

5-2021

## The Breeze that Took Her Beads: Examining and Imagining Ojibwe Life at Big Rice Lake After the Treaty of 1854

Travis Armstrong

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THE BREEZE THAT TOOK HER BEADS: EXAMINING AND IMAGINING  
OJIBWE LIFE AT BIG RICE LAKE AFTER THE TREATY OF 1854

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Applied Archaeology

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by  
Travis K. Armstrong  
May 2021

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May 2021

Approved by:

Dr. Russell Barber, Committee Chair, Anthropology

Dr. Thomas Long, Committee Member

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## AGAASIBII'IGAN (ABSTRACT IN OJIBWE)

Mewinzha go 1900 ingoji go, gii-maadaanimad Gaa-manoominiganzhikaag biinish ikwezens wani'aad omanidoominensan, baanimaa gaa-ondaanikaadawaawaad wendaanikejig. Mii ow dibaajimon "Wani'aad Omanidoominensan Nooding," anishaa dibaadodeg ji-bagakendamang keyaa ozhibii'igewaad wendaanikejig nawaj weweni ji-zhawenimindaa gaa-bimaadizijig. Dibaajimowin – gaa-ondinigaadeg gichi-aya'aawi-nibwaakaawin, ondaanikewin, miinawaa gaa-izhiwebak mewinzha – aabadad ji-ni-michi-mikwendamang Anishinaabe-inaadiziwin Gaa-manoominiganzhikaag. Gaa-manoominiganzhikaag eteg "Superior National Forest" ezhinikaadeg onjida gikendaagwad niizhing midaaswaak daso-biboon gaa-izhi-manoominikewaad Anishinaabeg. Ojibwewi-anishinaabeg ogii-miinigoowaan o'ow. Mii na naasaab keyaa keyaa aabajitoowaad Gaa-manoominiganzhikaag dibishkoo gaa gaa-aabadak ishkweyaang? Aaniin wenji-inendaagwak nawaj noomaya gii-aabajitoowaad Ojibweg gaa-ishkwaa-inaakinigaadeg zoongi-mazina'igan miinawaa gii-mamigaadeg odakiimiwaan gaa-onji-zanagak eshkam ji-babaa-ayaawaad? Gii-pabaamaadiziwag anishinaabeg 1900 ingoji go wiigwaasi-jiimaaning ji-bi-ondaadiziikewaad Gaa-manoominiganzhikaag wiigiwaaming. Mii keyaa maamikwendaagwak Gaa-manoominiganzhikaag Ojibwewakiing nandawenjigeng, mawinzong, miinawaa ganawenjigeng ezhi-gikendamowaad gichi-aya'aag, gekendaagwak ondaanikeng, miinawaa mazina'iganan mewinzha gaa-ozhibii'igaadeg.

## ABSTRACT

It's the early 1900s, and a breeze off Big Rice Lake in northern Minnesota steals away a girl's tiny glass beads, later to be excavated by archaeologists. The story of "The Breeze That Took Her Beads" is archaeological fiction meant to humanize scientific descriptions that can be impersonal or unapproachable to audiences outside of the profession. The imagined story – rooted in tribal elder wisdom, archaeology and history – becomes a vehicle for acknowledging the perseverance of tribal life at Big Rice Lake. Big Rice Lake in the Superior National Forest is known for its 2,000 years of wild rice production by a series of indigenous cultures. The Ojibwe people are the modern-day inheritors of this legacy. Does their seasonal use of Big Rice Lake correspond to those far into the prehistoric past? Why do archaeological findings presented here suggest more extensive Ojibwe use after federal treaties in the mid-1800s took away their land and restricted tribal mobility? The Ojibwe people until the early 1900s were traveling in birch-bark canoes in large groups to Big Rice Lake and giving birth to their children in wigwams there. Elder knowledge, archaeological analysis and historical documentation suggest possible reasons why Big Rice Lake persists to be a place of meaning on the Ojibwe landscape in memory, for subsistence hunting and gathering, and for continuing stewardship.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With gratitude and respect:

Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Dr. Russell Barber, Dr. Thomas Long, Dr. Amy Gusick, Dr. Peter Robertshaw, Lee Johnson and the Superior National Forest, Dr. Sean Dunham and the Chippewa National Forest, Dr. David Mather and the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Dr. Guy Hepp, Daniel McCarthy, John Eddy, Beverly Miller, Rose Berens, Bill Latady, Dr. Bill Sapp, Dr. Anton Treuer for Ojibwe Abstract translation, the late Seppo Valpuu and other previous Big Rice Lake researchers who built the foundation for this study, and the CSUSB Anthropology Department and Graduate School for funding.

## DEDICATION



Figure D.01: Beverly Miller on the dock at Big Rice Lake in 2017

The research project before you would not have happened without Beverly Miller, longtime director of the cultural heritage museum on the Bois Forte Reservation in northern Minnesota. Ms. Miller early on gave her blessing for this project to proceed and was crucial in reaching out to Bois Forte Ojibwe elders. She did this while undergoing medical treatment. Beverly Rose Miller (Lightfeather), *Nayta Wau Jinok* (Lady Floating Across the Lake), *Minis Aanakadook* (Island Cloud Woman) passed away before seeing the project finished. This thesis would be incomplete without acknowledging the honored wisdom, encouraging words and sly-but-warm humor she shared. *Chi-Miigwetch*.



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## PROLOGUE

### CAUTION

“*Come over here,*” the Ojibwe elder says, gesturing in my direction. “*I want to talk to you.*” She lowers her voice, just slightly, to say she wants to tell me something. We are standing in a dirt parking lot near the boat launching area on the shores of Big Rice Lake in the Superior National Forest in northern Minnesota. She is one of a group of elders from the Bois Forte Reservation who have come today, I hope, to share their knowledge. The Bois Forte Band of Chippewa “in particular maintains a strong cultural tie to the lake,” notes the Management Plan Revision for Big Rice Lake (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources 2013: 4). Bois Forte is pronounced “boys fort.” Nineteenth Century Ojibwe writer William Whipple Warren explains the name: “A considerable body of the Northern Ojibways are denominated by their fellow-tribesmen *Sug-wau-dug-ah-win-in-e-wug* (men of the thick fir-woods), derived from the interminable forests of balsam, spruce, pine, and tamarac trees which cover their hunting-grounds. Their early French discoverers named them ‘Bois Forts,’ or Hardwoods” (1885: 85).

It is May 2017, with summer not far off. But this is the far north of Minnesota so those of us gathered here still are wearing jackets. Superior National Forest archaeologist Lee Johnson has taken off his coat to lay it out on the ground, using it as a backdrop to display artifacts that archaeologists

decades ago removed from here after excavations. See Figure P.01 and Figure P.02. The wind today is chilly. The sky is gray. The lake water, reflecting the clouds above, at times is dark blue or gray. Much of the surrounding forest is wet. Melting snow has left pools of cold water in the woods. The birch, maple and many of the other trees still are stripped bare of leaves. The pines, evergreen, stand in contrast. Spring, at least as many people outside of northern Minnesota know it, has yet to reach Big Rice Lake.

At first, the cold and somewhat forbidding nature of this space may seem an unusual one to come to talk about persistence and adaptability. But archaeologists have found spears at Big Rice Lake used by ancient hunters after the glaciers retreated at the end of the last Ice Age, perhaps 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. Another chapter of Big Rice Lake's story began when tribal peoples started to harvest a plant whose stalk grows out of the water, today known as wild rice, here 2,000 years or more ago.

The Ojibwe people call it *manoomin*, the good berry, a food that is central to tribal subsistence, tradition and identity. The Ojibwe people have continued a legacy of wild rice harvesting and production at Big Rice Lake long after the federal government said this territory was no longer theirs. They also hunted here, from moose to ducks, and creatures in between. They fished. In early spring, they would tap the maple trees for its watery sap to turn it into sugar. And, according to the elders, they buried their dead here.

Big Rice Lake, an official at the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office wrote is “a site of exceptional scientific and historical significance” (Gimmestad 1989). For the Ojibwe people, Big Rice Lake also is one of the places on the tribal landscape that their migration story – of them traveling from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Superior – says they were divined to find. The Ojibwe people would end their westward journey, the story says, when they found places with food growing on top of the water. Big Rice Lake and all other wild rice habitats for the Ojibwe people are imbued with a spiritual meaning connected to their continuing identity as a distinct community of people. Wild rice grows in many other lakes and rivers in the Upper Great Lakes region. So why here at Big Rice Lake? Why such persistence? Why have a group of elders bothered to come here to talk specifically about this place, or let someone into their homes and offices on the nearby Bois Forte Reservation to ask questions?

This project will use Ojibwe testimony, archaeological investigation and historical documentation to explore these and other questions. But, first, to get to that examination, there must be caution and then permission to do so.

*“You know about the monsters,”* the elder says to me after we leave the others in our group. She has lived her whole life among the woods and lakes of these northern reaches of Minnesota. Monsters? It is unclear to me whether her words about knowing about monsters amount to a question or declaration, so I just nod. One should know better than to get in the way of an Ojibwe elder who is ready to share a story. My own father would tell stories about the North Country,

sometimes haunting, sometimes funny, and always, even when we did not realize it at the time, meant to connect us to the dream-and-vision-filled world of the Ojibwe people and their lands, to let you know you belonged here too. Stories about animals or strange entities, tricksters, or vision-like appearances of ancestors shape your connection to the land, at once bringing a sense of closeness as well as respect and fear. I recall elders dropping bits and pieces of long-held knowledge, seeing if you were ready to receive it.

*“When I was little,”* she continues, *“little green creatures tried to pull me into the water. They reached up at me to pull me in.”* What? I ask, thinking I misheard her. She said they wanted to drown her, pull her down in the water. Here, at Big Rice Lake? I ask, glancing back at the dark lake. No, I’m told, with a shake of her head. Her creatures were not in this lake. They lived in a lake near where she was from to the north. Her childhood memory, given life in a story to me, could be taken as a statement of fact, a test, a warning, or all three.

The Ojibwe people in the Lake Superior and Mississippi River headwaters regions embrace a storied sense of place that connects them to the natural environment, the land and the waters. Ojibwe oral stories may provide inspiration or serve as warnings of danger. They often emphasize mythical and modern connections to place. An example is the continuing hold that the sea creature *Mishipeshu* has on individuals venturing on Lake Superior and its shores. A pictograph on the Ontario side of the lake depicts this underwater lynx with spikes on its back and horns on its head. *Mishipeshu* can bring death and

destruction. It guards the copper first mined for tools by indigenous peoples, tools that archaeologists have unearthed at Big Rice Lake. On the Minnesota side of Lake Superior is a 500-year-old tree growing out of a large rock on the lakeshore on the Grand Portage Reservation. This Little Spirit Cedar Tree, also known as the Witch Tree, has restricted access today. But those individuals allowed to see it leave tobacco and other offerings as a testament to the power of the spirits and the lake that the tree embodies.

Connections to places through stories are part of everyday Ojibwe life. They also are warnings. Big Rice Lake may or may not have creatures like *Michipeshu* in Lake Superior or the green creatures of her childhood. Hers was a cautionary reminder of the power of nature and, more specifically, a story directed at me to treat this lake, this land and the ancient people buried there with respect and a degree of fear if this research project was to continue. It was left up to me to understand this, or just dismiss her extraordinary story as a fanciful tale.

*"I want to show you something,"* she next says, holding her cell phone and showing me pictures of her ricing. She was moving on from her story. The moment was over. But her story had served notice on me, subtly and indirectly.



Figure P.01: Ojibwe elders at Big Rice Lake



Figure P.02: Big Rice Lake artifacts

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION



Figure 1.01: Road sign to Big Rice Lake in the Superior National Forest

The geographic location of this research project is Big Rice Lake (*Gaa-manoominiganzhikaag*), today within the Superior National Forest in northern Minnesota. For thousands of years, long before Minnesota achieved statehood in 1858 or the federal government created the national forest in 1909, the life-sustaining resources that the lake and surrounding woods provided drew many different cultures. They were there after the Ice Age glaciers melted away and later when the first pottery-making emerged in the North Woods to usher in a period of growth and technical innovation. Ever since, they have kept coming.



Big Rice Lake is known for the antiquity of indigenous harvesting and production of wild rice there. It is one of the oldest documented locations for these activities in the Upper Great Lakes region. Indigenous peoples have continued to travel there, for wild rice and other sources of nourishment, even after federal treaties in the 1800s created Indian reservations that removed Big Rice Lake from direct aboriginal control. Yet the human story of Big Rice Lake goes beyond its tangible physical or geographic location. It is a story of perseverance and persistence, a place on Minnesota's prehistoric and modern tribal landscape that has attracted people since time immemorial.

This project utilizes Big Rice Lake's archaeological assemblages but also relies on tribal testimony to inform and create, it is hoped, a more approachable work for those outside academic and professional archaeology. Archaeological analysis and assumptions, tribal knowledge and historical documentation further Big Rice Lake's story, particularly about life there after the creation of reservations meant to restrict travel by Ojibwe tribal members.

### Telling A Story

Many ways exist to tell a story from the same set of facts or events. Anthropologist Margery Wolf in "A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism and Ethnographic Responsibility" (1992) focuses on an incident during her fieldwork involving a village woman in Taiwan acting strangely to create three narratives from different perspectives. She concludes that writers should

consider their responsibility for more practical and less academic perspectives for their work to reach other audiences.

Archaeologist Janet D. Spector in “What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village” (1993) uses an artifact to imagine the life of a young indigenous woman who may have lost an antler-handled tool in a village in southern Minnesota in the 1800s. She writes that even though materials found by archaeologists reflect the unique individuals who made and used these objects, “archaeological descriptions and interpretations tend to be impersonal, even when the site’s inhabitants are known from written records” (30). Spector used the perforating tool to create a story of an imagined young woman who lost it and her family’s life in the village. Drawing on information presented here, this research project will use Spector’s approach to create a story about how hundreds of tiny glass beads wound up in the ground at Big Rice Lake to humanize the research process and provide relatable glimpses of the perseverance of tribal life there.

Archaeologically speaking, Big Rice Lake is “a site of exceptional scientific and historical significance,” an official at the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office wrote three decades ago (Gimmestad 1989). As Big Rice Lake’s descriptive name suggests, the lake is home to wild rice, an aquatic plant that harvesters later can turn into a long-term storable source of food through the drying, parching and winnowing of its kernels. For illustrative purposes, Figure 1.01 to Figure 1.05 are photographs of the Big Rice Lake area and wild rice

harvested and processed by the author of this research project on the Mississippi River about 80 miles west of Big Rice Lake.

This production process has potential to leave traces in the archaeological record. Big Rice Lake was at the center of such studies from the 1980s to early 2000s. Research on prehistoric ceramic types and associated carbonized wild rice kernels there have challenged notions of the antiquity of wild rice harvesting in the Upper Great Lakes region, pushing the date back to 2,000 or more years ago (Shafer 2003; Valppu 1989; Valppu and Rapp 2000).

In the scientific language of an archaeological report, a site record could simply classify Big Rice Lake as “a seasonal occupation site for food harvesting and production.” Big Rice Lake’s archaeological assemblages document its use by a series of aboriginal cultures gathering and processing wild rice. The modern-day inheritors of this indigenous legacy are the Ojibwe people, part of the Algonquian-speaking language group who lived in vast territories in the United States and Canada during the time of European contact. The Ojibwe people see Big Rice Lake as more than a temporary occupation site to procure food and more than only an archaeological site of exceptional scientific value.

A note on use of tribal names: The name Ojibwe and related spellings such as Ojibwa and Ojibway possibly come from early French explorers for a type of moccasin the indigenous people wore. Chippewa is an English variation that often appears in federal government dealings with the tribe including the initial official names of tribal governments recognized by the United States.

*Anishinaabe* is the name for the people in their tribal language. For consistency, this project generally will use Ojibwe unless tribal governments or other entities use one of the other names.



Figure 1.02: Top of a wild rice stalk



Figure 1.03: Harvested kernels



Figure 1.04: Parched kernels



Figure 1.05: Finished hulled wild rice

## Research Questions

Researchers in the region primarily know Big Rice Lake for the prehistoric archaeology of its wild rice. But collections of artifacts from previous excavations there possess the potential to document the extent of when indigenous peoples were at Big Rice Lake beyond the annual wild rice season in the late summer and early fall. A genesis of this research project was a conversation with a tribal elder of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa who questioned the archaeologically derived notion that Big Rice Lake primarily was a seasonal camp site for harvesting and processing wild rice. Her knowledge, from what she has seen and heard, from what was passed down, suggested otherwise.

This spawned one of the project's research questions: How would archaeological investigation and historical documentation stand up to tribal testimony about the extent of Big Rice Lake's seasonality?

Researchers suggest that certain use patterns that exist today may be continuations of the prehistoric utilizations of the Big Rice Lake site (Superior National Forest 1983: 295). Big Rice Lake possesses an extensive prehistoric record from a series of excavations and testing there. Most researchers, though, have not emphasized its post-contact archaeology in longer-form studies. But the historical and continuing uses of Big Rice Lake are more than historical side notes. As background, just 95 years ago, Ojibwe mothers were giving birth to their children in wigwams at Big Rice Lake (Minnesota Historical Society, 2006). Ojibwe families during this time also were using birch-bark canoes to paddle and

portage to wild rice camps there in the late summer or early fall (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 11, 1914).

The mid-1800s to mid-1900s at Big Rice Lake are understudied periods compared to the research done on prehistoric times there. The specific historical documentation about Ojibwe families traveling by birch-bark canoe and living in wigwams at Big Rice Lake led to a second question: What would tribal, archaeological and other historical investigation reveal about life at Big Rice Lake after federal treaties in the mid-1800s created reservations in northern Minnesota?

These two questions, regarding seasonality and decades of occupation, are somewhat straightforward. But answers to them, or the interpretations derived from those answers, will form part of the basis to explore a broader third inquiry into whether Big Rice Lake has been a persistent place on the tribal landscape from prehistoric to modern times.

### Organization and Approach

Caution and collaboration are guiding principles of this research project, as it involves asking a tribal community to share its knowledge and participate in an anthropological and archaeological inquiry even though these fields have a contested history for the Ojibwe people. With this in mind, this is the project's outline:

Chapter Two discusses Big Rice Lake's environmental and geographic settings and the archaeological heritage sites there. Chapter Three contextualizes ways in which anthropology and its sub-discipline archaeology are rooted in exploration and colonialism and Ojibwe experiences with this history. Chapter Four addresses theories and methods, including the responsibility to utilize theoretical frameworks suitable to the Ojibwe people and methodical approaches that include the process of gaining permission to study a tribal space. Chapter Five provides background on the Ojibwe people and their connections to wild rice. Chapter Six details Big Rice Lake's prehistoric record. Chapter Seven details post-contact times through the archaeological record. Chapter Eight examines historical and other written documentation. Chapter Nine details Ojibwe wisdom and knowledge through oral stories and interviews.

