Change was not something that happened quickly at Mistissini. In 1950 Edward Rogers took his bride, Jean, for a winter's visit to Alfie Matoush's camp to learn about the Mistissini Cree who had a long tradition of living by the fur trade in a cold harsh climate but were ignored by most of the outside world. For the Cree it was an honorable way of life providing them a living and security. Furs were the major source of income at Mistissini. The hunting territories ranged from 1500 to 3000 sq. miles in size, large enough to include a mix of terrain providing conditions for many different species of animals, plants, birds and fish. Self-sufficient people could usually harvest a variety of food and trap furs enough to exchange for a year's store goods. A good trapper made $15,000-$20,000 a year. Fur prices depended on the European fur market and fluctuated much like the stock market. 1970 was a year of great fur protests in Europe and North America. Fur prices tumbled. Mistissini's estimated income dropped $50,000, a huge loss for a reason that they could not understand. It was very difficult to explain the sudden drop in fur prices to a trapper convinced that he had more credit at the Bay Store. They were proud people, their furs were second to none, receiving top dollars at the Hudson's Bay fur auctions in Montreal. If they were to have a heraldic device, the beaver would be the dominant figure on it. The number of winter bush camps increased each winter from 1970-75. Then hunting was forced to be reduced by the land requirements of the massive James Bay Hydro Project invading the Mistissini Territory.

In 1960 the Québec government suddenly took an interest in Mistissini, deciding it was time for them to come into the 20th century. Prior to that it was rare for the chief to see the Indian agent for more than a very brief annual visit. A transition period began that would dramatically change life for these remote people. Mistissini Post was one of a network of trading posts that included Chibougamau, Nemiscoau, Neokweskau, and Nichikun. The Indian's summer vacation was a trip to the Post to trade for their winter outfit and prepare their gear for the following winter. It was also a time to visit with friends and for social activities such as weddings.
The Hudson's Bay Company, claiming that their plan had nothing to do with Québec's proposal, began closing surrounding posts making Mistissini the major trading center. The Mistissini Territory covered 65,000 square miles of prime wilderness that the outside world felt had little or no economic value.

The government had little regard for Mistissini traditions. One of Québec's early changes in Mistissini routine life was the enactment of a law that changed the term of office of the chief from life to two years. Mistissini traditionally elected a chief for life, usually a son of the former chief. Powers of a chief were rather limited as the requirements of the hunting groups lacked the formality of conventional communities. The traditional chief was noted for his ability to survive and provide for people in a cold, white, wilderness world. Younger well-educated people were needed who had knowledge and experience in dealing with the demanding white government officials who were imposing new regulations. The position of a paid band master, a position similar to that of a city manager, was created to help with the introduced bureaucratic paper work and to deal with the many government bureaucrats attempting to improve life at Mistissini. The first social workers were not prepared to come face to face with people living in tents. When they saw children, whose parents for some reason were away, living with grandparents, they found this good reason to send the children to city foster homes. Sociologists who lived "by the book" had the arguments on their side, but not the band members. The band had to work hard to keep their children, but succeeded.

The most accepted new office was the full-time nursing service. A full-time priest was assigned to the village. One of his foremost duties was to help the self-sufficient people to understand communal living. Where one's closest friend and neighbor lived ten or more miles away, the new village plan surrounded you with people you might not know well or would not want for neighbors. Finally people were permitted to select who their neighbors were to be. There were many new regulations that needed defining for those so new to communal living. A method to communicate with Québec bureaucrats was needed; a very unreliable telephone system was installed, but no technician was assigned to it. Luckily, Ken Blaber, the priest appointed to Mistissini, had been a mining engineer. His experience from that profession was extremely valuable to the infant community. He became very well acquainted with the telephone
system that was in frequent need of repair. Later when young men who had graduated from high school looked to the new copper mines for work, Ken taught classes in civil engineering. Cree traditions taught Indians to fear going below ground. Those who had attended school were not aware of those teachings. Parents feared for children planning to work in the mines and tried to discourage them from doing so, however, some were attracted by the high wages offered at the Chibougamau copper mines. These families established an Indian Center in Chibougamau where Cree could live maintaining their own ways. The first Indians hired found it difficult to cope with the French laborers who did not want Indians competing for “their” jobs. The mine administrator agreed to try an all Indian team. Their study of French and Indian workers showed that at noon production by the Indian workers was lower than the French, but at the end of the day the Indians’ production lead the French. The Indians retained their pace, but the French slowed down as the afternoon passed.

