusetts, \$2.5 million, and the Western Pequot Indians of Connecticut, \$900,000.

### Other Recognition Benefits

Mr. St. Francis said he has mixed feelings about the Abenakis' petition.

"Why should I have to ask immigrants for recognition?" he asked, referring to the Abenakis' claim of predated white settlers.

But there is a great deal more at stake. Recognition, Mr. Lawson said, confers upon the tribe the status of "quasi-sovereign government" and makes it eligible for a variety of Federal programs, ranging from health and social welfare to development of natural resources. It allows a tribe to establish unregulated gaming operations like bingo parlors and to set its own rules for hunting and fishing.

For the Abenakis of Swanton, those programs could only help. Mr. St. Francis estimates the employment rate among tribal members at about 65 percent and the illiteracy rate even higher. Those who oppose him concur with those estimates, but they say his leadership has done little to help the situation.

"People in town used to be sympathetic, but now it's becoming a joke, something to talk about over morning coffee," said Mr. Yarnell.

"He has some support among the Indians, but I think he's lost a lot of it," said Joan St. Pierre, whom Mr. St. Francis fired as president of the Abenaki Self-Help Association, which manages the tribe's finances. "I've had a lot of people who used to support him come up to me and say, 'We made a mistake.' He hasn't accomplished much except making the Indians look like a bunch of fools."

In an effort to improve relations between the tribe and non-Indians, last week the Vermont Historical Society and several other groups sponsored a program on Abenaki history and culture that was presented in Montpelier and Swanton. It included a presentation by Colin Calloway, a historian from the University of Wyoming. "To a historian, Vermont is just as much Indian country as is Wyoming," Mr. Calloway told the Swanton audience.

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