The final four chapters beginning with Chapters Ten and Eleven utilize the research from the earlier sections to provide glimpses of life at Big Rice Lake including its seasonality and persistence as an Ojibwe place. Chapter Twelve tells the story of an imagined little girl, *Mashkawizi*, whose family moves to Big Rice Lake every year to harvest and process wild rice. The child's pendant broke on the last day at ricing camp with the breeze scattering her glass beads across the land. In contrast to impersonal or abstract archaeological narratives, hers is a story of an enduring tribal connection to the land across generations. Chapter Thirteen offers concluding thoughts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SETTING THE SCENE

Lake-dwelling creatures of Ojibwe stories are perfectly at home in the natural world of northern Minnesota and southern Ontario – a place where bodies of water big and small intermingle with wooded and swamp lands. The shapes of thousands of blue-shaded lakes, streams and rivers cover the map of this region. Here, major watersheds divide, sending water to the north, east and south. Ojibwe elders could tell you stories of spiritual power of these great divides and ancient trails and routes connecting them.

#### The Lake and Woods

Big Rice Lake is a small lake compared to the many large lakes in northern Minnesota, 2,072 acres in size with 5.9 miles of shoreline. At its closest point, about 60 miles to the southeast, is Lake Superior. It is the largest of the North America's Great Lakes and the world's biggest fresh water lake by surface size. The Ojibwe people call it *Gitchi-Gumee* or *Kitchi-Gami*, the Great Sea, the Big Lake, the Huge Water.

Lake Superior connects to the other Great Lakes to form a route to the Atlantic Ocean. To the west and north, lakes and rivers form waterways that go deep into North America. Lake Superior's shores became hubs for French, British and American fur-traders. Grand Portage, on the far North Shore of



present-day Minnesota near the Canadian border, was a focal point of commerce between Europeans and tribal people. So crucial to commerce, it was the only place this far west that the British stationed Red Coat soldiers during the Revolutionary War.

Big Rice Lake is in an area of St. Louis County, Minnesota, filled with lakes and rivers surrounded by thick, diverse forests of alder, ash, aspen, balsam fir, basswood, birch, cedar, maple, pine, spruce, tamarack and maple trees, among other trees. Much of Big Rice Lake's shore areas are wetlands with bog plants. It is a shallow lake, and thick beds of wild rice historically have covered portions of it (Superior National Forest 1983: 280).

#### A Three-Way Continental Divide

The lake is in a region where large watersheds divide. It lies about 12 miles north of the Laurentian Divide, the point that separates the Hudson Bay watersheds (draining north and west) and the Lake Superior watersheds (draining east). It is about 20 miles from the beginning of the Mississippi River watersheds (draining south). Water from Big Rice Lake ultimately drains into Hudson Bay in Canada more than 600 miles north. See Figure 2.01 for a road sign marking "A Three-Way Continental Divide."

Another lake, known as Little Rice Lake, is about 1.2 miles to the east. The waters from Little Rice Lake flow into Big Rice Lake through Rice River. By way of a short overland portage, people traveling in canoes can reach Pike River,

which flows into Lake Vermilion at Pike Bay, enabling them to reach still more water routes (Valppu 1989: 8). Lake Vermilion, or Evening Sun Tinting the Water a Reddish Color, or the Lake with the Red Ochre, is about 15 miles northwest of Big Rice Lake by way of a portage route. The Lake Vermilion area is one of the principal population areas of the Bois Forte Ojibwe people.

A U.S. Forest Service document states ethnographic and historical records indicate that tribal people accessed a “major portage” from Pike River to Big Rice Lake’s southern shore (Superior National Forest 1983: 280). Powell recalled elsewhere that every fall her family “would travel about 40 miles over portages and small lakes to get to the rice fields ... It was pleasant to make the trip, leisurely, thinking of the good rice we would have to take back on the return trip” (Powell undated).

To the west, water flows out of Big Rice Lake with the resumption of Rice River. Eventually, Rice River turns north. Along with other nearby rivers and lakes, the routes to the east and west from Big Rice Lake form a chain of connections to Rainy River, Lake of the Woods and Lake Winnipeg before draining into Hudson Bay (Valppu 1989: 8). Big Rice Lake’s “proximity to several major drainage systems allows access to the site from most areas of Minnesota” (Valppu and Rapp 2000: 81-82). See Figure 2.02 to Figure 2.04 for an aerial photograph of Big Rice Lake and regional maps.



Figure 2.01: Road Sign

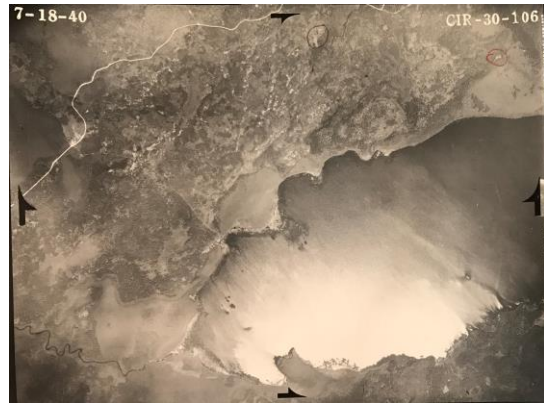


Figure 2.02: 1940 aerial photograph

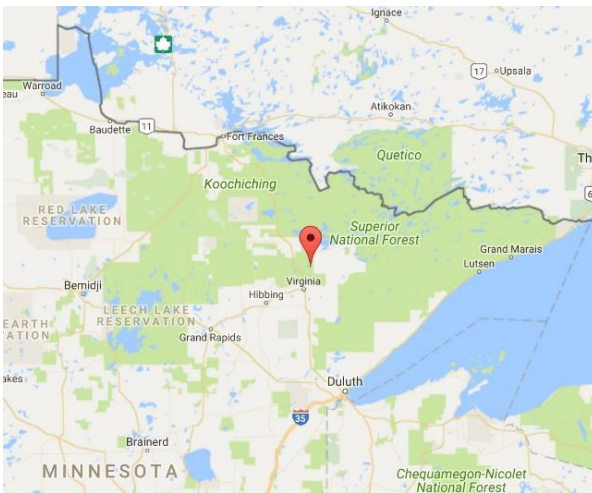


Figure 2.03: General region, Google

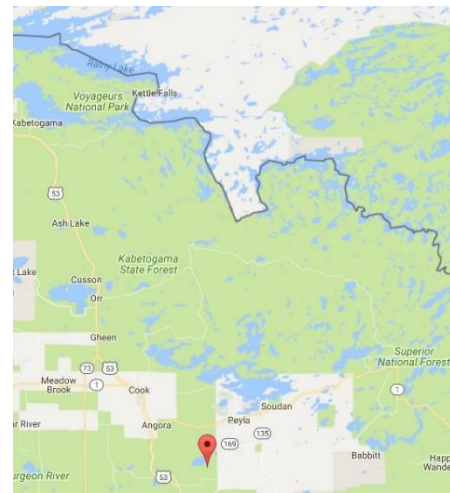


Figure 2.04: Big Rice Lake region, Google

### Archaeological Heritage Site Description

The Big Rice Lake archaeological heritage site is on a peninsula. The tip of the peninsula is surrounded by the lake on its southern, eastern and western sides. Thick woods are to the north and bogs to the east. Archaeologists have recorded three sites, which neighbor or sometimes overlap one another, in this area. Archaeologists often record a single site with separate site records as they

find new areas over the ensuing years or decades that may expand boundaries. Some archaeologists call themselves splitters and divide up a site into what they consider more manageable sizes. Other archaeologists call themselves lumpers for looking at locations through a more wholistic lens. This project sees the common assemblages at Big Rice Lake and tribal perspectives to categorize the three “sites” as one interrelated occupation and use site of the Ojibwe people during the 1800s and 1900s.

Of the three sites, the most cited in archaeological literature is known by the names “Big Rice,” “Big Rice Lake North Point” or “the Clearing.” Its Minnesota state archaeological number is 21SL163, and its U.S. Forest Service number is FS #09-09-09-034. (As background, for Minnesota state numbers, the 21 is for the state of Minnesota, SL is for St. Louis County, and 163 is the archaeological site number within the county. For the U.S. Forest Service, the first 09 is for Region 9, the second 09 is for the Superior National Forest’s designation within that region, the third 09 is for the Laurentian Ranger District, and 034 is the archaeological site number within the district).

Big Rice Lake’s elevation is approximately 1,434 feet. The Clearing has some of the only level higher land adjacent or near the lake, at about 1,440 feet in certain places. A rocky shoreline has protected the site, although on one visit pieces of old ceramics and glass could be seen in the water. People call it the Clearing because there is an absence of trees even though part of the site borders a forested area primarily of ash and aspen trees. The lack of trees here

in the forest reflects human management of the landscape through its occupation and use. Pits used to process wild rice still are visible as indentations in the ground. Its U.S. Forest Service site record notes: “Excellent site for evaluation of prehistoric habitation with its numerous positive tests, varied ceramic types and features associated with a subsistence activity (ricing jigs).” Ricing jigs are holes in the ground where people “dance” on parched wild rice kernels to help break up the husks to begin the process to remove them.

The second site is the Big Rice Lake Inland Terrace location (FS #09-09-09-35), a prehistoric site originally recorded in 1981. The site record states: “The site is a gently sloping bank that forms what we believe is the old lake shoreline. The area consists of a dense maple stand with scattered basswood and birch. Probably associated with rice processing area 09-034. This could be the habitation area and the point could be just processing.” Its elevation is 1,470 feet.

The third site is the Big Rice Lake Inland Terrace Homestead location (FS #09-09-09-36), an historic-era site that overlaps the prehistoric Inland Terrace location (FS #09-09-09-35). Archaeologists originally recorded this site in 1981. They gave it the homestead name because of two earthen-and-rock foundations discovered there. The site record states: “The site consists of the berms of a foundation 3m x 5m. The berms are 2 ft. high and 2 ft. thick. The materials present are a combination of earth and rocks. There are numerous scattered metallic buckets – some galvanized. However, there is no definable correlation (between) the foundation and buckets. A larger structure is represented by berms

– located 60m south of the above mentioned structure. Also – possible burials.” A 1981 sketch map indicates that an 80-year-old birch was growing in the 3x5m feature, which “could mean (the) foundation was all that was left as early as 1900.”

Notes from a 1996 field visit state: “2 maple tree taps for sap collection confirming that use for this site.” These tree taps are some of many other artifacts that indicate the presence of an Ojibwe maple-sap harvesting location known as a Sugar Bush, or *iskigamizigan* as the Ojibwe call such places in their language. The focus of the site record are the rock features. However, the mention of the historic-era artifacts for maple-sap harvesting has led to the historic-era FS #09-09-09-36 to become considered as the Sugar Bush site record.

A fourth site, about a half-mile northeast from the Inland Terrace, is outside the scope of this research project. It is the Big Rice Lake - Esker Well site (FS #09-09-09-37), an historic site. The 1981 site record describes it as consisting of “an old rock-lined well and a pile of rocks in close proximity. There was no evidence of any buildings or other related structures. The site is between two swamps on a narrow ridge.”

As noted, archaeological literature often cites the first location, 21SL163, FS #09-09-09-034, as the “Big Rice” site. However, this research project subsequently will combine the Clearing, the Inland Terrace and Sugar Bush locations collectively into one site, the Big Rice Lake site, because of overlapping

usage. The three locations will be referenced individually when appropriate for the context.

The site record states: “1983 Notes: According to informants, the area near the maple ridge was the site of an historic Ojibwe burial grounds. Several oblong depressions suggest unmarked graves in the area. It was observed that the Ojibwe buried their dead in shallow pits, covered them with low mounds of earth, then build up rocks on the tops. Over time, it is assumed that the low mound would invert, and become slumped in. Local informants also stated that the maple ridge survived the Big Rice fire (year unknown). Only Ojibwe historically tapped maples on the ridge. Tin cans, kettle parts, etc. are supposedly deposited by historic Ojibwe. There is no information on the ownership of the structures represented by berms.” See Figure 2.05 to Figure 2.12 for photographs of Big Rice Lake.



Figure 2.05: Boat launch without dock



Figure 2.06: Boat launch with dock



Figure 2.07: The Clearing



Figure 2.08: Lakeview from the Clearing



Figure 2.09: Inland Terrace



Figure 2.10: Inland Terrace



Figure 2.11: 1980s excavation



Figure 2.12: 1980s screening



## CHAPTER THREE

### ARCHAEOLOGY IN TRIBAL CONTEXTS

#### A Discipline Rooted in Exploration, Academia, and Colonialism

This project involves indigenous peoples who experienced and survived policies of the French, British, American and Canadian governments. This research is being undertaken as part of an academic anthropology and archaeology program. Anthropology and its precursors have centuries-long ties to colonialism. Colonization has many definitions. A general definition is that it is the act of setting up a colony away from one's place of origin. A more political definition is that it is forced change in which one culture dominates another. Americans commonly associate colonization's beginning in the New World with Christopher Columbus (1451-1506).

Researchers have argued that anthropology has a more significant relationship with European and American colonial powers than other social sciences because its original objects of study were dominated people in dominated lands (Hymes 1969: 58). The field as an academic discipline, at least in the past, distinguished itself by the study of living and past of "non-Western cultural Others" (Pandian 1985: 8).

The legacies of the men of social science in the 19th century include advocating Western superiority through their beliefs or theories. These are frameworks that archaeologists today continue to study, debate and ultimately

often reject. Nevertheless, they are part of the evolution of the discipline and reminders of its past. Cultural evolutionist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) coined the term survival of the fittest for cultures before Charles Darwin (1809-1892) brought it to biology (Bohannon and Glazer 1988: 3-6). Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) categorized unilinear cultural evolution from savagery to barbarism to progressing to Western civilization (Trigger 1993: 119-120). American Indians were trapped in the Stone Age, despite evidence at Big Rice Lake and elsewhere that they made and used cooper tools. American physician Samuel Morton (1799-1851) in the 1840s asserted that “scientific measurement on hundreds of skulls proved that individuals of European descent had bigger cranial capacities and superior intellect than other people” (Blakely 1987: 9; Pandian 1985: 1).

The emerging social sciences embraced ideas of cultural superiority and biological determinism to position European men above all women and non-Western people on an evolutionary scale (Ferguson 1984: 20). Colonizers from Western Europe accepted these views about all tribal peoples even as they traded and made pacts with separate native groups (San Juan 1992: 8).

Differences between tribal people and Europeans became “scientific” facts during the 18th century through the work of individuals such as Swedish doctor Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), who plotted the species into one system that delineated human “races.” “*Homo americanus* was essentially the traditional White image of the Indian, for he described him as reddish, choleric, beardless, content, free, painted with red lines and governed by custom” (Berkhofer 1978:

57; 1988: 543). Morton wrote about the “race” of the tribal peoples: “In their mental character,” he stated, they “are averse to cultivation, and slow in acquiring knowledge: restless, revengeful, and fond of war, and wholly destitute of maritime adventure” (Horsman 1975: 156). His cranial studies would put down one foundation for physical anthropology and legitimize anthropology’s search for American Indian remains (Bieder 1992: 26).

### Salvage Anthropology

German-American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) is known as the father of modern American anthropology. Historians of social science credit Boas with professionalizing anthropology and distancing the field from its past racist practitioners, institutionalizing the field of study in the universities, and championing its four subfields approach of cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, physical/biological anthropology and archaeology. This differs from some universities in Europe, for example, where archaeology may be part of history or classical departments. Boas while at Columbia University trained students who later helped establish anthropology departments at schools across the United States.

Boas and his students partly documented the cultures of American Indians out of concern that Westernization was destroying living tribal societies, material culture and archaeological legacies. They conducted much of this research under the notion of salvage ethnography and archaeology. From the beginning,

American anthropology and archaeology as academic disciplines were connected to American Indians. There are few, if any, other departments of American social science or behavioral studies with such foundational and developmental ties to small minority group under such colonial conditions.

Boas and his students supported and promoted a type of thinking later called historical particularism. This is a relativist belief in which researchers were educated to record specific cultural and historical contexts, in contrast to beliefs of cultural evolutionists and deterministic thinkers. One could argue that this turn was the beginning of the decolonization of anthropology and its sub-branches. A decolonized anthropology, therefore, could benefit from a re-examining of the history of this colonialism and its impacts on indigenous peoples, as well as “on Western interpretations, theories and models” (Dartt-Newton and Erlandson 2006: 424). This approach may produce more well-rounded research results. This research project attempts to add tribal knowledge and voices when considering what archaeological and historical documentation indicates about life at Big Rice Lake, as well as using theoretical frameworks adaptable to recognizing that knowledge and those voices.

### Ojibwe Experiences

What is written above is not an abstract academic undertaking solely for background in a thesis. The actions of anthropologists of past generations have

lasting impacts on the Ojibwe people themselves and on the present-day practitioners in the field.

The Ojibwe people constitute one of the largest American Indian groups in North America, with communities in the United States and Canada transected by an international border imposed upon them. The Ojibwe people and their connection to wild rice have been the objects of anthropological investigations from the beginnings of the discipline. Ojibwe people view many of these research efforts as intrusive, unwelcome, biased or incomplete. For example, anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978) classified the Ojibwe people as a “grossly individualistic” society based on the suspect fieldwork and writings of one of her peers in the early 1900s. (1937: 459). On the other hand, tribal organizations and members use and value the work of some early anthropologists, such as Ruth Denison, who collected and preserved tribal songs.

The Ojibwe people did not have a proverbial seat at the academic table to refine or dispute such characterizations by outsiders such as Mead. Diversity and inclusion were not the primary goals as American anthropology and its sub-disciplines were organizing themselves. White Earth Ojibwe Nation scholar and activist Winona LaDuke notes the work of Aleš Hrdlička, a physical anthropologist associated with the Smithsonian Institution. She writes that the anthropologist “specialized in measuring cranial capacity — which involved measuring heads and scratching skin to create eugenics-based data ‘proving’ racial

inferiority and was used to establish classification criteria. Much of his data was used to deprive the *Anishinaabeg* of land” (LaDuke 2011; also see LaDuke and Carlson 2003).

A focus of this study is the wild rice plant and how it shaped Ojibwe relationships with Big Rice Lake. Here, too, with wild rice, early social scientists had a role in influencing how others perceived the Ojibwe people’s relationship and use of this plant. Beginning in the mid-1800s, government officials and other observers have examined the Ojibwe harvesting of wild rice in the Upper Great Lakes region (Densmore 1929: 128). The Smithsonian Institution in 1901 published “The Wild Rice Gatherers in the Upper Great Lakes: A Study in American Primitive Economics” by Albert Ernest Jenks. He interviewed Ojibwe individuals and reviewed accounts of explorers, fur traders and government agents from the 1600s to 1800s, describing his work as “a detailed picture of aboriginal economic activity which is absolutely unique, and in which no article is employed not of aboriginal conception and workmanship” (Jenks 1901: 1019).

Wild rice is abundant, except in years with poor weather conditions, to the point that a two-person team in a canoe may gather hundreds of pounds of unprocessed rice each day during the late-summer ricing season (Vennum Jr. 1988: 107). The processed kernels may be stored to be used as food throughout the following year or for much longer (134-136).

Government officials and academics in the 1800s and 1900s worried that these factors helped enable Ojibwe resistance to cultural and economic

assimilation and, thereby, advancing toward ideas of Western civilization.