The first children to go to school were sent to Sault Sainte Marie and did not return for seven years. The Rev. J.E. De Wolfe, Anglican priest, established a new residential school at La Tuque. Students were bussed to school and returned for the holidays. This school was very good and the only one in La Tuque that had a swimming pool. Many of the students returning home for the summer went into summer bush fish camps with their families. After being exposed to all the wonders of electrical appliances and gadgets, bush life was very limiting. Some children decided to go to visit friends living in Senneterre where they had the benefits of electricity. In one instance three young 12 year old girls were so bored at Mistissini that they were determined to go to Senneterre. They started hitchhiking, were picked up by three young men, driven off on a back road and murdered. This was a tremendous shock to all the eastern James Bay Indian communities. Such behavior was not Indian and they were not prepared for it. It was a hard way to learn that children could not roam without supervision.

As good as that school was, many families wanted a new elementary school in the new village. Their plan required not only a school building but dormitories for teachers, and Indian supervised student dormitories. They felt that small children would adjust to the school system better if they had Indian supervisors for the dorms. Not long after that pressure developed for a village high school. La Tuque was anxious to obtain the Cree School; work went ahead at Mistissini on a high school and
expanded dormitories. Toilets became a source of entertainment for youth who enjoyed plugging them. The custodian kept his plunger handy. When school closed for the annual spring goose hunt vacation, the custodian’s tent in a goose hunting camp was evident by the plunger tied to a tree in front of his tent. Some said that he was going to open up the streams and start the water flowing!

The first high school graduates who returned were like fish out of water. They lacked bush skills and there was little opportunity to work with their acquired school skills. There was a very limited labor market at Mistissini until government building construction began. The young high school graduates obtained construction jobs and learned a trade.

The Hudson’s Bay Company warehouse was enlarged and Glen Speers, the manager who had been in the area since about 1944, began to expand his stock with things that he knew would improve bush life such as canoe motors, flashlights, radios, tape recorders and other portable battery operated items. Coleman stoves and lamps were added to trapper’s inventories. Pampers replaced the moss that mothers picked for children’s diapers and were always in evidence at every camp. About 1975 when short skirts were generally in vogue, Speers took the bold step of ordering short skirts. The non-Indians at Mistissini were in agreement that the Indians would never purchase them. How wrong they were! The short skirt was just as popular at Mistissini as it was in the rest of the world.

It was not easy to ship anything to Mistissini from the outside world. There was no transportation on a regular schedule. Anyone going there had to go to Lake Waconichi and radio for a boat. Due to the transportation difficulties, each fall Glen Speers sent out his Hudson’s Bay Company order for the entire year’s village needs about the time that the previous year’s order arrived. The pattern of one annual order and one annual delivery had not changed since the days when a Hudson’s Bay sailing ship arrived once a year. In 1960 the supplies were shipped to Chipougamau by train, hauled to Lake Waconichi where they were transferred to a small barge and taken to Mistissini. Fresh milk, ice cream and junk foods were unknown in Mistissini. Clothing styles sent to the HBC were usually those no longer in vogue in Europe. Glen Speers’ store was like a visit to a museum for here was everything band members needed for their winter in the bush: rabbit snare wire, traps, guns, cartridges, crooked knives, camp stoves, sections of stove pipe, rolls of canvas, duffle, blankets, sleeping bags, heavy clothing, thread, fancy ribbons and
other material for decorating moose hide boots, gloves, bags, or other articles. Canoes were numbered, and when purchased, the owner’s name was recorded with the identifying number. The owner of an overturned canoe would readily be known.

Hudson’s Bay factors and Anglican priests had emphasized that couples living together should have a proper wedding. They frowned on unmarried couples who had children. It was not always easy for the Mistissini to meet the criteria of the white world. Sometimes Mistissini bush life required young couples to live together for a winter, even though there was no priest available to perform a wedding ceremony. When a clergyman became available in the summer, several weddings would take place at the same time. Often the priest was not well acquainted with the people, even the several couples to be married. Once the officiating priest married two of the men to wrong girls. However, the couples were officially sealed together, and I was assured that they all lived happily ever after. In those days, when the population at Mistissini was much smaller, the grooms went hunting to provide a wedding feast for everyone in the village. The sudden population explosion of the growing modern village made it impossible to provide sufficient food for everyone. The couple to be married had to limit their guests by send invitations to their friends.