LaDuke writes that in the 1960s when University of Minnesota scientists started to work on domesticating wild rice seeds there again was the suggestion that the Ojibwe people were resisting assimilating into the overall economy with a Minnesota legislative report criticizing the tribal relationship with the plant as the “September Santa Claus” and “good berry Mardi Gras” (LaDuke 2011: 1).

LaDuke states: “They might not have been able to domesticate the Ojibwe, but they were determined to domesticate wild rice” (LaDuke 2011: 1). She is expressing an Ojibwe viewpoint that sees the roots of the commercialized paddy wild rice – or tame rice as many Ojibwe people call it – as attempts to acculturate the people by diminishing their cash crop through mass production. As evidence of this, they cite Jenks’ work stating that the plant that had led to Ojibwe advancement was holding the Ojibwe people back from more progress unless they left wild rice behind because “for with them it was incapable of extensive cultivation” (Jenks 1901: 1112-1113). An 1820 newspaper article states that tribespeople could produce more if they did not devote “so much time feasting and dancing every day and night” while at ricing camps (Jenks 1901: 1074). Dancing at wild rice camps was common, and a Finnish-American homesteader in the early 1900s reported from his residence across the lake he could hear “pow-wows” taking place at Big Rice Lake (Valppu 1989: 48). Bois Forte elder Warner B. Wirta recalled “pow-wows” at Big Rice Lake as well (Isham 2011: 3).

The federal Indian agent for the Bois Forte Reservation in 1917 criticized the “crude” methods used to harvest wild rice and the need for new ones as the wild rice sells for 15 cents to 20 cents a pound with the potential to yield more than 100 tons (Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Nett Lake Indian Agency Report 1917). The federal agent’s report the following year added:

Meetings are held at which the advantages and necessity of agriculture are illustrated in lectures by the superintendent and farmer and every effort is made to induct the Indians to clear up small parts of their allotments, but so long as game and fish are plentiful as at the present and wild berries and rice are to be had for the gathering I do not anticipate much progress in agriculture unless it be by the introduction of sheep and goat raising (Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Nett Lake Indian Agency Report 1918).

Furthermore, a body of anthropological writings around the early and mid-1900s debated a claimed atomism and noncooperative characteristics of the Ojibwe personality, based on various purported reasons such as family structure, social isolation during part of the year because of the winter climate, and the availability or unavailability of food sources (Boggs 1958; Friedl 1956; James 1954). Suggestions of excessive individualism and atomism fed off each other in academia.

Yet other social scientists have criticized the research of Franz Boas student Ruth Landes on the Boundary Waters Ojibwe people that served as a



basis for such characterizations by Mead and others. For example, research on her published and unpublished materials, along with ethnohistorical materials and elder testimony, have demonstrated significant weaknesses in Landes' fieldwork and analysis. One critique states that although her "work represents many of the biases and preconceptions of colonial anthropology, regrettably, she compromised her ethnographic portrayal by fabrications, by serious errors of fact and omission and by questionable methodology" (Lovisek *et al.*: 1997).

Regardless of the merits of such early assertions of Landes or others, or more recent anthropological research that may better contextualize the Ojibwe experience, social science researchers working with the Ojibwe must be aware of this earlier history within the discipline when engaging Ojibwe tribal members in their research. The Boundary Waters Ojibwe people of the Rainy Lake area are linked by family ties to the Bois Forte Band, the principal tribal stewards of Big Rice Lake.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FRAMEWORKS

Anthropological and archaeological theories have come and gone over the past century, with one generation often casting aside the frameworks of its predecessors. Theory-driven research later runs the risk of appearing outdated despite the data it contains. That said, an applied archaeology thesis that glosses over theory may miss out on an analytical tool to illuminate its results. Archaeologist Matthew H. Johnson defines theory as the order that researchers decide to put their facts in (Johnson 2006: 118). This study adopts this conceptual framework for the role of theory. This chapter outlines the research project's theoretical and methodological approaches.

#### Theoretical Perspectives

An underlying theoretical orientation throughout this research project is human agency and resistance. As defined and used here, human agency recognizes that people's lives are, at once, given but also actively constructed. This approach will assist examining the continuing persistence of wild rice as a food staple for the Ojibwe people and their stewardship of Big Rice Lake even after the federal government removed the area from their direct control.

The editors of "Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location" write that spaces on the landscape become places when humans ascribe meaning to them (Carter *et al.* 1993: vii). Their work discusses the stories of the past that

people tell themselves in constructing their present living identities. The idea of the existence of persistent places of human activity as archaeological theory creates a framework to organize and analyze data about long-term uses of a location. As with other frameworks such as landscape theory's use in American anthropology, it is a relatively newer approach and at times vaguely defined with its conclusions couched in broad or esoteric language by American researchers.

Persistent places of human use, as used here, are not locations of permanent full-time settlement. Instead they are places that have episodic occupation or use over long periods by different cultures. The approach may help researchers examine the long-term histories of these "individual locations because it acknowledges the role of multiple behavioural events in the accumulation of the archaeological record" (Shiner 2009: 26). Versions of this approach often entail two basic concepts. The first one is that aspects of a location's natural environment provide attractions for people to come back to over long periods of time. These locations may be habitats for sources of food, provide shelter, or have other desirable qualities that other nearby areas may lack. The second is that humans have left evidence of these occupations in forms such as features or artifacts that archaeologists can study (Schlanger 1992; Shiner 2009). Big Rice Lake appears to qualify as a persistent place through its documented use by various prehistoric cultures, but researchers have put less emphasis on proto-historic and later times.

Big Rice Lake is an archaeological site that has drawn numerous indigenous cultures – but it is more than that too. This research project aims to examine aspects beyond simply repeated or redundant use of Big Rice Lake by different peoples. A prehistoric site qualifies as a persistent place because of its resources and features but also due to “the importance that people invested in it by travelling there time and again. This interaction between people and place is a mutual, deep-rooted one” (Shaw *et al.* 2016: 9).

Put another way, persistent places often possess natural attractions that over time have drawn people to them, and these places have archaeological or other evidence of those occupations. The framework used in this research project allows for examination of more than the natural or human-built environments of the location under study. It also allows for looking at the meaning of a place. In other words, these places with rich histories of human use are not merely “redundantly utilized” spots on a map and instead are places where relationships are created and identities formed (Moore and Thompson 2012: 269).

## Methods

This research project’s methods involved two areas: 1) gaining permission and collaboration and 2) standard archaeological techniques.

Permission to proceed for this research project comes in different forms. It requires approval of the federal caretakers who manage the archaeological site.

Consent of the tribal people today who are indigenous stewards of a place is ethically required but is not always legally mandated. Anthropology and its sub-discipline archaeology have contested pasts with Native communities such as the Ojibwe people. Recognizing the legal, ethical and moral requirements of applied archaeology to involve living tribal citizens in discussions about their ancestral sites, a centerpiece of this research project was to gain meaningful input from the tribal community.

The goal of this research project was not to impose an archaeological-oriented investigation upon tribal people. I also wanted more than their permission. I wanted their support and help. Collaboration indicates permission. To achieve this, I met with Ojibwe tribal members and federal archaeologists in the Lake Superior region to discuss possibilities for research topics. This led to the Superior National Forest, a sprawling forest that encompasses 3.8 million acres and includes the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area, commonly known the BWCA. The Superior National Forest also is home to Big Rice Lake. The lake, its wild rice beds and other natural resources have long been associated with the Bois Forte Ojibwe.

The U.S. Forest Service has viewed the Big Rice Lake archaeological site as eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under various significance criteria. But there has been no official nomination. Furthermore, local tribal members had been interested in such a nomination to the National Register as a traditional cultural property of the Ojibwe people. These sites must meet the

National Register's significance and integrity standards, as well requiring that Traditional Cultural Properties have a connection with the "cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community's history, and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing identity of the community" (National Park Service Website 2018). The idea of such a nomination with tribal partners fits into the collaborative approach as a method I wanted the research project to utilize. Getting access to tribal people to share information about cultural and spiritual places can be challenging. This is one reason this research project detailed matters regarding access and collaboration in its methods to underscore their importance.

In the 2016-2017 school year, I traveled to the Bois Forte Reservation on several occasions to meet with Beverly Miller, executive director of the Bois Forte Heritage Center and Cultural Museum (The Legend House - *Atisokanigamig*) and others associated with the tribe's cultural heritage programs. As noted, this undertaking would not have happened without the guidance of Ms. Miller. Her approval and permission opened many doors for the research including introductions to tribal elders who possessed unique knowledge about Big Rice Lake.

The distance between the archaeological profession and American Indian communities still can be wide despite decades of attempts to find common ground through working together and mutual understanding. Tribal knowledge is key to contextualizing and better understanding archaeological and historical

records. Archaeology holds itself as a science or science-like discipline. Tribal knowledge embodies values and wisdom handed down over many generations. This knowledge may be based on connections to the land that may defy explanations offered by Western thought. Exclusion of tribal knowledge also is crucial to meet the requirements of a traditional cultural property listing under federal law.

Initially I traveled to Big Rice Lake for informal surveys in winter (March) and spring (May) conditions in 2017. In terms of travel by car, the Big Rice Lake archaeological site is located six miles from the nearest paved road and accessed by dirt roads that may be impassible for many vehicles due to snow, ice and fallen trees. An earlier attempted site visit in December 2016 resulted in my car becoming stranded in a snow bank on the dirt road while driving to the site and requiring a tow truck to be called. I continued my fieldwork during the summers of 2017 and 2018.

No excavations were performed during this project because of the large number of artifacts previously collected and because of tribal concerns that digging into the earth is unnecessary for the thesis research or the nomination. Archaeologists beginning in the 1980s have performed numerous excavations and shovel test pits on the peninsula. This includes a series of summer field schools in the Clearing from 1983 to 1986 operated by the University of Minnesota, Duluth. The U.S. Forest Service later also excavated in the Inland Terrace through its Passport in Time volunteer program, now a nationwide

program that began in the Superior National Forest and has its roots in the field schools at Big Rice Lake.

The Superior National Forest stores Big Rice Lake artifacts in about 20 boxes and drawers at its headquarters in Duluth, about 65 miles southeast from the heritage site. I initially spent several days at the U.S. Forest Service curation facility reviewing the storage containers, photographing representative artifacts, examining historical aerial photographs, and locating reference materials. In the summer of 2018 much of the collection was temporarily relocated to the Bois Forte Reservation museum curation facility to study and photograph.

Meetings with Bois Forte representatives resulted in planning a site visit with tribal elders in May 2017. We produced a flier about the visit and used word-of-mouth and social media to spread information about the visit. Our site visit with tribal elders produced testimony about the importance of wild ricing and other natural resources at Big Rice Lake. I located other oral histories and legal testimony of Bois Forte Ojibwe elders. Figure 4.01 is the flier. Figure 4.02 is a picture the Bois Forte museum from [boisforteheritagecenter.com](http://boisforteheritagecenter.com) Web page.

This applied archaeology project drew upon many of the tools that cultural-resource management professionals use in archaeological investigations: site survey, examination of collections and specific assemblages, review of ethnographic and historical documents, research of regulatory and other legal requirements, and consultation with tribal governments, organizations and citizens.





Figure 4.01: Meeting flier



Figure 4.02: Bois Forte museum ([boisforteheritagecenter.com](http://boisforteheritagecenter.com))

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PEOPLE OF BIG RICE LAKE

The Big Rice Lake area has drawn indigenous peoples for thousands of years. This chapter discusses prehistoric archaeological cultures up to the present day.

#### Prehistoric Times

As background, there are three prehistoric archaeological eras in the Upper Great Lakes region – Paleoindian, Archaic and Woodland. They progress from when the Ice Age glaciers receded to indigenous-European contact.

Approximate dates are:

- Paleoindian Period from 12,000 to 7,000 years ago (8000-5000 BC).
- Archaic Period from 7,000 to 2,500 years ago (5000-500 BC).
- Woodland Period from 2,500 to 400 years ago (500 BC-AD 1600).

Researchers further divide the Woodland period between:

- Initial Woodland Period from 2,500 to 1,300 years ago (500 BC-AD 700), and
- Terminal Woodland Period from 1,300 to 400 years ago (AD 700-1600).

Dates may vary by source or specific areas in the Upper Great Lakes region. (Huber 2001: 34-52). For example, some researchers say the

Paleoindian dates should not be as recently as suggested as the timeframe above. The end of the Woodland period saw a French, then English and then American presence in Minnesota, with an international border dividing Ojibwe territory. The Lake Superior and Mississippi Ojibwe bands in the United States signed treaties with the federal government in the mid-1800s.

Beginning at least by 50 BC, indigenous peoples started gathering wild rice from Big Rice Lake and processing the aquatic plant's kernels into food on land near the shore. The time estimates come from detailed studies of the ceramic technologies and carbonized wild rice kernels recovered at past archaeological excavations at Big Rice Lake (Shafer 2003, Valppu 1989; Valppu and Rapp 2000).

A series of different peoples – including the Dakota, possibly the Cree, and others from cultures assigned names by archaeologists based on the type of ceramics they possessed – left behind in the ground a rich prehistoric record that has drawn researchers here to study the Woodland Period in northern Minnesota. The Woodland Period is an archaeologically derived era that generally in the greater region stretched from the end of the Archaic Period around 500 BC to the arrival of the first Europeans in the 1600s. The Woodland Period ushered in population growth, the making of pottery and the building of earthen mounds. Big Rice Lake is a prototype Woodland site that archaeologists use to compare other such places to in terms of its components and resources.

(State of Minnesota, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form: 2008).

### The Ojibwe Are Here

Eventually the Ojibwe people, from the east, arrived too. How far back in time they or their ancestors, who social scientists call the proto-Ojibwe people, first appeared in Minnesota is a matter of academic and cultural debate. Some Ojibwe people, for example, say they have been there much longer, occupying and traveling through this region in the far ancient past, as they moved around the continent over the course of four Ice Ages.

Ojibwe oral testimony relays that their ancestors arrived in the Upper Great Lakes region after their westward journey from the mouth of the St. Lawrence Seaway to find where “the food grows on the water” – wild rice. They stopped on the southern shore of Lake Superior at Madeline Island in present-day Wisconsin when the giant clamshell in the sky guiding them disappeared. Some bands later continued farther west to populate other areas. The territory had been most recently that of the Lakota people. Whether the Ojibwe people forced them out, or the Lakota people opted for a more Plains lifestyle to the south, or a combination of both occurred, is contested. Yet from an Ojibwe perspective, Big Rice Lake and other waters with wild rice stands are places on the tribal landscape that they were divined to find.

Former Bois Forte Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Bill Latady and Bois Forte Ojibwe elder Marybelle Isham state that the first historical reference to the Ojibwe people in the general area was a 1731 journal entry of French explorer and fur-trader Pierre De La Verendrye (1685-1749), which mentions a camp on the Vermilion River of the Saultier people, a name the French used for the Ojibwe people at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan (2014: 4; 2015: 4). He was one of the French explorers attempting to use the area's networks of lakes and rivers to find passage a western sea. He eventually reached North Dakota (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography Website* [www.biographi.ca](http://www.biographi.ca) 2020).

The Ojibwe people established a village at Lake Vermilion by 1800 and hundreds of Ojibwe families in the area still traded “almost exclusively” with Britain's Hudson Bay Company in the mid-1800s. Ojibwe leaders negotiated a series of treaties involving their territories in the Upper Great Lakes region from the early 1800s until the end of treaty-making era in the early 1870s. The last Ojibwe treaty in the region was in 1867 (Latady and Isham 2013: 4; 2014: 4 and 2015: 4).

Lake Superior and Mississippi bands signed the 1854 Treaty With the Chippewa, also known as the second Treaty of La Pointe, named after a town on Madeline Island in Lake Superior. This treaty ceded 5 million acres including most tribal land in the Arrowhead region of northeastern Minnesota to create reservations in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The treaty provided for rights to Lake Vermilion, a large lake that covers more than 39,000 acres and at its widest point

is 24 miles long. This treaty referred to the Ojibwe families living north of Big Rice Lake as the “Bois Forte of Vermilion Lake.” (Latady and Isham 2013: 4, 2014: 4; 2015:4).

The 1860s brought a short-lived gold rush that led to an 1866 treaty that ceded Lake Vermilion and 2 million more acres of Ojibwe land. It established a reservation at Nett Lake about 50 miles north. Gold prospectors left by 1868. Latady and Isham write that Ojibwe families “once again roamed the surrounding forests, streams, rivers and lakes, returning to Lake Vermilion. The Band members living at Lake Vermilion held no legal title to the land, but most refused to leave the lake and move to the Nett Lake Reservation” (2013: 4, 2014: 4; 2015:4). President Chester Arthur in 1881 signed an executive order that created a reservation at Lake Vermilion, today one of three disconnected sections of the overall Bois Forte Reservation along with Nett Lake and the unoccupied Deer Creek areas.

Increased private ownership of land by 1900 restricted Ojibwe travel.

Latady and Isham add:

Sites formerly used for berry picking, hunting, fishing and ricing became homesteads and lake homes. Limited mobility infringed on basic subsistence practices, that eventually resulted in families leaving the area and scattering to other communities. Some families moved ... Those who remained often followed a seasonal round in order to survive, whenever

possible gathering wild rice in the fall, berry picking in the summer and sugaring in early spring on and off the reservation (2015: 5).

Today the Bois Forte Band has more than 3,000 enrolled members. See Figure 5.01 for a sign marking the reservation and Figure 5.02 for an official Bois Forte Band license plate. Bois Forte is one of six bands that form the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. The five other reservation bands in this confederation and their estimated memberships are: Fond du Lac (2,000), Grand Portage (500), Leech Lake (9,500) Millie Lacs (2,000) and White Earth (20,000).

Tribal citizenship requires enrolled members to have a blood quantum of at least one-quarter Minnesota Chippewa Tribe blood and have at least one parent enrolled in the tribe. As such, members of one band many have relatives on different Minnesota Chippewa Tribe reservations. A seventh band, the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, is not part of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe confederation. (Note: The author of this research project is an enrolled member of the Leech Lake Reservation Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe.)



Figure 5.01: Bois Forte Reservation sign    Figure 5.02: Bois Forte license plate

## CHAPTER SIX

### PREHISTORIC AND PROTO-HISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY

This chapter reviews the archaeological record of Big Rice Lake through surveys for this research project and excavation collections held by the Superior National Forest. It also addresses previous research at Big Rice Lake that has had a significant role in advancing science's understanding of the antiquity of wild rice production as a foundation to discuss historical and modern times. This provides the background on Big Rice Lake's prehistoric record to be applied to its historical archaeology, as well as components of the later discussion of Big Rice Lake as a place of persistent human use.

#### Beginnings: A Paleoindian Past

The first archaeological evidence of human use of Big Rice Lake comes from fragments of two Plano-style lithic points from Paleoindian times. Long before the bow and arrow arrived in this forest, the first hunters at Big Rice Lake used spears topped with large points. Hunters would have mounted these points on spears to thrust them at large animals living there after Ice Age glaciers had receded. Paleoindian projectile points are relatively rare on the prehistoric Minnesota landscape. Fragments of the projectile points left here serve as testimony that these ancient peoples were in the Big Rice Lake area after the last



Ice Age. Figure 6.01 and Figure 6.02 are pictures of the fragments of the two Plano-style points found at Big Rice Lake.

To date, no excavated artifacts firmly suggest occupations during the Archaic Period (about 7,000 to 2,500 years ago depending on various estimates). Excavators have unearthed numerous copper tools. Archaeologists often associate copper tools with the Archaic Period's Old Copper Culture in the Great Lakes region. But other researchers suggest the style and function of the copper tools at Big Rice Lake may indicate that people made them during prehistoric times after the Archaic Period. The copper section below discusses this more in depth.

But it is with the dawning of the Woodland Period that a more extensive pattern of human life at Big Rice Lake begins to appear in the archeological record.



Figure 6.01: Plano-style point tip



Figure 6.02: Plano-style point fragment

## Woodland Period

A commonly accepted axiom in Minnesota archaeology is that the Archaic Period gave way to Woodland Period with the emergence of the first ceramics, known as Laurel ware, mound-building by indigenous peoples to bury the dead, and population growth. The Woodland Period began somewhat earlier in other regions of the United States to the east and south, where archaeologists often divide it into Early, Middle and Late stages. But archaeologists in Minnesota split it into Initial and Terminal stages, with the Initial Woodland Period beginning around 2,500 years ago.

A National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (2008) commissioned by the State of Minnesota to recognize the Woodland Tradition in Minnesota references the Clearing site. Woodland Period sites included as background amount to exemplar models that researchers should judge or compare other sites to in their evaluations. Excavations from the Clearing and Inland Terrace locations at Big Rice Lake have unearthed tens of thousands of artifacts from the Woodland Period.

## Emergence of Wild Rice as Food

Wild rice harvesting and production, as outlined below, dates to prehistoric times. However, the prehistoric and post-contact archaeology involving wild rice and later ethnographic and historical accounts are helpful in discussing its

emergence as food source, as well as debates about the antiquity of its emergence.

### Prehistoric to Post-Contact

Anthropologists and other researchers since at least the beginning of the 1900s have focused on wild rice as a food staple, often with a focus on harvesting of the plant by the Ojibwe people (Densmore 1929: 128). The Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology published "The Wild Rice Gatherers in the Upper Great Lakes: A Study in American Primitive Economics" by Albert Ernest Jenks in 1901 (T. Armstrong 2017) <sup>1</sup>.

In addition to talking with members of tribal communities, Jenks studied written accounts from the 1600s to 1800s of Europeans and American explorers, fur traders and government Indian agents to discuss an "aboriginal economic activity which is absolutely unique, and in which no article is employed not of aboriginal conception and workmanship" (Jenks 1901: 1019). He also noted the plant's importance during the fur-trading times, stating that the area would have been nearly inaccessible if not for wild rice's availability and its ability to be stored for long periods (Jenks 1901: 1019).

Descriptions such as those written by Jenks provide glimpses of prehistoric techniques used in wild rice production that continued to the post-contact world. As with elsewhere in northern Minnesota, there can be a blurring

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<sup>1</sup> Please note the author has put portions of these sections he wrote on the archaeology and history of wild rice harvesting and production on the Wikipedia Website as part of a class assignment.

of the line between prehistoric and post-contact artifacts, so the classifications below in some cases are general in nature. Also, many items that people used for wild rice harvesting and production, such as birch-bark canoes and winnowing trays and long wood poles with Y-shaped ends, are less likely to appear in the archaeological record. People continue to use some of these items such as traditional trays and poles.

Wild rice's social and economic importance has continued into present times for the Ojibwe people despite the availability of more easily obtainable food sources (Vennum 1988: 58–80). This continued use of wild rice from ancient to modern times has provided opportunities to examine the plant's processing by various cultures through the archaeological record they left behind during their occupation of seasonal ricing camps. Early ethnographic reports, tribal accounts and historical writings also inform archaeological research in the human use of wild rice. For example, geographer and ethnologist Henry Schoolcraft in the mid-1800s wrote about depressions in the ground on the shore of a lake with wild rice growing in the water. He wrote that wild rice processors placed animal hides in the holes, filled them with rice and stomped on the rice to thresh it (Jenks 1901: 1067).

These jigging pits are part of the husking needed to process wild rice, and archaeologists see these holes in the soil stratigraphy in archaeological excavations today. Such historical records from the post-contact period in the Lake Superior region focus on Ojibwe harvesting and processing techniques.

Archaeological investigations of wild rice processing from the American era, before and after the creation of federal Indian reservations, also provide information on the loss of traditional harvesting areas, as 1800s fur trader and Indian interpreter Benjamin G. Armstrong wrote about outsiders "who claimed to have acquired title to all the swamps and overflowed lakes on the reservations, depriving the Indians of their rice fields, cranberry marshes and hay meadows" (B. Armstrong 1892: 81). (Benjamin G. Armstrong is this researcher's great-great-great grandfather.)

Despite the close association of the Ojibwe people and wild rice today, indigenous use of this food for subsistence also predates their arrival in the Lake Superior region. The Ojibwe people today were part of a larger Algonquian group who left eastern North America on a centuries-long journey to the west along the St. Lawrence River and Great Lakes. The Ojibwe migration story details a vision to follow a giant clam shell in the sky to a place where the food grows on the water. This journey ended between the late 1400s and early 1600s in the Lake Superior wild rice country when they encountered the plant (Warren 1885: 76–95).

Archaeological and other scientific investigations have focused on the prehistoric use of wild rice by humans, including: 1) the Ojibwe people, 2) so-called proto-Ojibwe who may have later transformed into this culture from an earlier form, 3) other indigenous groups who exist today such as the Lakota people, and 4) archaeological-categorized cultures from the Initial and Terminal

Woodland periods whose living lineages today are more difficult to identify. An archaeological study in 1969 documented the prehistoric nature of indigenous wild rice production through radiocarbon dating. This study contradicted an argument made by some European-Americans that wild rice production did not begin until post-contact times. Researchers tested clay linings of jiggling pits and thermal features associated with threshing and parching of the plant (Johnson 1969).

But a more exacting dating of the antiquity of human use of wild rice and the appearance of the plant itself in lakes and streams have been the subjects of debate. For example, researchers have focused on when the plant became a staple for indigenous peoples in the Wild Rice Culture Area, which encompasses parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan in the United States centered around Lake Superior. One study focused on the headwaters region of the Wisconsin River in the north-central area of Wisconsin because of the high densities of wild rice harvesting sites. Overall, the study suggested that the sites indicated a subsistence pattern focusing on wild rice, along with fish, aquatic mammals, deer and berries. This pattern had developed by AD 750 (Moffat and Arzigian 2000).

Huber notes: "The use of wild rice by and its influence on prehistoric people in northeast Minnesota has led to much argument among archaeologists and paleoecologists" (2001: 2). Some of these disputes may be framed around these questions: When did wild rice first appear in various areas of the region?

When was it plentiful enough to be harvested in quantities to be a significant food source? What is the relationship of wild rice to the introduction of pottery and to increases in indigenous populations in the past 2,000 years? The next section discusses Big Rice Lake's importance in this debate.

### Preserved Kernels and Ceramics at Big Rice Lake

An examination of the pollen sequence at Big Rice Lake indicates that wild rice existed in identifiable quantities there 3,600 years ago during the Archaic Period (Huber 2001: 1–2). This date is 1,600 years before other research suggests that wild rice harvesting and production began Big Rice Lake. There is no archaeological evidence of human use of the wild rice at Big Rice Lake 3,600 years ago.

In general, researchers have relied on two lines of inquiry to address the antiquity of wild rice production by tribal people. The first is radiocarbon dating of burnt wild rice kernels or charcoal left behind during the parching of wild rice. The second is examination of preserved kernels associated with Woodland pottery styles found in excavations of wild rice processing locations. This approach at Big Rice Lake has challenged the antiquity of the plant's harvesting and production in the Wild Rice Culture Area.

Different pottery styles in northern Minnesota are linked to certain times in the Initial and Terminal Woodland periods stretching from around 500 BC to the time of contact between indigenous peoples and Europeans. To place this in context, "Although ceramics may have appeared as early as 2,000 BC in the

southeastern United States, it is about 1,500 years later that they became evident in the Midwest" (Anfinson 1979). The Initial Woodland period in northeast Minnesota marks the beginning of the use of pottery and burial mound building in the archaeological record. The Initial Woodland Period also experienced an increase in indigenous population. One hypothesis is that wild rice as a food source was related to these developments (Valppu 1989: 1). After European contact, indigenous wild rice processors generally abandoned ceramic vessels in favor of metal kettles (Hilger 1951: 148).

The 2,000-year-old date comes from research on preserved wild rice kernels at Big Rice Lake and associated pottery used to process wild rice into a food source. Researchers interested in Woodland cultures continue to cite two thesis projects by University of Minnesota graduate students on ethnobotany and ceramics at the Clearing site. Seppo H. Valppu's "Paleoethnobotany of Big Rice site, St. Louis County, Minnesota: Early Wild Rice (*Zizania aquatica* L.) in Archaeological Context" (1989) studied wild rice kernels preserved in the soil during the parching process to turn the kernels into an edible and storable food. Valppu followed up this work with additional research and testing. Jennifer Renee Shafer's "A Seriation of Ceramics from Big Rice Site (21SL163, FS#09-09-09-034), St. Louis County, Minnesota" (2003) examined thousands of pieces of Woodland Period pottery from Big Rice Lake.

Valppu writes that researchers had suggested that dependency on wild rice had a large role in population growth and the subsequent construction of



burial mounds (1989: 1). However, he adds that this was a questionable assumption because of the lack of preserved wild rice at known Laurel archaeological sites. His master's thesis aimed to see whether direct evidence existed on the Laurel culture using wild rice at Big Rice Lake, as this kind of direct evidence at northern Minnesota site had so far eluded archaeologists, paleo-ethnobotanists or other researchers.

He studied the presence of carbonized kernels and Laurel ceramics found in units in about 35 square meters of prehistoric and historic wild rice processing areas at the Clearing site. Researchers suggest that people used these pottery vessels during the process to parch the kernels. He noted that excavations in 1986 were at deeper levels than earlier ones that began in 1983. Excavators dug up Laurel ware pottery from the Initial Woodland Period, as well as Blackduck, Sandy Lake and Selkirk ware from the Terminal Woodland Period (3). Valppu's research suggests that the appearance of wild rice plants in harvestable amounts and human utilization of this food source took place at the dividing line between the pre-ceramic and ceramic cultures (17). The research also suggests that wild rice production occurred at the Clearing at Big Rice Lake from the Initial to Terminal Woodland periods.

His accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) radiocarbon dating of charred wild rice or charcoal samples from the Big Rice Lake indicated human use there dating to 2,050 years ago. Furthermore, all the excavation levels that solely contained ceramics only used during the Initial Woodland Period (as known as

Laurel pottery complex) also included wild rice kernels. This suggested human use of wild rice during the Initial Woodland era (Valppu and Rapp 2000: 86).

The next decade after the publication of his thesis included improvements in the use of AMS technology to date smaller amounts of charcoal in the form of burnt wild rice kernels. Valppu and Rapp write: “The radiocarbon dates on rice kernels generally support an age of 2000 B.P. for the onset of utilization at this site. Given the associations of (wild rice) with the Laurel ceramics and the available radiocarbon dates, it is certain that Laurel People utilized wild rice on this site” (2000: 81-85). Other dates from radiocarbon testing suggest wild rice production during later times in the Woodland Period as well, dovetailing with the observations from the 1986 excavations at Big Rice Lake. See Figure 6.03 and Figure 6.04 for charred wild rice kernels from Big Rice Lake.



Figure 6.03: Charred wild rice kernels    Figure 6.04: Collection of charred kernels

Shafer's study included more than 50,000 pottery sherds from the Initial and Terminal Woodland periods excavated at Big Rice Lake from the Clearing

location. Specifically, she analyzed ceramic rim pieces of Laurel pottery from the Initial Woodland period and Blackduck, Sandy Lake and Selkirk pottery styles from the Terminal Woodland Period. Each pottery type had wild rice kernels associated with it in the soil layers of archaeological deposits. These soil layers were not contaminated with pottery from other eras. This suggests intensive exploitation of the site for wild rice processing through these time periods by different cultures. Shafer writes: "From the rimsherds at the Big Rice Site, a minimum of 564 ceramic vessels were identified from four Woodland complexes. The Initial Woodland Laurel complex is represented by 159 vessels. The Terminal Woodland Period is represented by a minimum of 395 vessels" (2003: ii). Some archaeologists associate Sandy Lake pottery found in northeastern Minnesota and Ontario with the Lakota people, who were later replaced by the Ojibwe people or possibly other earlier Algonquian migrants. Archaeologists often associate Selkirk pottery with the Cree people, an Algonquian group related to the Ojibwe people. Presence of Laurel, Blackduck and Sandy Lake ceramics also typically indicated that the site occupants may have had contacts to the south in the Mille Lacs area and the western part of the state" (Peters and Motivan 1983: 284). See Figure 6.05 to Figure 6.10 for photographs of pottery types at Big Rice Lake.



Figure 6.05: Laurel ware pottery



Figure 6.06: Laurel ware pottery rim



Figure 6.07: Sandy Lake ware pottery



Figure 6.08: Reconstructed vessel



Figure 6.09: Selkirk ware pottery



Figure 6.10: Blackduck ware pottery rim

## Features Marked in the Earth

Archaeological evidence of wild rice production on Big Rice Lake also exists in features left by the indigenous production of wild rice, commonly known as jigging pits or dancing pits. As previously discussed, part of the production process included husking wild rice kernels by digging holes in the ground. Geographer and ethnologist Henry Schoolcraft in the mid-1800s wrote about depressions in the ground on the shore of a lake with wild rice. Wild rice processors placed animal hides in the holes, filled them with rice and stomped on the rice to thresh it (Jenks 1901: 1067).

Ojibwe elder Dorothy Powell recalled in a memoir: “Usually a young boy in a new pair of moccasins, would begin his tromping the rice. Rice had been put into the hole and his ‘dancing’ on it separated the chaff from the good kernels of rice. When it was ‘danced’ on long enough so the rice all seemed to be loose from the outer shell the boy would get out of the hole and the rice would be scooped out of the hole as closely as possible and put into birchbark pans” (Powell, undated, “Wild Rice Harvesting”).

The Clearing’s U.S. Forest Service site record mentions the importance of the presence of the jigging pits as evaluation components, stating: “Excellent site for evaluation of prehistoric habitation with its numerous positive tests, varied ceramic types and features associated with a subsistence activity (ricing jigs).”

Indentations from jigging pits are present in the Clearing. Figure 6.11 shows a jigging pit found during survey. Figure 6.12 is a photograph of a clay

lining form a jiggling pit. The soil stratigraphy in archaeological excavations there also has revealed jiggling pits that had filled in with dirt. Figure 6.13 and Figure 6.14 are photographs of jiggling pits from past excavations. Figure 6.15 and Figure 6.16 are photographs from the 1980s excavations.

There are other features carved into the earth, mentioned in the U.S. Forest Service site records as foundations or holes in the ground with berms of earth and rocks. No information is known about these foundations and whether they are related to wild rice or maple sap production. They need further study.



Figure 6.11: Big Rice Lake jiggling pit

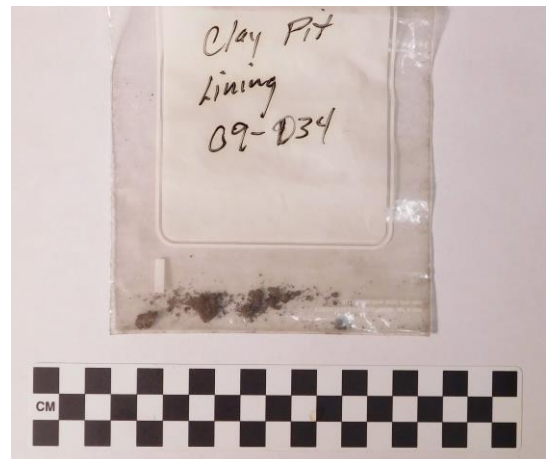


Figure 6.12: Clay lining from jiggling pit



Figure 6.13: Excavated jiggling pit



Figure 6.14: Excavated jiggling pit



Figure 6.15: 1980s excavation



Figure 6.16: 1980s excavation

### Lithics

Woodland Period artifacts unearthed at Big Rice Lake include projectile points. The many styles of these points suggest many periods of use. For example, there are Initial Woodland style points as well as smaller “bird” points from made after AD 900. The large amounts of waste flakes suggest hunters also utilized Big Rice Lake as a location to make points and lithic tools such as scrapers and knives. The points and flakes are of numerous materials from across region, including Gunflint silica, Hudson Bay lowland chert, jasper/taconite, Knife Lake siltstone, Knife River flint/chalcedony, Lake of the Woods chert, Red River chert, Swan River chert, quartz and quartzite. See Figure 6.17 to Figure 6.21 for lithics from Big Rice Lake.



Figure 6.17: Scraper



Figure 6.18: Point



Figure 6.19: Lithic fragments



Figure 6.20: Projectile points collection



Figure 6.21: Projectile points with bags

### Lithics: Obsidian

Archaeological excavations at Big Rice Lake in the 1980s discovered three obsidian flakes. Obsidian is a type of volcanic glass that may form when lava cools quickly. There are no known obsidian sources in Minnesota. However, a technique known as energy dispersive X-ray fluorescence can shed light on the geologic source of a piece of obsidian because obsidian from a particular location contains its own unique chemical signature.



Big Rice Lake's three flakes were part of 53 obsidian artifacts from 28 sites in Minnesota analyzed for their geological sources (Hughes 2007: 53-68). Testing traced Big Rice Lake's flakes to Bear Gulch in the Centennial Mountains of eastern Idaho, about 1,100 miles away from Big Rice Lake. Bear Gulch obsidian, also known as Big Table Mountain or Camas-Dry Creek obsidian, is known for its high quality for knapping. Researchers have found it in numerous Midwestern states and in southern Canadian provinces. They also have discovered it in Hopewell burial mounds in Illinois and Ohio. Many of the Bear Gulch obsidian artifacts appear in assemblages from the Woodland Period (Raley 2011: 5).

Of the 53 artifacts tested, nine were Bear Gulch obsidian. The majority of the other artifacts – 35 – came from Obsidian Cliff in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. This is about 35 miles northwest of Bear Gulch. These include a fragment of a scraper from a site near Pike Bay (21SL1) on Lake Vermilion, about 15 miles northwest from Big Rice Lake via a portage route (Raley 2011). The Pike Bay artifact was a formed tool, while Big Rice Lake's flakes suggest some degree of lithic-reduction activity taking place there. Pike Bay also is the closest known location of Initial Woodland burial mounds to Big Rice Lake (Valppu 1989: 8). The remaining two sites with Bear Gulch obsidian were the Windy Bead site north of Big Rice Lake near the international border in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (FS 05-373) and to the south by the Mississippi River (21-AK-7). Figure 6.22 is obsidian on the ground at Bear Gulch,

Idaho. Figure 6.23 is a photograph of Bear Gulch in the Sawtooth National Forest taken by the author of this research project.