When the wedding feasts were no longer community feasts, the band organized an annual Mistissini feast during the summer. Hunters were authorized to shoot geese during the hunting season and other animals that were then stored in a freezer for the summer feast.

Bush plane travel was gaining popularity by those who needed to travel in the north. Glen Speers who had previously made his two winter trips into bush camps by dog team experimented with the use of the airplane. Trappers moved their camp several times during a winter. During their stay at Mistissini they had determined their winter plans and knew exactly when they would move and their new location during their winter hunt. Before the trappers left for their winter quarters Glen Speers knew where each hunter planned to camp and marked the dates and location on his maps. Hunters gave Glen orders for goods they would need for each of his two trips to their camp; his trips were a combination of restocking a hunter’s larder and the purchasing of furs. The freight costs were entirely assumed by the Hudson’s Bay Company. Glen found that he could make many more visits in a short period of time by plane than by dog team, an important factor when considering the subarctic climate. It was a much
more efficient means of wilderness travel. The Indians soon copied his example. The average cost of a hunter’s flight for his family and winter outfit from Mistissini to the winter bush camp was $800. As air service became more accepted, one band member obtained his pilot’s license and became the most popular pilot among the Indians. Several years later he purchased his own plane. When it became apparent that the Indians should form their own flying service, he became the manager. The band bought five planes and sent five young men out to learn to fly. Many northern companies used helicopters advantageously. Soon the band bought five helicopters and sent five more young men out to learn to fly them.

The nursing station, nurses, teachers, and civil servants quarters, schools and dormitories required water. A young man who had enjoyed his mechanical drawing classes designed a water system for the village. A-framed water outlets, quickly termed “nipi tepees,” were planned at several sites where the Indians could get water for their daily needs. There were also two public shower rooms for the Indians.

Mistissini had its schools, but the adults were in the bush hunting. The village had an abnormally high percentage of youth in its population. Many communal youth recreational activities were started. Hockey and broom ball were popular. Older boys enjoyed skidooing. The schools were looked to for activities and became the center for holiday celebrations. Many parents wanted the school to develop a program that permitted children to visit bush camps where they would be introduced to traditional activities. Children were permitted to visit family camps for a week and were expected to take their books and do the required homework while there. Books were often forgotten. There was no way to return for, or to replace, any forgotten item.

Many elders did not want the road to come to Mistissini. They were well aware of the bad things that would easily make their way to the village that were not present in their village. However, in 1970 it came, and with it came all kinds of vehicles, peddlers, alcohol, drugs, evangelists, and crafty salesmen. They were fortunate that the climate was not conducive for hippies. Many good things resulted from the road also. One of the men quickly obtained his driver’s license, purchased a Suburban and obtained the franchise to haul mail from the village to the post office at Chibougamau. He obtained the contract to take patients to and from the Chibougamau hospital. For several years this included returning those
who died at the hospital. His work was considered so un-Indian that he was assigned a house near the independent white residents, the priest and the HBC personnel. Fresh vegetables, bread, and junk food were delivered once or twice a week. Milk was often sour by the time it reached the consumer. The manual gasoline pumps were upgraded to electrical to better serve the vehicles and snowmobiles. Some women purchased gasoline-powered washing machines. Indians studied the new appliances carefully before being convinced that the new item would improve their lifestyle. They quickly added the chainsaw to their winter outfit. It was not only a great improvement for cutting wood, but also for cutting holes in the four-foot-thick lake ice.

Another early popular item was the portable battery-operated tape recorder. People recorded favorite music, including hymns, and played them while doing routine chores in their tents. The nurses found it of great importance. Infectious diseases were not common in the isolated winter camps where visitors were few. If one person in a camp contracted a disease, probably all those in the camp would catch it. When a medical emergency occurred in a camp many miles from the village, a person in the camp could explain and describe on tape the condition of the sick one or accident victim. A runner took the tape to a camp closer to the village where a fresh runner would relieve the first. This action was repeated until one reached the nursing station. The nurse listened to the tape and decided whether to send medicines with instructions for use back with the runner, whether to hitch up her dog team and go to the scene, or radio out for a doctor to go to the camp by bush plane. The tape-recorded message was an improvement over the runners being given an oral message.