Figure 6.22: Bear Gulch obsidian



Figure 6.23: Forest at Bear Gulch

### Copper

Prehistoric indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region made tools and other items from copper. For example, the Old Copper Culture or Old Copper Complex refers to indigenous groups who crafted tools and other objects out of the pieces of the raw metal found in the Upper Great Lakes region during one of those time periods. Isle Royale in Lake Superior was a significant source of copper. Archeologists associate the Old Copper Culture and the use of copper in general to the Archaic Period, but it is important to note that indigenous peoples possibly used the metal from the late Paleoindian to Woodland periods. Common theories include that copper tools became smaller as time progressed and became more ornamental rather than utilitarian in use. Projectile points, fish

hooks, and beads are among the variety of copper objects found in northeastern Minnesota.

Pulford studied copper types in the Arrowhead region in northeastern Minnesota, including analyzing copper objects found at 24 sites within the Superior National Forest. In all, these sites had 89 pieces of copper. Big Rice Lake contained more than half of the inventory, 45 of them. The Inland Terrace had one copper artifact described as an axe/wedge. The Clearing, which has gone through a greater amount of excavation and testing, had 44 pieces. These included awls, punches, pressure flakers, pendants, flattened pieces, fragments, and raw copper (2009: 97-102).

Researchers in Minnesota since the 1950s often have classified copper artifacts into two categories: utilitarian tools and ornaments. The copper artifacts found at Big Rice Lake appear to be utilitarian tools, such as awls or punches. Pulford states that the large number of copper items presents an “interesting case study” because of Big Rice Lake’s location on the western boundary of the Superior National Forest and because it is a Paleoindian and Woodland documented site. Yet it has more copper items “to date than the Arrowhead’s dozen or so Archaic Period sites. Only sites on South Fowl Lake have a wider variety of tools, and these sites seem to be clearly Archaic” (2009: 103).

The presence of raw copper could suggest that the people at Big Rice Lake also crafted tools and ornaments there. But “no associations of burned earth, which may indicate copper tools manufacture, was noted with the copper”

during excavations (Peters and Motivan 1983: 287). However, archaeologists debate whether indigenous peoples in the Upper Great Lakes used heat to shape objects or cold-pounded pieces of copper. See Figure 6.24 to Figure 6.27 for copper from Big Rice Lake.



Figure 6.24: Copper



Figure 6.25: Copper punch



Figure 6.26: Copper tools

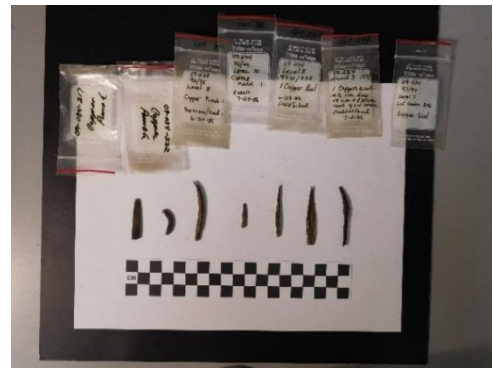


Figure 6.27: Copper tools with bags

## Animals

Archaeologists have recovered a large number of animal bones from Big Rice Lake. Researcher John T. Penman has analyzed remains from the

excavations in the Clearing in the 1980s. His work provides glimpses of life at Big Rice Lake beyond animals as food. For example, he suggests dogs were present but not common there. A single bear tooth may have been a lost amulet based on what is and what is not in the assemblages of big mammal remains and how these remains ended up at Big Rice Lake (1989: 2-4).

But the natural bounty that the earth offered those living at Big Rice Lake also tells much about what the people consumed there, where they butchered and prepared their food, and how they cooked it. And importantly for this research project, the mammals, birds and fish that provided this nourishment for the people of Big Rice Lake also provide clues about when during the year humans lived there. Penman's analysis does not assign times in the Woodland Period for the remains.

As background, the animal remains identified at Big Rice Lake include:

Mammals: Moose, black bear, white-tailed deer, beaver, river otter, snowshoe hare, muskrat, porcupine, squirrel, mice, and voles. See Figure 6.28 to Figure 6.33 for photographs of bone, antler and shell found at Big Rice Lake, age unknown.



Figure 6.28: Moose bone side view



Figure 6.29: Moose bone



Figure 6.30: Moose bone scraper



Figure 6.31: Moose tooth



Figure 6.32: Antler fishing lure



Figure 6.33: Turtle shell

Birds: Mallard duck, American black duck, wood duck, redhead duck, loon, green heron, pied-billed grebe, horned grebe, red-necked grebe, buffalohead, American bittern, Canada goose, gadwall, pintail, green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, American wigeon, white-winger scoter, grouse or ptarmigan, sora, lesser scaup, American coot, common merganser, and red-breasted merganser.

Fish: Northern pike, longnose sucker, white sucker, and sauger.

Reptile: Painted turtle (Penman 1984a, 1984b and 1989).

The people at Big Rice Lake ate all these animals. But large mammals such as moose and deer comprised a significant component of their diet. In terms of birds, Big Rice Lake hunters favored mallard ducks, pied-billed grebes, blue-winged teals and coots (Penman 1989: 3). Penman also suggests that the quantities of meat from beavers indicates “these animals were a dietary staple centuries prior to the importance that beaver pelts played in the European introduced fur trade” (Penman 1989: 4).

#### How did People at Big Rice Lake Cook Their Food?

The 1983 excavation unearthed nearly 5,000 bone fragments. More than 95 percent of the collection is unidentified in terms of specific species (Penman 1984a: 1). However, researchers did group the fragments into these categories for the purpose of examining cooking practices: Large mammals, medium mammals, small mammals, fish, and turtles.

Researchers found that a large amount of the bone fragments was from large mammals, presumably moose and deer based on the appearance of the

fragments. Nearly all these fragments – 93 percent – were burned. This suggests that people at Big Rice Lake roasted the meat over an open fire that burned the bone or that the presence of so many fragments of burned bone are due to a process used to make grease (1989b: 2). He cites research indicating that fur traders produced this grease or “butter” by placing bone fragments near a fire. The modern Cree people also continue to do this and later boil the fragments to remove the grease. He suggests that many of the burned fragments are byproducts of this production process and not roasting. Bird and turtle remains had evidence of burning to a much lesser degree than the large mammals. No fish skull or vertebrae fragments were burned. This suggests the people at Big Rice Lake may have stewed fish and these other meats in pots (Penman 1984a: 1).

#### Where did the People at Big Rice Lake Butcher Their Food?

As may be expected, the people at Big Rice Lake butchered moose and deer where they hunted them to reduce the weight of carrying the entire bodies of these large mammals back to their camp. The low percentages of skull, sesamoid and toe elements from these animals at Big Rice Lake support this idea. Penman writes: “Presumably, several individuals were killed at a distant location. These animals were then butchered, and probably quartered at the kill location. Heads and feet would have been removed during this procedure, and these elements would not have been transported to the site” (1984: 1-2). He suggests that the presence of toe fragments for small animals indicates the



hunters butchered these animals at Big Rice Lake (1984b: 304). Penman's analysis suggests that the people at Big Rice Lake brought birds and fish back there to butcher them (1984b: 304; 1989: 3).

#### Which Months Did People Live There Based on Faunal Remains?

The animal remains studied tell a story of what the people at Big Rice Lake long ago ate and how they prepared and cooked it. But analysis of these remains also reveals insights into when they came to and left Big Rice Lake. Conventional wisdom in the past has suggested tribal people used Big Rice Lake in the late summer to gather and produce wild rice. Tribal elder testimony suggests a longer period of annual use. What can the animals tell us?

Migratory birds: Excavators discovered the remains of many migratory birds. Most of these birds do not spend the winter in northern Minnesota at all and the ones that may be uncommon residents during winter. Furthermore, Big Rice Lake hunters favored mallard ducks, pied-billed grebes, blue-winged teals and coots based on the analysis of the remains (1989: 3). Mallards fly into the region in early March or afterward and leave before the beginning of December (Penman 1989: 3, citing Roberts 1936: 222). Other species have shorter residencies in northern Minnesota.

Fish: Richard W. Yerkes of Ohio State University used fish scales to analyze the growth rings on northern sucker fish and sauger fish. He determined Big Rice Lake fishers caught them between July and October (Penman 1989: 3).

Mammals: The peak period in the Big Rice Lake area for deer to give birth is from late May to the middle of June. A deer jaw bone found in shovel testing suggests the deer was 2.5 years old. Analysis suggests that Big Rice Lake hunters would have killed the deer in November.

Penman suggests: "The presence of so many migratory birds and the ages of the fish and deer indicated that most of the hunting activity at Big Rice Lake occurred between March and December" (1989: 4). These dates challenge the notion that Big Rice Lake was only a wild rice harvesting and processing camp.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeologists who have undertaken more extensive research projects at Big Rice Lake have examined its prehistoric resources, namely the connections that Woodland Period ceramics and preserved burnt wild rice kernels have with harvesting and processing the aquatic plant there. There is the suggestion that current use patterns may be the continuation of the prehistoric uses of the Big Rice Lake (Superior National Forest 1983: 295). But researchers have not focused on historical aspects to the same degree they have on prehistoric wild rice harvesting and processing. This section looks at Big Rice Lake's historical archaeology.

The archaeological record, at Big Rice Lake and elsewhere, is inherently biased as it favors durable objects such as lithic materials. The perishable past is at a disadvantage. This skews the picture of life at Big Rice Lake. Historical records and tribal knowledge and continuing traditional practice help to create a fuller picture. For example, Ojibwe wild rice processors utilize flat rectangular-shaped baskets during the hulling of kernels after parching. They toss up the kernels in these winnowing or fanning baskets, which primarily are made of birch bark along with materials from other trees as fasteners. They continue to use them today. But birch-bark baskets, wigwams and canoes typically do not survive in the prehistoric or more recent archaeological record.

As previously noted, the line between prehistoric and post-contact artifacts can be blurred or uncertain at times. For example, perhaps indicating a mixing of technologies one object in the Superior National Forest's collections is a moose bone possibly sawed off with a metal saw to create a scraper. There is an artifact described as a fishing lure with "lead harpoon point possibly made from musket ball" (Peters 1983: 296). Site records indicate that Big Rice Lake is a fur-trading-era location. This era had French, English and American periods, with the American period largely ending in the mid- or late 1800s depending on the area. Some artifacts may be from the earlier periods during the fur-trading era. But many archaeological materials collected to date at Big Rice Lake are from the 1800s and 1900s, presumably left by the Ojibwe people.

This section focuses on items that appear to be associated with the Ojibwe people. The historic artifacts for this analysis come from two sources: surveys of Big Rice Lake done for this project and excavation collections held by the Superior National Forest. Below is a more detail discussion of some of the historic artifacts from Big Rice Lake. These include ammunition, beads, buttons, coins, pipes, bottles and jars, cans, ceramics, nails, and metal tubs and buckets.

### Ammunition

Hunting long has been part of Big Rice Lake's story, stretching back to Paleoindian times when ancient hunters left behind fragments of their Plano-style spears used to hunt big game. Hunting of other animals continued in the

Woodland Period with smaller projectile points. Then came Western ammunition. Musket balls represent the oldest type of ammunition found at Big Rice Lake. Hunters generally used musket balls from the 1600s to 1800s. The musket balls from Big Rice Lake is one category of artifacts that extend its possible use back to the French and English fur-trading eras. See Figure 7.01 for muskets balls from Big Rice Lake.

Shotgun shells excavated during the archaeological field schools at Big Rice Lake during the summers from 1983 to 1986 indicate hunting between the late 1800s and early 1900s. This corresponds with oral testimony. Fred Erkkila's father owned a 10-acre homestead near Big Rice Lake beginning in 1893. Erkkila's son said the Ojibwe had been ricing and hunting waterfowl, particularly ducks, as far back as he could remember, to the 1920s. Archaeologists also have found a type of lead shell shot associated with hunting for swans and geese. Marlene Diver, president of the Anishinabe Club, said in a 1988 interview that tribal people would hunt waterfowl at Big Rice Lake after ricing season. Others state the seasons also may have overlapped with waterfowl hunting in the early morning or early evening as the prime hours with wild rice harvesting taking place during the rest of the day (Barsness, undated: 1-3).

Brand names found at Big Rice Lake include Redhead, Remington, Peters, Peters Cartridge Company, Union Metallic Cartridge, Western, Winchester and Winchester Repeating Arms.

One researcher who studied the assemblages from 1980s field schools suggests a time range from 1878 to 1967. He states that Big Rice Lake “was visited by many (hunters, wild rice harvesters, and fishermen) who came to use mother nature’s abundant gifts. Hunting (waterfowl) and wild rice harvesting were the primary reasons for bringing people here. The paper shotgun shells shed light on how far back the use of shotguns may have played a part in hunting and the type of hunting that took place (1878 – 1967)” (Barsness undated: 6). See Figure 7.02 for ammunition.

David Frederickson, M.D., analyzed 16 types of shells found at Big Rice Lake based on old factory catalogues, advertisements and personal data from his collection (1988). These are the ranges of manufacturing dates he found:

1. 1907 to 1911
2. 1900 to 1906
3. 1890 to 1894
4. 1922 to 1930
5. 1910 to 1930
6. 1925 to 1930
7. 1907 to 1925
8. 1890 to 1894
9. 1930 to 1934
10. 1910 to 1925
11. 1910 to 1925
12. 1907 to 1911
13. 1924 or 1925
14. 1884 to 1890
15. 1926 to 1930
16. 1925 to 1930



Figure 7.01: Musket balls



Figure 7.02: Ammunition

### Beads

American Indian jewelry and crafts often use colorful glass beads, sometimes referred as seed beads because of their tiny size. The first of these beads appeared in the Upper Great Lakes region during the French fur-trading era. Some found at Big Rice Lake potentially could date to various times during the fur-trading era, but others could be from the past century (Superior National Forest 1983: 301). The most numerous historic artifacts found in the 1983 excavation in the Clearing were 1,412 beads, all glass seed beads, except for one red corn bead and two clear tubular-shaped beads.

More beads presumably are there based on what excavators have unearthed so far. Big Rice Lake's glass beads have more to tell than just the fact that tribal people for some reason left behind at least 1,400 of these beads. Did they make jewelry there while also harvesting wild rice? Did they decorate

clothing made of leather or cloth there? Did they lose or break their jewelry there, or rip their clothing, scattering beads in the soil?

Examining the specific colors of these beads, their excavation location and association with other artifacts indicates that someone at Big Rice Lake possibly lost or broke a pendant. This provides a picture that humanizes the archaeological record. These beads indicate that Big Rice Lake was more than a place to harvest and process wild rice for subsistence. Consider the records from the 1983 excavation. Level 2 of Excavation Unit 85/42 contained 444 beads including 370 in varying shades of blue and 37 in dark yellow-orange. Excavators found these beads in direct association with a safety pin clasp, suggesting a lost or broken broach. Level 1, Level 3 and Level 4 also had beads in color and diameter size matching the bead assemblage in Level 2 (Superior National Forest 1983: 299).

This unit's location was on the western portion of the Clearing where excavators also found other historic materials. Artifacts in Level 2 included white plastic buttons, glass fragments, various types of nails including one hand-wrought square nail, barb wire and a fragment of a Copenhagen tobacco snuff jar lid. Artifacts in Level 3 offered more diagnostic opportunities to assist with dating. A .12-gauge cartridge cap head-stamped "Winchester Repeater" was manufactured between 1896 and 1901. A .12-gauge cartridge cap head-stamped "Peters League" was manufactured between 1907 and 1911. A Hutchinson bottle stop (patented 1872) was in use between 1872 and 1930. A 5-inch-long piece of



metal in a forceps shape could indicate jewelry or craft production because of its association with the beads (Superior National Forest 1983: 299).

Another excavated unit with a similar composition of beads and other historic materials also is helpful when considering the period for the possible lost or broken bead broach. Level 2 of excavation Unit 84/75 also had a large concentration of glass seed beads in the varying shades of blue and diameters matching the above excavation unit. Furthermore, it had .12-gauge cartridge caps, manufactured between 1896 to 1925, that roughly correspond with the dates of the cartridge caps on Level 2 in the other unit.

These units also had prehistoric materials including lithics and pottery sherds in the upper levels. The presence of the prehistoric and historic materials in the upper levels of these two excavation units could be due to mixing of the soils or the coexistence of different technologies. Regardless, the units indicate the continuation of indigenous use of this area in the Clearing. Additionally, this data taken together suggests that someone in the late 1800s and 1900s, most likely a woman given who usually made such jewelry during this period, lost a piece of jewelry or was making jewelry. These beads indicate that Big Rice Lake was more than a place to harvest and process wild rice for subsistence.



Figure 7.03: Glass beads

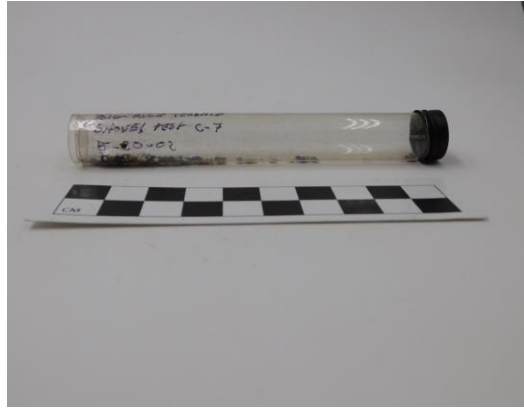


Figure 7.04: Glass beads in cylinder

### Bottles and Jars

Numerous glass bottles and jars remain on the surface at Big Rice Lake. Local brands include Arrowhead Bottling from Virginia, Minnesota, Virginia Bottling Works from Virginia, Minnesota and Fitger's Beverages of Duluth, Minnesota. The various brands or styles at Big Rice Lake had manufacture dates from the mid-1800s to mid-1900s. See Figure 7.05 to Figure 7.10 for bottles and jars from Big Rice Lake.



Figure 7.05: Fitger's bottle from Duluth



Figure 7.06: Bottle fragment



Figure 7.07: Arrowhead Bottling bottle    Figure 7.08: Virginia MN Bottling Works



Figure 7.09: Burnette's Almond Extract bottle    Figure 7.10: Vick's jar

### Buttons

The button assemblage at Big Rice Lake contains buttons made of shell, glass, metal and plastic, a wide range of materials used over the past centuries. See Figure 7.11 and Figure 7.12 for buttons found at Big Rice Lake. For example, the shell buttons appeared in early 1600s America but increase in popularity in the mid-1800s with shell-button manufacturing appearing along the Mississippi River and other inland waterways after 1890. A general range for shell-button popular usage is 1850 to 1930. The one in Figure 7.11 is a mass-

produced post-1890 shell button (Barber personal communication 2020). Metal and glass buttons also were used in the 1800s and early 1900s. Plastic buttons first appeared in the late 1800s, with Figure 7.12 showing what is likely a modern plastic button dating after 1930 (Barber 2020).



Figure 7.11: Shell button



Figure 7.12: Assorted buttons and clasps

### Cans and Tins

Big Rice Lake artifacts include metal containers. The branding or shapes of some of the food, beverage or tobacco containers help provide date ranges. One is a lid for a tea tin that reads: "Lipton's Tea The Most Delicious the World Produces." Lipton manufactured this tin from 1900 to 1950. Another example is the can that reads "KC True Height Can Baking Power Guaranteed." It was manufactured from 1925 to 1950. See Figure 7.13 to Figure 7.16 for types of cans, tins and other metal objects found at Big Rice Lake. Please note that Figure 7.14 is an Internet photograph of an intact KC baking powder can from

pinterest.com. Figure 7.15 shows a type of safety pin from between 1880 and 1910 (Barber 2020).



Figure 7.13: KC baking powder can top Figure 7.14: KC can from pinterest.com



Figure 7.15: Lipton tea top and assorted metal Figure 7.16: Metal can

### Ceramics

Big Rice Lake contains many pieces of ceramics manufactured during historical times. These include fragments of stoneware crocks. People often used these crocks to store food such as pickles and butter or beverages such as

alcohol. This stoneware pottery was particularly popular in the early and mid-1900s. See Figure 7.17. Some ceramics, as well as glass artifacts, are now in the lake because of erosion. See Figure 7.18.



Figure 7.17: Crock fragment



Figure 7.18: Ceramic and glass fragments

### Coins

Coins found include an Indian Head cent dated 1904. See Figure 7.19. The United States Bureau of Mint made these pennies from 1859 to 1909. Others are a Wheat Back Penny dated 1924 and another Wheat Back Penny with an indistinguishable date. The United States produced these from 1909 to 1958. Excavators also found a 1909 Liberty Head dime. See Figure 7.20.



Figure 7.19: 1904 Indian Head Cent    Figure 7.20: Liberty Head Dime

### Fishing Lures

A Superior National Forest publication reference a “lead harpoon point possibly made from musket ball” at Big Rice Lake. No picture is available (Superior National Forest 1983: 296).

### Cutting and Digging Tools

Knives, axes, files and shovels show the work being done at Big Rice Lake. Many of these appear to be from the 1900s. See Figure 7.21 to Figure 7.25.



Figure 7.21: Pocket knife



Figure 7.22: Pocket knife



Figure 7.23: Long knife



Figure 7.24: Shovel



Figure 7.25: Axe head



## Nails, Barbed Wire and Metal Pieces

Big Rice Lake's archaeological assemblages include common metal objects such as nails and barbed wire, as well as fragments of metal. The nails and barbed wire are some of the more confounding historical artifacts at Big Rice Lake because there is little or no historical data or tribal testimony about their use.

Researchers may divide nails up into three basic categories based on their manufacture type. They are hand-wrought nails, machine-cut nails and wire nails. The nails excavated at Big Rice Lake appear to be wire nails, which are "notoriously difficult to date" (Barber 2017: 135). Larger-sized wire nails such as those found at Big Rice Lake began to be common in the late 1800s. Some nails have clamp etchings that first appeared about 1890 and still are used in the present. By 1900, wire or rounded nails made up the majority of nail manufacturing in the United States (Merritt 2014: 3). The variety of rounded wire nails and the lack of older nail types suggest that those at Big Rice Lake used primarily used nails in the 1900s. One suggestion is that nails were used to build wigwams, duck blinds or other temporary shelters. See Figure 7.26 and Figure 7.27 for nails found at Big Rice Lake. The exact uses for barbed wire are unknown. Archaeologists have not found fences or remnants of fencing.



Figure 7.26: Nail



Figure 7.27: Nail

### Pipes

White clay pipes were manufactured as early as 1580 in Scotland and the Netherlands (Barber 2020). They were later also made elsewhere in Europe and ended in popularity in the 1930s. The angle of the pipe bowls suggests later date from that range. See Figure 7.28. No pipe stems are in the archaeological collections. Archaeologists also excavated a pipe base made of pipestone from southern Minnesota. The manufacture date is unknown. See Figure 7.29.



Figure 7.28: White clay pipe bowls

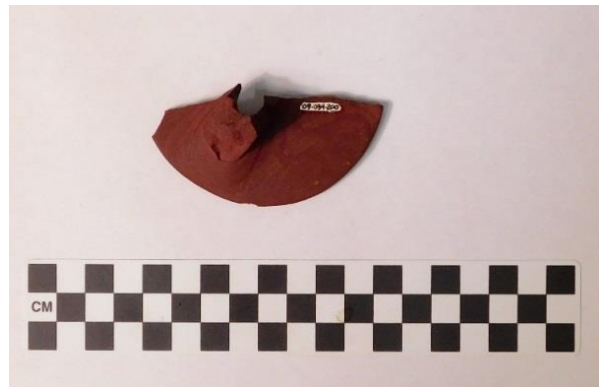


Figure 7.29: Pipestone pipe base

### Pins and Pendants

Archaeologists excavated two metal pins or pendants. One is baseball-themed pin with an unknown manufacture date. Another is a shield-shaped badge or pendant with the number “52” with a 1925 or 1926 stamped date. See Figure 7.30.



Figure 7:30: Pins

### Metal Tubs and Buckets

The site has many metal tubs. Ojibwe people used these tubs for wild rice and maple sap production. See Figure 7.31 to Figure 7.34 for field photographs of the tubs and historical photographs of them in use in wild rice production elsewhere. The Historical Documentation chapter includes a 1915 newspaper article about

the drowning deaths of two young Ojibwe people, noting that a “galvanized iron tub was found under the overturned canoe, and jammed in the cross pieces. This was full of clothes, evidently the apparel of a lady.” The article added that an “Indian runner” was dispatched to Big Rice Lake to notify the families of the deaths. Figure 7.35 and Figure 7.36 are buckets used to collect maple sap to be turned in sugar. Ojibwe harvesters used the spouts of cans to collect the dripping sap, as seen in Figure 7.37.



Figure 7.31: Metal tub



Figure 7.32: Metal tub



Figure 7.33: Historical ricing photograph



Figure 7.34: Historical ricing photo



Figure 7.35: Bucket



Figure 7.36: Bucket



Figure 7.37: Bucket with spout

### Range of Dates from the Artifacts

Examination of the historic artifacts at Big Rice Lake include many objects dating to the 1800s and first half of the 1900s. Analysis of the date ranges suggest there was a spike in usage of European or American-derived goods beginning in the mid- to late 1800s until approximately the 1950s and 1960s. The most intensive use was between 1890 and 1950, based on the artifacts found during this research project's surveys and in the Superior National Forest's excavation collections.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

Newspaper articles, books, aerial photographs, federal Indian agency reports, tribal records and environmental documents are written or historical materials that help tell Big Rice Lake's story. This section lays out some of this documentation in detail as background to be used for analysis in later chapters.

#### Historical Aerial Photographs

Historical aerial photographs in the Superior National Forest archives indicate that the U.S. Forest Service at some point after 1949 constructed a dirt road to Big Rice Lake. Before then, tribal people usually accessed the area by canoe and overland portage. However, to be discussed later, Ojibwe oral testimony indicated that a new forest road did not necessarily change past practices because of the poor conditions of the road at times.

#### Newspaper Reports

Big Rice Lake is in a remote spot, but it was a center of wild rice activities that drew the attention of news coverage in the early 1900s in newspapers based in Tower and Virginia, Minnesota. Newspaper articles from the early 1900s contain reports of extended stays during ricing season at Big Rice Lake (then

simply called Rice Lake or Wild Rice Lake) and fleets of birch-bark canoes using the system of lakes and rivers to travel there and back. Here is one:

On Sunday the Indians returned from Rice Lake where they have been for some time gathering rice. There were a dozen or so of birch bark canoes in the fleet and these were laden to the guards with dunnage and rice. Each boat carried three to four people and the sight reminded one of the primitive days in the district. They came down Pike river, making the portage at the dam. The trail covered by these people is an exceedingly difficult one and is only to be taken by an Indian and his birchbark. Many new canoes were noted in the fleet. A new birchbark is a rare thing these days as they are not being generally made. The material for them is growing scarcer each year and the Indian less inclined to make them with the white man's Peterboro as a swifter, stauncher cruiser. These people are magnificent canoe men and handle the paddle like masters of the art. They seem a part of the canoe and ride it like a bird and are right at home on the water in one of these dangerous little cockleshells. Their collection of rice was all that they expected and will help to tide them through the winter nicely (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 11, 1914). (Figure 8.01 is a copy of the newspaper article.)

An article headlined "Indians Gathering Wild Rice" reads:

Twenty-nine birchbark canoes loaded with Indians from the local reserve went to the rice beds up Pike river way, Monday. Seven more followed

them, Tuesday. About every family has gone to gather the winter's supply of wild rice. It is said that the crop is quite plentiful this year, and this will mean plenty to eat for our red brothers the coming winter. John Light went to Virginia by train, where he will buy provisions and ship them out to the camps as near as possible, after which they will portage in. The canoes were all loaded with tents and camping out paraphernalia so that a sufficient supply for the two or three weeks' camp could not be taken along. They go to Rice Lake first. This means a trip up Pike River and a long portage to the rice beds, entailing no small amount of labor, as the whole equipment must be carried on the shoulders and heads of every member of the party (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Aug. 27, 1915).

A 1916 newspaper article with the headline "Annual Harvest of Wild Rice" reads:

A fleet of thirty four canoes came down the lake this week laden with Indians, wild rice and camp equipment. They had been out to Rice Lake, some ten to twelve miles away, and rice is now plentiful in every home on the reserve. The crop of rice was rather green for gathering, but there was plenty of it ... The Indians have been required to go to Rice Lake for years for their supply for winter's use (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 8, 1916).



These newspaper articles provide information about the number of Ojibwe people traveling to set up camp at Big Rice Lake. The 1914 article states that a “dozen or so” canoes with three to four people returned. This suggests at least 36 to 48 people based on 12 canoes may have left Big Rice Lake at various times so the number of people there may have been larger. The 1915 article indicates a total of 36 canoes leaving for Big Rice Lake, or 78 to 144 people based on the standard of three to four people in each canoe. The 1916 article indicates 34 canoes heading to Big Rice Lake, or 102 to 136 people using the same passenger standard. Figure 8.02 is a historical photograph of overland portaging of a birch-bark canoe elsewhere in the region. Figure 8.03 is a photograph of birch-bark canoes at the Bois Forte Reservation.

A news article from 1917 indicates that non-tribal traders traveled to Big Rice Lake to purchase wild rice from Ojibwe harvesters. It reads:

Frank Landgren came in from Rice Lake Tuesday afternoon with some twelve hundred pounds of wild rice which he bought from Indians. He will dispose of it to a Duluth firm (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 14, 1917).

Other newspaper articles reported that Ojibwe families suffered deaths associated with Big Rice Lake trips. One from 1914 reads:

A week ago the Indians returned from Rice Lake and while on their return a 17-year-old boy named John Wabose, died and was buried in the

cemetery on the reserve” (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 18, 1914).

A newspaper article from 1915 headlined “Indians Drown in Pike Bay: Geo Light and Mary Sam Drown When Their Canoe Upsets” reports on the drowning deaths of two young people on Lake Vermilion and a runner sent to Big Rice Lake to notify parents of the death. Please note the newspaper headline and story each uses a different first name for Miss Sam. The article reads:

George Light and Annie Sam, Indians living on the Sucker Point reserve, were drown in Lake Vermilion Wednesday afternoon. The two were in a birchbark canoe, evidently going from Tower to the Lake Vermilion Indian School. The accident occurred in Pike Bay in a line across from the sawmill dock to the school. The water at this point will average eight to ten feet, with mud bottom ... A galvanized iron tub was found under the overturned canoe, and jammed in the cross pieces. This was full of clothes, evidently the apparel of a lady. A mackinaw coat and a man’s hat were also found and efforts were then made to locate the owner ... Light and Miss Sam had been out gathering rice with others from the school, but had returned for food supplies. They stopped at the school Tuesday evening and later crossed the bay to Tower where they spent the night. They were seen to leave the dock about 11 o’clock Wednesday morning. It is said that Light did not drink and the why of their tipping over in a canoe cannot be seen as these people handle a canoe expertly. Only a

light breeze rippled the lake at the time. Those who saw them go down state that they did not hit any deadhead, and none are near where they drowned. The birchbark has no holes in it. Light was about 25 years of age and a son of John Light and wife. His companion was about 21 years of age and it is rumored that the two had been recently married. Annie Sam's parents are with the rice gathers at Rice lake. An Indian runner was dispatched to the fields to notify them of the death of their daughter. Lake Vermilion has now secured its sixth victim so far this season. However, no fault is laid to the lake. It is never angry and each of the six accidents seem more the act of unkind fate than that of lake conditions (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 3, 1915). (See Figure 8.04 for copy of the newspaper article.)

Similarly, an article from 1902 reports on the death of an Ojibwe man and his body delivered to "the balance of the tribe, now camped at Big Rice Lake." Under the headline "Decapitated," it reads:

An engine on the line of the Duluth, Virginia & Rainy River railroad ran over an Indian who had chosen the rail for a pillow, on Friday night last, practically decapitating him. The body was picked up and later turned over to the balance of the tribe, now camped at Big Rice Lake thirteen miles south. It is generally supposed the deceased was under the influence of liquor at the time of the accident (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Virginia Enterprise*, Oct. 17, 1902).

Other new reports discuss Big Rice Lake as a place known for its resources. An article from 1909 headlined “Stopping Place at Big Rice Lake” reads:

Matt Derosia has established a neat stopping place for hunters at Big Rice Lake, in which vicinity big game abounds and where the toothsome duck finds fine feeding grounds in the big rice beds. Mr. Derosia has accommodations for twelve people, and has eight boats on the river for rental purposes. The place is neatly kept and well stocked, and is cared for by attentive attendants (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Virginia Enterprise*, Sept. 24, 1909).

A newspaper article from 1917 on Ojibwe maple-sap harvesting at Big Rice Lake reads:

Maple sugar time has come again and a large number of the local Indians left Monday morning for various points down the line to the different sugar bushes they know of. They annually produce a lot of sugar which helps largely in sweetening their lives during the months that follow. They also sell a lot of it in Tower and elsewhere (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, April 13, 1917).

Local newspaper reports tell the story of Ojibwe families traveling to and from Big Rice Lake. The articles document extended stays there, trading, and the economic and subsistence importance of the wild rice crop.

**Indians Through Gathering Rice**

On Sunday the Indians returned from Rice Lake where they have been for some time gathering rice. There were a dozen or so of birch bark canoes in the fleet and these were laden to the guards with dunnage and rice. Each boat carried three to four people and the sight reminded one of the primitive days in the district. They came down Pike river, making the portage at the dam. The trail covered by these people is an exceedingly difficult one and is only to be taken by an Indian and his birchbark. Many new canoes were noted in the fleet. A new birchbark is a rare thing these days as they are not being generally made. The material for them is growing scarcer each year and the Indian less inclined to make them with the white man's Peterboro as a swifter, stancher cruiser. These people are magnificent canoe men and handle the paddle like masters of the art. They seem a part of the canoe and ride it like a bird and are right at home on the water in one of these dangerous little cockleshells. Their collection of rice was all that they expected and will help to tide them through the winter nicely.



Figure 8.01: 1914 article    Figure 8.02: Historical portaging photograph



Figure 8.03: Canoes at Bois Forte

**Geo. Light and Mary Sam Drown When Their Canoe Upsets**

George Light and Annie Sam, Indians living on the Sucker Point reserve, were drowned in Lake Vermillion Wednesday forenoon.

The two were in a birchbark canoe, evidently going from Tower to the Lake Vermillion Indian School. The accident occurred in Pike Bay, in a line across from the sawmill dock to the school. The water at this point will average eight to ten feet, with mud bottom.

A party of boys were on or near Hoodoo Point at the time and heard the cries of young Light for help. The boys ran around the shore line and secured a boat and put out to the overturned canoe, but the occupants had gone down. At that time it was not known who the unfortunates were. A galvanized iron tub was found under the overturned

all this with the loss of three saloon licenses amounting to \$1,500. The finances of the city are on the upturn. Through the present council one of the greatest city improvements for years is on. Cement walks have been made a possibility. When these are laid, and men are today laying them, Tower will enter the cement walk period. Next rear the South-siders will not sit back and watch travel and trade go to the North-siders and walks will no doubt be laid on that side of Main street. One thing calls for another. The present council seem to be doing things which could have been done by previous councils of the long ago had they so minded. Tower is entering a new era. It is time. A council which does not know that a thing cannot be done, but goes ahead and does it, is the one thing needed today, and it looks today as if we had 'em.

**To Meet Next Monday Night**

Figure 8.04: 1915 article

## 1854 Treaty Authority

Another source of documentation is the 1854 Treaty Authority ([www.1854treatyauthority.org](http://www.1854treatyauthority.org)). The 1854 Treaty Authority works with the Bois Forte Band and Grand Portage Band to protect rights for members to hunt, fish and gather within the territories ceded by that treaty.

The Management Plan Revision for Big Rice Lake states: “Big Rice Lake is culturally and historically important to local Ojibwe Bands who have utilized the lake for centuries and continue to exercise treaty rights there today” (2013: 2). The plan says archaeological evidence suggests use for hundreds or thousands of years for wild rice and maple sugar harvesting and hunting, noting that artifacts date “from the Woodland and Fur Trading eras (approximately 500 BC to AD 1850)” and “the Bands indicate a long history of utilizing the resources at Big Rice Lake, and its sued continues to be important today” (2013: 4). See Figure 8.05 for the 1854 Treaty Authority sign at Big Rice Lake on protecting the wild rice plant in the lake.



Figure 8.05: 1854 Treaty Authority sign at Big Rice Lake

## CHAPTER NINE

### OJIBWE MEMORY AND STORIES

The Ojibwe people embrace a storied sense of place that links them to the past and present. Stories today emphasize mythical and modern connections to place. One suggestion is that the Ojibwe cultural focus on dreams and visions stems from the long winter periods when smaller family groups withdrew to the woods before reuniting in the spring with other tribespeople. These winter times in the wigwams were filled with the telling of stories and sharing dreams. Storytelling about places continue today, and with my family often would happen in cars travelling the road on and off the reservations in northern Minnesota.

For the interviews for this research project, I met a married Ojibwe couple at the Bois Forte Heritage Center and Cultural Museum (The Legend House - *Atisokanigamig*) on Lake Vermilion to drive them to Big Rice Lake. On the way to the lake, one of the elders told me about the vivid dreams that she had been having about the quality of the upcoming wild ricing season. Her dreams told her the crop would not be as good as in years past, and the dreams troubled her. Her dreams foretold larger concerns over wild rice in general as climate change, pollution, overharvesting and other problems challenged the health of the plant in northern Minnesota. She said her friends had told her they, too, were having dreams about this year's crop of wild rice, although not all of them envisioned a poor crop.

Researchers should be careful not to essentialize North America's varied tribal societies by considering them as one monolithic group. Before indigenous-European contact these societies may or may not have seen themselves as one cultural or ethnic group across the continent. Today the federal government recognizes more than 500 tribes as sovereign entities. Each tribe is distinct. Outsiders often lump them together. Pan-Indianism also resulted in the tribes and tribal people transmitting and adopting cultural traditions, practices and viewpoints from other tribes as well.