Snowmobiles were introduced to Mistissini. Non-Indians considered them a recreation vehicle; Indians evaluated them as a work horse. The skeptical non-Indians did not consider that they could maintain and make necessary repairs to the snow machines. After a few late night snowshoe treks back to camp leaving the snowmobile miles away, they would return to dogs. Again they were wrong. In three years the snowmobile replaced dog teams. They doubled the distance of trapline one could cover in a day and still return about dusk. Riding the snowmobile, although only going 25 mph in the coldest weather, was much colder than snowshoeing. There were also the winds sweeping across the rivers and lakes causing additional chill.
As the Indians became more oriented to electrical appliances, they even added battery powered TVs and portable electric generators to their growing list of camp gear. Bush camps hundreds of miles from an electric line replaced candles and Coleman lamps with an electric light bulb. Probably the most innovative system was a two-way radio system connecting Mistissini with bush camps. These were powered by car batteries. The system had a 90 mile range. Someone at the 90 mile limit had the responsibility to rebroadcast to those for the next 90 miles and then on to the last 90 miles of the Mistissini Territory. Every morning every camp received a seven am wake-up call and check of people. Any medical problem could be reported. When medical emergencies occurred, the condition could be reported immediately and a doctor could be at the patient’s side in an hour or two, or the patient could be flown to a hospital in two or three hours.

There were a few things for which suitable store substitutes could not be found. Moose or caribou hide boots were superior to the best store boot. Feet sweat in an insulated boot that does not permit moisture to escape. The foot is warm while walking, but quickly becomes cold and feet freeze when one stops, even to boil tea. No substitute has been found for moose-hide gloves. Frozen fingers and hands could lead to much greater problems in the northern bush. Nothing in the Hudson’s Bay Store can compete with the ancient bone fleshers fashioned from moose or caribou leg bones for skinning beaver and scraping fat from some skins.\

During the years that Québec had ignored its northern Indians, the principal outside influences were the Hudson’s Bay Company, the Canadian Government, and the Anglican Church of Canada, all English-speaking groups. The Québec Government was a strong advocate for the French language. A choice of English or French was offered and a vote was to be taken. Benefits of each language were debated. The French language won. Adult courses were offered. Those taking lessons were paid. Even those who could speak French found the additional money useful. This affected the schools as all the children’s classes were in English. Government bureaucrats insisted on the use of the French language for all social services, family care, and business requests. The Hudson’s Bay Company and Anglican Church retained the English language. School children were given the option of going to French-speaking or English-speaking classes. Just as families a few years before decided to send some
children to school and keep others in the bush, they now sent some to the French language school and others to the English language school.

Most of the social service workers had no idea of what Mistissini life was like. They went to Mistissini with their well founded community services backgrounds and sophisticated theories concerning children's needs for proper upbringing. They were shocked to find some cases of grandparents taking care of children in the remote bush camps while parents were temporarily away. The social worker's immediate reaction was to take those children away and place them in city foster homes where they would not even know the language spoken. This was an area where two cultures clashed. Village elders were horrified. It was hard work for the Cree to educate those going by the book of the importance for Mistissini children to be brought up in Mistissini. In the end they won out and some social workers became more enlightened.