Stories about places have roles in many other individual indigenous culture besides the Ojibwe people. Consider a quote from an Apache elder: "I think of the mountain ... as if it were my maternal grandmother. I recall stories of how it once was at the mountain." But these stories are more than simply ones that carry on tribal memory of place. They are meant to teach. He adds: "The stories told to me were like arrows. Elsewhere, hearing that mountain's name, I see it. Its name is like a picture. Stories go to work on you like arrows. Stories make you live right" (Basso 1996: 38). In other words, such oral traditions about places teach shared values. Furthermore, these oral traditions serve to connect places to the continuation of shared identities. Additionally, they instruct you to "live right," serving as unwritten customary law to encourage people to act in ways their society expects them to behave (Richland and Deer 2010: 36).

Ojibwe oral stories may entertain, inspire or serve as warnings. These stories may serve as guides to future actions through the telling of a cautionary



tale. On that day in May of 2017 at Big Rice Lake, an Ojibwe elder has served me this type of notice, unwritten, but in the form of a childhood story to make sure I did right. *“When I was little,”* she told me, *“little green creatures tried to pull me into the water. They reached up at me to pull me in.”* Her story was a reminder of the power of nature. More specifically, she was warning me to respect the lake, the land and the ancient people buried there. Big Rice Lake was important to her, not only a place she harvested wild rice but also as a place powered by thousands of years of people like her coming here.

There were other stories too. She and other elders told of their ricing trips, being out on Big Rice Lake or other lakes, being out in a canoe engaging in what the Ojibwe people call “making ricing.” There always are ricing stories on the Ojibwe reservations in northern Minnesota – tales of one’s prowess at harvesting, of canoes full of hundreds of pounds of wild rice, of the ability or inabilities of one’s ricing partner. Ojibwe children grew up hearing these stories. They wait for the time for them to be able to be part of the two-person team in a canoe. One of the pair uses wood “knockers” in the front of the canoe to bend the wild rice stalks down over the canoe and knock the stalks to dislodge kernels from the plant. The other one in the back pushing the canoe along using a long pole with a Y-shaped end that touches the water’s bottom. One Ojibwe elder told the story of when, at last, she became old enough to rice and no longer had to stay home to watch the other children in her family.

Wild rice is supposed to be the first solid food that an Ojibwe infant should eat and the last food a dying person should eat. Wild rice's significance dates back to the Ojibwe people's migration story, which chronicles a vision-inspired journey from the mouth of the St. Lawrence River westward to the place "where the food grows on the water" (Warren 1885: 76-95).

Ojibwe children learn that their ancestors followed a giant clam shell in the sky until they reached the Lake Superior area in northern Wisconsin and found wild rice. White Earth Ojibwe author and University of California, Berkeley professor Gerald Vizenor writes that "the *miigis* shell appeared in the sun for the last time at *Mooningwanekaning*, or Madeline Island in *Anishinaabe Gichigami*, Lake Superior, in the Great Sea of the *Aninishaabeg*" (Vizenor 1993: 21). Continuing today, the harvesting and processing of wild rice from lakes and waterways is integral to Ojibwe's living identity. The aquatic plant "was endowed with spiritual attributes, and its discovery was recounted in legends. It was used ceremonially as well as for food, and its harvest promoted social interaction in the late summer each year" (Vennum Jr. 1988: 1). Wild rice continues to provide social, nutritional and economic subsistence for Ojibwe families. Wild rice is central to Ojibwe identity.

Some Ojibwe elders who gathered in 2017 at Big Rice Lake traveled on a bus provided by the tribe from the Nett Lake sector of the Bois Forte Reservation, about 50 miles away. They discussed their families ricing at Big Rice Lake despite the distance because of the availability of a good ricing spot and,

because this lake is farther south, the wild rice might be ready to harvest weeks earlier than to the north. Conversely, Ojibwe families from the more southern regions of the reservation would travel north as the wild rice season stretched on.

Many had personal connections to the lake, either ricing here themselves or having family members who did or still do. They discussed their families camping in trucks here. The elders knew that tribal people had been harvesting wild rice here for thousands of years. They also revered the location because ancestors had buried people here as they believed other peoples had before them.

“The presence of Native American ricing activities at the site has been acknowledged by the popular local name for the peninsula: ‘Indian Point’” (Peters and Motivan 1983: 282). But one elder said it is simply known to them as “The Point.” He stressed that the true extent of indigenous occupation of Big Rice Lake goes beyond the documented sites. He also said the importance of Big Rice Lake not only is its wild rice but all the other resources that his family gathers there. He was making a wood flute out of a small piece of a branch as he said this. Figure 9.01 to Figure 9.04 are photographs of the author harvesting wild rice on the Mississippi River.



Figure 9.01: Wild rice



Figure 9.02: Y-pole used in ricing



Figure 9.03: Canoe with wild rice



Figure 9.04: Harvested wild rice in bags

### Ojibwe Tribal Elder Interview

*“I don’t think they make up their rice. But us, we make up our grains and eat it. If we have a lot of rice, we sell some. We eat the rice.”*

These words are from an interview I conducted with a Bois Forte Ojibwe elder in August 2017. Her family has been harvesting wild rice at Big Rice Lake at least as far back as her grandfather’s generation. I asked her how old she was, but she told me she did not know. Her husband had kept track of her age

before he passed away. She had no concern about it. These handful of brief sentences conveyed much about the subsistence nature of wild rice to the Ojibwe people, sanctity of the plant and place, and need for stewardship. This section reviews past oral histories, as well as new ones, to chronicle the Ojibwe historical presence and use of Big Rice Lake, sense of ownership of this tribal cultural landscape, and concerns about it for future generations.

INTERVIEWER: When you were younger do you remember going to Big Rice and what the rice stands were like back then?

ELDER: Yeah. I wasn't too young, you know. I'm pretty old, so I've been there ...

INTERVIEWER: Do you mind me asking ...

ELDER: My parents riced there. My grandparents. We came from Nett Lake.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mind if I ask you how old you are?

ELDER: I don't even know how old I am.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

ELDER: Yeah, I don't keep track of my age. My husband used to but he died about two years ago.

INTERVIEWER: I wish I could be like that, not worry about my age.

ELDER: Laughs.

INTERVIEWER: It'd be nice.

INTERVIEWER: Your grandparents then were living up at Nett Lake, and they'd come down to Big Rice?

ELDER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How do you end going to Big Rice?

ELDER: The Tower people always went there. That was their lake. But they lost control of it. They used to tell the people when it was ripe, when we should go out. And pretty soon the white people knew that the Indians didn't have control of that lake so they would go out and pick, and break it up, knock the heads. They didn't rice like we did because they want to get all they could. Take the whole grain. But the whole grain takes about two or three weeks to ripen all the way. But they want ... They used to take the whole head, and that whole head doesn't ripen all at once.

INTERVIEWER: So in terms of the losing control of the lake, at one point it was just native people ricing at Big Rice?

ELDER: Yeah, the people from here.

INTERVIEWER: Tower.

ELDER Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And they would tell the other people now you can go, it's time to go?

ELDER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But somewhere along the line it got opened up to everybody, and that when you're seeing the decline of the rice at Big Rice?

ELDER: Yeah.

-

INTERVIEWER: What was it like back a long time ago? Where was the rice, was it all the way to the shore, to the middle of the lake?

ELDER: All over. We used to go rice there .... But anyway the Indians were in control of that lake. The game wardens didn't care about it at that time.

INTERVIEWER: When do you think this was, like what years?

ELDER: I can't remember.

INTERVIEWER: I knew you were going to say that. I'm not keeping track of the years. Don't even ask her that.

ELDER: Yeah, I don't know what year that was. But I don't remember how old I was that's the bad part.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember you grandparents going there?

ELDER: My grandparents, we riced with them.

INTERVIEWER: So it was a family ...

ELDER: Yeah.

-

ELDER: These people from Vermilion that was their lake because there's no rice here.

INTERVIEWER: So how did you end up living on Lake Vermilion.

ELDER: Because my husband was from here.

INTERVIEWER: When you were younger and you and your parents or grandparents went to Big Rice were there a lot of other native people ricing there at the same time.

ELDER: There were hardly any white people. Mostly Indians when we first started ricing there. But after a while there was more white people than Indians and they're the ones that killed the rice.

INTERVIEWER: You were living up at Nett Lake, you'd come down here, you'd drive down here?

ELDER: Yeah, we had a pickup truck. My grandpa had a truck so we carried like, depending on how many people were, we could carry five canoes on top of that truck.

INTERVIEWER: What?

ELDER: Yeah. We just layer them and one on the top.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a daytrip or would you stay down here?

ELDER: No, we went home because we have to try to get a couple of loads in to parch and we believed in parching soon as you got off the lake because the rice would cook real quick.

INTERVIEWER: Really.

ELDER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Sort of like fresh food, right. It's better when you pick it and make it. Same with rice. I never heard that.

-

INTERVIEWER: I want to thank you for all the time. Is there anything about Big Rice that you think is important? In talking to some of the other elders they were concerned about the future of Big Rice, but they really thought it was an



important place because all the ricing that had happened there over the years and because the people had been there for so long, and to have it recognized as something important.

ELDER: Yeah. People moved over there from like from here, all over, they moved into Big Rice. They would rice there maybe two, three weeks. A few of the older people would stay and pick all the rice, you know what was left.

INTERVIEWER: When do you think that was?

ELDER: Oh, I don't know, maybe about 50 years ago.

#### Minnesota Historical Society Interviews

Other projects also have collected Ojibwe stories or concerns about Big Rice Lake, even though the lake itself was not the focus of their studies. A Greatest Generations oral history project conducted by the Minnesota Historical Society included this interview with Bois Forte tribal member Bill Light, born in a wigwam at Big Rice Lake in 1925:

BILL LIGHT: Big Rice Lake. Yes. They were having ricing time. So that's where I was born. I was born in a wigwam.

INTERVIEWER: I see. So your family was ricing.

BILL LIGHT: Yes. My ma was pregnant at the time I suppose and my grandmother was my ... when they got me out of the ... out of my mother. She was my ... what would you call people?

INTERVIEWER: Midwife.

BILL LIGHT: Midwife. Yes.

INTERVIEWER So it was in a wigwam.

BILL LIGHT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: While ricing. (Minnesota Historical Society 2006).

### Mining Project Interviews

The Bois Forte Tribal Historic Preservation Office set out to identify historic properties of spiritual and cultural significance to Bois Forte tribal citizens by interviewing elders from the community. One project stemmed from a proposed expansion of iron-ore mining in the area. The interviewers targeted individuals born in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Latady and Isham 2013). A large proportion of the people interviewed brought up Big Rice Lake as a place of importance, where their families had harvested wild rice. For example, elder Justin Boness was concerned about rice at Big Rice Lake and mining drainage, and noted the long-kerneled wild rice on the lake. Some of the insights:

Gene Goodsky:

I'm an elder here at Bois Forte ... We were teenagers in the early '50s when we riced on Twin Lakes and Big Rice Lake. We would ride back and forth with the old man; his name was Ed Foster, who was a wild rice buyer and processor. We averaged two Bemis (grain) bags a day that was a good harvest.

John Day:

When I riced with my mom, she would talk about ricing in the Boundary Waters. They would move all the way south down to the area near Virginia; Big Rice, Twin Lakes and all the local lakes – then towards Grand Rapids.

Stanley Day:

I was born here in Nett Lake, I am 67 years old ... We riced a lot of lakes in that area, at Big Rice Lake which was north of that area and at Echo Trail and the Boundary Waters area. I can recall getting a lot of rice which was for our winter use for food.

Karen Drift:

The only thing I remember about when I was 8 years old, I was taken along when my mom and dad riced on Big Rice Lake. Herbert and Emma Strong were there. We'd camp there so we would wait all day until they came in.

Jim Gawboy:

I am 77 years old, I will be talking about the Indians using the land around here. This is according to what my father and grandfather told me, so it may be a little mixed up. I'll talk a little about the maple sugaring. Some of the Indians on the reservation used to go to Big Rice Lake to make maple sugar in the spring.

Alma Lumbar:

I want to say a little bit of the ricing long ago. We riced at Twin Lakes, two little lakes and Big Rice Lake. We used to travel with Ed Foster; he would take people to go ricing carrying our canoes so he could buy our rice and we'd get enough rice, some to eat and some to sell, so we could buy groceries or things we needed. We would go out all day long, but we'd come back each day, he had a pick-up truck and a trailer to carry our boats. The amount of rice we got usually depended on the weather. We'd get back to his store about six or seven and we would parch rice maybe a little that evening or next day, whenever we could. Then we'd be back out there ricing again until it was too beaten up. Anyway, it was a lot of fun when the rice was good; people had rice ... In the early morning, my grandpa would put tobacco in the water and say a prayer in Indian before we went out.

Bernard O'Leary:

My mom and dad, Susie and Tom O'Leary, lived at Nett Lake most of their lives. My Dad hunted and fished this area for many years, and every fall they went ricing. They riced for anywhere from three to four and maybe even five weeks every year. They processed their rice by hand. No machining was done. They riced at all of the area lakes – Big Rice, Twin Lakes, and Vermilion River, sometimes they would camp at one of these lakes for up to seven days. Dad had a pick-up truck with a home-made rack on the back for hauling the canoe and camping gear.

Eileen Villebrun Barney:

We riced Big Rice Lake near Virginia when I was about 18-19. We had to carry our canoes about a mile to the lake. There was so many people there.

The researchers who interviewed Ojibwe elders for the mining project study noted that wild rice is important as a food source, but it also is at the “center of Ojibwe life as it is the reason for the westward migration, which for Bois Forte culminated in their arrival in northeastern Minnesota” (2013: 16).

The Bois Forte Tribal Historic Preservation Office also interviewed tribal members in 2014 in a study for another mining project. Many elders mentioned concerns about Big Rice Lake.

Ronald King:

I remember when I was young my mom and dad ricing all the time on Nett Lake, about the state lakes, maybe Big Rice Lake, it was so long ago. Personally, I riced on Pike River in Biwabik, Big Rice Lake ... I did a lot of hunting by the Laurentian Divide by Big Rice Lake, very beautiful country, but they've logged a lot of that out right now. My friend rented a cabin near Big Rice Lake. He leased the land so we took a lot of deer out of there, and also a lot of rice. When I was about 20, my sister and I riced there. I'm now 57 and no longer rice there. I don't know if it was the way the people beat the rice stock, it was beaten so often I basically quit ricing there. I haven't been back there for at least fifteen years.

Ronald Geshick:

When I was young, a teenager, we used to go out quite a ways. There's a place called Twin Lake we went to and a place called Dora Lake it's over by Leech Lake and we riced on Vermilion River and Big Rice Lake. There was a lot of people at these lakes we rode on a big truck filled with people. I believe it was Ed Foster or Matt Holmes ... We came back the same day, but there was some people that would stay for days or weeks, ricing or picking blueberries.

Bernard O'Leary:

I guess I can say my parents participated in harvesting wild rice, they went to all the lakes, Big Rice Lake, Twin Lakes, Vermilion River, Nett Lake, East Lake, they'd go to Cut Foot Sioux, Four Mile Lake, up the North Shore, just about every place that wild rice grew. They would pick rice all fall and sometimes we had a thousand pounds, even eleven hundred pounds and that was all hand finished by my mom and dad. And I still hand finish all my wild rice to this day. It seems it's no longer easy to get a deer, or what we need to eat. There is a lot less wild rice in the lakes ... We brought (our wild rice) home, a lot of people made their rice out there – just enough to eat while they were there. A different party took us when we went to Big Rice Lake. There was a rice buyer there, so we sold our rice.

Delano Gonier:

Mining the land on the Iron Range in particular, talking about Big Rice Lake that is producing very little wild rice whereas 15, 20 years ago I believe that there was a lot of wild rice being produced on Big Rice Lake. Now there isn't much, if any, rice out there. A few sparse stands, I believe this is all due to the mining going on, on the Iron Range because of the seepage going into the water system and chemicals are being mined also and they're being washed also into the lakes around here on the Iron Range.

Another study followed in 2015 with memories of Big Rice Lake again mentioned by the Ojibwe elders interviewed:

Lillian (Ruby) Boshey:

When we got married we moved to Lake Vermilion here. Then we used to go ricing at Big Rice Lake. That guy that owned the land around the lake, he'd let us camp there. We'd stay there three or four days ricing, then we'd come back and parch the rice with his grandpa and grandma. But, I haven't been there for many years. It must be about twenty years ago when I went ricing. Then when we got our grandkids we started to teach them how to set net, how to pick blueberries and how to put your 'asaima' (tobacco) down before you do anything, like ricing at Big Rice. We put "asaima" down in the water to give thanks for what we are going to get.

Chapter Eleven will use the above Ojibwe elder testimony to discuss tribal life at Big Rice Lake as part of the discussion about what tribal, archaeological

and historical investigation might reveal about life at Big Rice Lake after the mid-1800s into the 1900s.



## CHAPTER TEN

### SEASONS

*“The Indians in this area have moved with the seasons, not fall, spring, winter, and summer but the rice season, the trout netting season, the blueberry season, so forth” (Ojibwe elder Dorothy Powell, undated).*

Researchers of tribal life in the United States before European contact often concentrate on the movement of indigenous peoples – their migrations and settlement patterns – tied to the changing seasons. In the desert and mountain regions in Southern California, for example, the presence of bedrock mortars may indicate the processing of acorns into flour in the fall when the oak trees shed them. This suggests the tribal people ascended the mountains from their desert homes in the fall and, by extension, also suggests that may be when they created the rock art there as well.

Yet this type of seasonality may not correspond to calendars used today that mark official start dates of the four seasons. Instead, as the above quote from a booklet of a tribal elder’s remembrances indicates, seasons for the Ojibwe people have to do with the rhythm of nature. A calendar cannot tell precisely when the wild rice is ready to harvest, the blueberries ripe to pick, or the sap water about to drip from maple trees. Bois Forte Ojibwe elder Marybelle Conner Isham explains that every change of the season for the Ojibwe people creates a flurry of excitement, with preparing for “berry picking, gathering medicinal plants,

harvesting birch bark and wild rice, duck hunting, preparation of getting enough wood for winter use, not forgetting meat for the freezer and of course trapping” (Latady and Isham 2013: 13). Each season brought its own tasks and routines, as Ojibwe elder Dorothy Powell notes that when September arrived they would leave for wild rice beds and they had new baskets made to winnow the wild rice “and a new pair of smoke smelling moccasins for the one who ‘danced on the rice’ ... Our tent and food were all set and the ax sharpened to cut wood” (Powell).

Some Ojibwe elders who came to Big Rice Lake to discuss their connections to Big Rice Lake traveled from the Nett Lake section of the Bois Forte Reservation, about 50 miles away. They said their families, in part, harvested wild rice at Big Rice Lake despite the distance because the lake is farther south, which meant the wild rice might be ready to harvest weeks earlier than in the north. Ojibwe people from the more southern regions of the reservation would travel north as wild rice season continued. These are points to consider when discussing Ojibwe seasonality and the months of occupation at Big Rice Lake.