Mistissini families had always cared for their dead. Before the road it was not easy to go to a hospital, but some were flown to hospitals in Montreal. If they died there, their remains were flown back to Mistissini and the family prepared the body for burial and dug the grave. After the road came to the village more people went to the hospital than before, resulting in more Mistissini people dying in a hospital than before. The Mistissini band member having the contract with the hospital transported the remains returning them to their family. That went on perhaps a year. Then someone announced to the village that Québec Law stipulated that only Québec licensed undertakers were permitted to transport the dead. Some of the Cree regarded this as another way white people were taking a job concerning Indians away from Indians. The Government agreed to pay the transportation costs. For two or three hundred years the Indians had made their caskets in the same way that 17th century caskets for seamen who died at sea were made. The undertakers returned bodies in welfare caskets. Most of the Chibougamau undertakers did not look forward to delivering remains to the Indian village. Many did not know where to take them when they got there. The young wife of a new missionary who had just arrived at Mistissini and returned to the rectory from her first shopping trip to the Hudson's Bay Store found that a small white plastic box had been left on her door step. She thought, "How nice. Somebody has given us a welcoming gift." She removed the plastic cover and was shocked to discover the remains of an infant. She learned quickly that she was in a community where she would have to make adjustments.
The James Bay Project’s plan to turn Mistissini Territory lands into reservoirs to generate and send electricity as far as New York City but not to Mistissini was perhaps the greatest catastrophe for the Mistissini during these years. The Government printed a booklet in Cree explaining the James Bay Project to them and distributed it to all the James Bay Indians. The Indians were aware that something was happening, but were not sure what. They did not really believe much of what they read because they could not imagine it actually happening and did not want to believe it. The chiefs of all the James Bay Cree met at Moose Factory to discuss the project. Their meeting ended with a big book burning on the beach, their answer to the Project. They thought that it would terminate the plan. The James Bay Corporation continued developing the plan. Indians were offered low-level labor jobs for the Project such as line cutting. The money looked good and lured some of the men. I doubt if they really understood what they were doing. The first Indian employees of the James Bay Project began cutting up their hunting territories, not really understanding that they were actually commencing the termination of their centuries-old hunting system. Québec Cree had never made a treaty with anyone. They assumed that the Mistissini Territory belonged to them. They would fight for it, not by war, but peacefully in the courts in the manner of contemporary Canada. They proudly took the challenge to do it themselves refusing aid from both whites and other Indians. Although they lost, they came extremely close to winning. Under the James Bay Project system the Mistissini people were required to be at the village for Christmas-New Years in order to receive their James Bay money. Southern Québec Indians always went to the post for Christmas-New Years holidays, but at Mistissini this was a period when trapping was at its height, the period when furs were in their prime. The James Bay Project terminated the Mistissini as the great fur trappers that they had been for three centuries. The fight brought the Cree closer together. It also created a strong barrier of distrust, enmity and cynicism for all whites. All white people who came to Mistissini were assumed to have an ulterior motive for being there. Why would they come, if they didn’t want Mistissini land? Even people who had visited for years and done much to help them were under suspicion. In the sixties and seventies the Mistissini had the reputation for greeting strangers very politely and cordially, but this changed. They had one image for all non-Indians. Although they lost the
battle, the fight prepared the people to meet the 20th century head on and preserve their ethnicity in a changed world.

When the Mistissini realized that neither the James Bay Hydro Project nor the Québec Government included a plan to provide electricity to Mistissini, they reacted. A television cone-type antenna grew on every Cree’s log home over night. They became a strong voice and electric lines were extended and was made available to everyone in the village.

About 1960 the Mistissini found that strangers from away were attempting to form policies for them that would transform their lives without their consent or prior knowledge. There was immediate reaction to regain control. They put their own band members into as many of the newly created bureaucratic offices as possible. Early work experience in the copper mines, lumber operations and other northern occupations taught them that French labor did not want their competition on the labor market. The unemployed school graduates who learned building construction and formed their own companies showed that they could successfully compete with the outside world. Extremely limited living facilities were turned to an advantage: the closest apartments for outside laborers were in Chibougamau, 50 miles away. The Mistissini companies used their few advantages well and were able to underbid the big construction firms in Québec City and Montreal. They formed their own bush plane operation, and helicopter service. Where they had no village school, they now have elementary and high schools on the reserve with their own school board. The Anglican Church was one of first institutions to have an all Mistissini board. They were able to fill many of the civil service type jobs in their village. They developed a two-way radio system so “instant” contact could be made with almost any one in their 65,000 square mile territory. They work with computers and the Internet and have their own web site.¹

It took most of Canada 300 years to progress from fur trade to high tech; the Mistissini did it in three decades!

Somehow the Mistissini have come through a period of great conflict of cultures accepting many things new to them and have retained their culture.

¹ At the time of publication, the website of the Council of the Cree Nation of Mistissini can be found at http://nation.mistissini.qc.ca.