Wild rice harvesting season in northern Minnesota, based on typical weather for the region, may be between mid-August and late September. But the length of Ojibwe stays at Big Rice Lake may be longer than that period as families may arrive early or may stay later. For example, families may travel to Big Rice Lake or other camps weeks before the beginning of the harvest for camp set-up or other reasons. One eyewitness account puts Ojibwe families at

Big Rice Lake as early as late July in the early 1900s and staying for one month before moving on to Pike Rice via Little Rice Lake or staying to early October to hunt during bird migration season (Valppu 1989: 48-49). They also may stay later. One newspaper account details an Ojibwe man killed by a train in mid-October. The article states: “The body was picked up and later turned over to the balance of the tribe, now camped at Big Rice Lake thirteen miles south” (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Virginia Enterprise*, Oct. 17, 1902). This information alone places ricing season and occupation anywhere from late July to mid-October, or a range of nearly three months depending on the ripening of the wild rice plant in Big Rice Lake and other subsistence activities around this period.

As previously noted, a conversation with a Bois Forte Ojibwe elder who questioned the archaeological-derived assumption that Big Rice Lake primarily was a seasonal camp site, with perhaps limited use during other times, prompted one of this project’s research questions. She had personal knowledge of the site and, as well, read the cultural landscape of wild rice plants, maple trees, duck and other waterfowl wetlands habitat, and other natural resources to see its value beyond merely a once-a-year occupation. Ojibwe elders during the 2017 site visit also discussed going to Big Rice Lake to hunt, fish and gather natural resources.

How would archaeological investigation and historical documentation stand up to tribal testimony about the extent of Big Rice Lake’s seasonality? Prehistoric, proto-historic, historic and modern records suggest wild rice

harvesting in the late summer and early fall. Analysis from remains, which may be prehistoric, protohistoric or historic in nature suggest, hunting and fishing from early March to at least November. Elders indicated a similar pattern of use continuing today, although personally were unaware if the sugar bush stands to collect maple sap were in regular use.

### Continuity with the Past

A Superior National Forest document suggests that “existing use patterns may be continuations of the prehistory utilization of the Big Rice Site” (Superior National Forest 1983: 295). One way to analyze this is to look at seasonality and continuity. How did the Ojibwe people utilize Big Rice Lake in the period under study (the mid-1800s to mid-1900s) and does this amount to a continuation of prehistoric occupations, by the Ojibwe themselves, their ancestors or relatives, or other prehistoric cultures? Taken and considered together, research on Woodland Period at Big Rice Lake, historical records and oral accounts indicate that Big Rice Lake’s story is one of seasonality and continuity from the past to the present. For example, comparing the prehistoric archaeological record with activities in the mid-1800s to mid-1900s indicates numerous common use patterns, including wild rice harvesting and processing, hunting of mammals and birds, and fishing.

Ojibwe elders shared that Big Rice Lake is a place to hunt animals and gather plant materials during the warmer months, in addition to harvesting maple

sap in the late spring and wild rice in the late summer. One elder described how the wild rice beds, the sugar bush stands of maple trees, the waterfowl and the other natural resources tell her that Big Rice Lake was a place on the landscape to challenge aspects of the beliefs of outsiders that the Ojibwe lived here for short periods. She characterized Big Rice Lake as a unique place on the landscape because of the confluence of resources.

The Ojibwe people, as the others before them, used Big Rice Lake's natural resources during much of the year beyond annual wild rice seasons in the late summer and early fall.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### BIG RICE LAKE AS A PERSISTENT PLACE

This project included an inquiry into what tribal, archaeological and historical investigation might suggest about life at Big Rice Lake after the mid-1800s. Specifically, what would tribal, archaeological and other historical investigation reveal about life at Big Rice Lake after Ojibwe leaders signed treaties? This research is crucial to answering the questions regarding whether Big Rice Lake would qualify as a persistent place of human use that has drawn cultures over a long period.

The Initial Woodland Period people at Big Rice Lake are known today only by archaeological cultures or complexes. They were more than that, and they have living ancestors today who carry them forward. The first of these complexes were the Laurel ware people, named for the first type of Woodland ceramics produced in the region. Peoples using other types of Woodland pottery – Blackduck, Sandy Lake and Selkirk – continued to come as well until the end of the Woodland Period about five centuries ago. In the process of transforming wild rice into food, they left carbonized wild rice kernels in the ground that archaeologists later dated to 50 BC. Other samples of these preserved kernels date to various centuries over the past 2,000 years and, therefore, demonstrate repeated use throughout this time before indigenous-European contact. The

pottery types and dates from the wild rice kernels suggest continuous use of Big Rice Lake as a harvesting and production location.

Previous archaeologists have established persistent use of Big Rice Lake in the prehistoric past. But what would tribal, archaeological and other historical investigation reveal about life at Big Rice Lake after Ojibwe leaders signed treaties in the mid-1800s?

In terms of the times after contact, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address the proto-historic era and the possible mixing of prehistoric and European-derived technologies that would provide insights into life at Big Rice Lake during the early fur-trading times. The French were the first European explorers in northern Minnesota in the 1650s, followed by French fur-traders. Next came English and then American traders.

The mid-1800s marked abrupt changes for the Ojibwe people of the area, discussed in a previous chapter. The fur-trading era was beginning to close. Federal treaties and a presidential executive order created Ojibwe reservations that would limit tribal mobility and access to natural resources. Minnesota statehood in 1858 introduced a new government that would challenge tribal sovereignty. The forming of Canada in 1867 solidified an international border that divided the Ojibwe people, particularly families associated with the Bois Forte Ojibwe people. Ojibwe soldiers fought for the Union in the Civil War in the early 1860s. The treaty-making era ended. The Wounded Knee Massacre in South Dakota in 1890 brought the end to the Indian Wars.

Big Rice Lake's archaeological record, to date, has revealed relatively few artifacts from the French and English fur-trading times compared other well-known fur-trading sites in northern Minnesota. A first historical reference to the Ojibwe people in the general area was in a journal of a French fur-trader and explorer Pierre De La Verendrye in 1731. The Ojibwe people established a village at Lake Vermilion by 1800 and hundreds of tribal families in the area traded nearly exclusively with Britain's Hudson Bay Company in the mid-1800s (Latady and Isham 2013: 4; 2014: 4 and 2015: 4).

There are a few excavated artifacts that may fall within the French or British fur-trading years. As previously discussed, the potential use of prehistoric technologies during those earlier transitional times for the Ojibwe people are not within the scope of this project. But research on Big Rice Lake's historical archaeological assemblages for this project suggests an increase in European-derived technologies beginning in the mid-1800s. Use of these technologies intensified and diversified at Big Rice Lake over the course of the next century. On its face, this intensification seems contrary to the events happening in the Ojibwe world of northern Minnesota. Federal treaties drew lines meant to confine the Ojibwe people to their reservations, although treaties at least on paper protected tribal procurement of natural resources off-reservation to some degree. One theory is that the restrictions on tribal land ownership and movement encouraged Ojibwe tribal members to hunt and gather more intensively on available non-tribal lands closer to their home. One tribal elder interviewed said



the lack of good harvesting locations at times near the Lake Vermilion section of the Bois Forte Reservation encouraged families to rely on the nearby Big Rice Lake.

Latady and Isham of Bois Forte also noted the increase in private land ownership after the treaties by 1900 restricted Ojibwe travel. They state: “Limited mobility infringed on basic subsistence practices ... Those who remained often followed a seasonal round in order to survive, whenever possible gathering wild rice in the fall, berry picking in the summer and sugaring in early spring on and off the reservation” (2015: 4). Additionally, an early 1900s newspaper report makes this reference: “The Indians have been required to go to (Big) Rice Lake for years for their supply for winter’s use” (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 8, 1916). No other background information has been uncovered to suggest whether the writer’s use of the word “required” refers to a legal requirement, an act of necessity, or some other reason. In other words, federal treaties and the reservations they established may have created a situation that encouraged greater usage of off-reservation Big Rice Lake.

Wild rice was plentiful at Big Rice Lake during this period, and it had become a place where non-tribal traders traveled to and purchased wild rice from the Ojibwe families there. One individual bought about 1,200 pounds there to sell in Duluth (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Sept. 14, 1917). News reports logged about three dozen birch-bark canoes annually leaving for Big Rice Lake during this time (Minnesota Historical Society archives,

*Tower Weekly News*, Aug. 27, 1915; Sept. 8, 1916). As previously noted, one described the trip this way:

About every family has gone to gather the winter's supply of wild rice ...  
The canoes were all loaded with tents and camping out paraphernalia ...  
They go to (Big) Rice Lake first. This means a trip up Pike River and a long portage to the rice beds, entailing no small amount of labor, as the whole equipment must be carried on the shoulders and heads of every member of the party (Minnesota Historical Society archives, *Tower Weekly News*, Aug. 27, 1915).

Eventually, Ojibwe families eased the amount of labor it takes to get to Big Rice Lake by taking advantage of a dirt road constructed through the forest on the north side of the lake sometime after 1949. Others arranged to pay to park on private of land on the south side. One elder said this was preferred during certain years because of the condition of the dirt road, which could have holes as big as the size of a dining room table. Some Ojibwe ricers today continue to access the private property to canoe to the wild rice beds despite the road usually being in drivable condition during non-winter months.

Ojibwe oral testimony indicates that construction of the forest road also prompted families to travel by trucks to stay at Big Rice Lake for overnight or extended stays. Big Rice Lake acted as a place to trade wild rice with non-tribal buyers traveling there at least since the early 1900s and continuing to the mid-1900s. The desire to begin the process of turning wild rice into food – one elder

saying it has a better taste and reduces cooking time if the production begins immediately – may partly explain why harvesting at Big Rice Lake transitioned from extended stays to daytrips. Ojibwe families also use nearby Superior National Forest campgrounds. In general, wild rice camps on lakeshores became less common with the rise of family backyard production and processing by tribal or commercial entities. For example, one practice today is for harvesters to give processors their wild rice, picking up their “finished” wild rice later, and allowing the processors to keep a percentage of the product for their services. Despite these adaptations, Big Rice Lake continues to be a place for harvesting wild rice and other natural resources, hunting and fishing.

In terms of persistent use, the previous research outlined above demonstrates human use of Big Rice Lake for more than 1,600 years of the Woodland Period beginning around 50 BC. The next centuries after indigenous-European contact is more difficult to determine because of the continuing use of prehistoric technologies, although some artifacts are from early fur-trading times. This research study picks up the timeline after that period, with artifacts dating from the early 1800s through the mid-1950s. It also used Ojibwe tribal testimony and historical documentation to record this persistent use from this time until the present. It also should be noted that the persistent place theoretical framework is flexible and does not demand an unbroken or continuous year-after-year usage.

## Power of Place

As outlined above, Big Rice Lake constitutes a place of persistent human use, including during its understudied historical period after the signing of federal treaties in the mid-1800s. But this research project is interested in more than whether different peoples repeatedly or redundantly used Big Rice Lake during the past 2,000 years. Places where groups repeatedly return to “are invested with the qualities of the interactions that have taken place before – whether they are held in direct memory, or inferred from observable traces.” (Shaw *et al.*: 2016).

At Big Rice Lake, these observable traces on the surface include wild rice jigging pits, dugout areas with berms, remnants of old tools, buckets, bottles and cans, and many other household items used for natural resource harvesting and extended stays there. People may have cached some objects, such as metal washtubs, for use during the next ricing season and maple sugar season.

Non-observable traces also are present in the ground. The Ojibwe people know their ancestors buried people here. Small ribbons tied to tree branches indicate the Ojibwe people continue to return here to remember and honor departed family. They know other peoples have harvested and processed wild rice here since before Christianity says Jesus Christ was born. They know that the ground contains objects that ancient peoples left behind. They know they are ricing there, just as countless generations of tribal cultures did before them. These qualities make Big Rice Lake a lasting place of memory on the Ojibwe

landscape even as its wild rice stands have declined over the past decades. For the Ojibwe people, it is a place imbued with the interactions that have taken place at Big Rice Lake in the past. These interactions may be with other people, or they may involve interacting with the past of the land itself.

Additionally, persistent places are locations “where relationships are created and, as a result, identities are formed” (Thompson and Moore 2012: 269). Furthermore, one may view places as reflections of past and present societies. In this view, places are not only the natural or human-built environments of a certain space. They also have meaning to people still using them. One such meaning, for example, is that Big Rice Lake is not just a location to extract wild rice or other natural resources. Ojibwe people have formed a relationship with it beyond merely as a place to hunt and gather food for nutritional and economic subsistence, although one cannot discount the importance of these aspects. It is connected to a tribal identity that is based on enduring, generations-long connections to the land and environment that also is inseparable from the prehistoric uses of Big Rice Lake. The Ojibwe people have knowledge, memory and history – all coming together at Big Rice Lake with a sense of meaning that comes with the need to care for and steward a place that legally is no longer theirs.

Anthropologist Keith Basso writes: “In native discourse, the local landscape falls neatly and repeatedly into places – and places, as Franz Boas (1934) emphasized some years ago, are social constructions par excellence”

(Basso 1996: 74). Social constructions are realities that people build for themselves to help order their world. This native discourse – as seen through Ojibwe stories, memories, stewardship and activism – serves to inform and reinforce cultural identities within their own communities. Discussion of people about their identities may prove elusive at times. But these stories, memories, stewardship and activism involving wild rice, and Big Rice Lake specifically, go beyond elusiveness to tenets of “being Ojibwe” and acting on it.

Ojibwe people have long resisted the idea that they should leave wild rice behind. Recall the Smithsonian Institution’s Albert Ernest Jenks and his 1901 work, “The Wild Rice Gatherers in the Upper Great Lakes: A Study in American Primitive Economics.” He asserted that the plant that had led to Ojibwe advancement was holding them back from more progress unless they left wild rice behind because “for with them it was incapable of extensive cultivation” (1900: 1112-1113). Also, recall that Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke noted that when University of Minnesota scientists in the 1960s began working on domesticating the plant there was the suggestion that the Ojibwe people were resisting assimilating into the mainstream economy. A Minnesota legislative report criticized the tribal relationship with the plant as the “September Santa Claus” and “good berry Mardi Gras” (2011: 1). She states: “They might not have been able to domesticate the Ojibwe, but they were determined to domesticate wild rice” (LaDuke 2011: 1).

Activism is a form of human agency. Today's Ojibwe ricers are born into a world that includes large-scale production of "tamed" strains of wild rice in commercial paddies, notably in California but in Minnesota as well, that devalue the natural product in terms of monetary market value and quality and taste. Reports indicate these modified kernels in some areas have contaminated natural stands of wild rice. Climate change is another threat. At Big Rice Lake, lake water levels and use of motorized boats are sources of Ojibwe concerns. Yet, the Ojibwe also are actively constructing a different reality than the one they have been given. Ojibwe families continue to come to Big Rice Lake even though there now are more productive harvesting locations.

Activism also takes different forms. As noted, Ojibwe tribal members are concerned about the decline of wild rice plants in Big Rice Lake, particularly whether management of the lake's water levels have harmed the plant. Their treaty-watchdog organization, the 1854 Treaty Authority, has championed the restoration of Big Rice Lake and monitors the wild rice plants there. It has signage at the lake.

For a research project by the Bois Forte tribal government involving mining in the wider region beyond Big Rice Lake, Ojibwe elders interviewed independently focused on Big Rice Lake stories and memories to show concerns about potential threats to their natural world. To review, Justin Boness was concerned about runoff from mining operations harming Big Rice Lake and noted that the lake is known for its big kernels of wild rice. Gene Goodsky as a

teenager in the early 1950s harvested wild rice there. Karen Drift remembers being 8 years old and camping at the lake and waiting for relatives to join her family. Jim Gawboy remembers others from the reservation making maple sugar there in the spring. Alma Lumbar remembered harvesting wild rice at Big Rice Lake, parching it, and selling some to a local trader to get money for groceries and other goods that the family needed. His grandfather would put tobacco in the water and say a prayer before going into the lake. Eileen Villebrun Barney harvested wild rice there in her late teens and recalls “so many people there” (Latady and Isham 2013).

Big Rice Lake is not merely another space on the modern Ojibwe landscape because the Ojibwe people ascribe culturally important meaning to it. Big Rice Lake, as a storied location, forms one of the places on the natural landscape where its social construct has led to a different meaning for tribal citizens than it has for outsiders. This includes a sense that this area still belongs to the local tribal community despite its federal ownership. Outsiders also recognize the Ojibwe ownership or, at the least, connection to the heritage by calling it Indian Point. It is simply known as the Point to the Ojibwe people.

The Ojibwe people have a sense of ownership and stewardship of it. During the trip to Big Rice Lake with the tribal elders I went in the woods to take some photographs. On my return, the elders had started to a cleanup along the shoreline where visitors had thrown garbage into the lake. They collected bags of



trash that others had left behind. To them, this land and lake still were theirs.

Figure 11.01 to Figure 11.06 are photographs of the field visit to Big Rice Lake.



Figure 11.01: Elders at Big Rice Lake



Figure 11.02: Elders



Figure 11.03: Collecting trash



Figure 11.04: Elder



Figure 11.05: Elder making flutes

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE BREEZE THAT TOOK HER BEADS

*“The breeze at Big Rice Lake was so helpful when tossing up wild rice kernels from a birch-bark winnowing basket. It would carry away the papery husks. But now the breeze worked against her, blowing some of her beads far away.”*



Figure 12.01: Woods at Big Rice Lake

Along with other old-timers, *Mashkawizi* was on the lakeshore doing the duty of watching the children. Their parents were out on Big Rice Lake in canoes, making rice. The green stalks of the wild rice plants had grown tall this season. The extra-long wood poles that the harvesters used to push the canoes through wild rice beds would at times pop up over the stalks. Sometimes she would see a person's head pop up too. *Mashkawizi* did not like standing up in the back of the canoe, lifting up that pole again and again, and plunging it back into the water until it hit bottom, then pushing out to glide the canoe. Not because she was not strong enough for the job. No, as a young one herself, her uncle, teasing, told *Mashkawizi* that if she ever fell in the water she better make sure to float. Otherwise, he said, the muddy lake bottom that the wild rice plants like so much would suck her in deep into the earth.

Maybe because of this, she did not like to think of that mucky lake floor every time the pole plunged back into the water. She was known for her ability and stamina as a knocker, sitting near the front of the canoe with a short wooden stick in each hand, using one knocker to bend the stalks over into the canoe and the other to tap off the kernels. It took great skill to take only the ripe kernels and leave the green ones behind for another day.

She liked being on the lake, or a river, in the midst of the food growing on the water. The plants were so thick it looked like you were in a wheat field back on land. She wondered what it was like that day, so many centuries ago, when the Ojibwe people first saw *manoomin* growing out of the water. The story she

learned as a child told of a giant clam shell in the sky guiding her people all the way west from the Atlantic Ocean to the end of the Great Lakes to find this plant. Did they too whistle at the little ricing birds that would fly out as the knockers took in the kernels? Did the little ricing worms bite them too? She did not mind the bites. Sometimes those little worms would show up alive weeks later in the liner of a jacket or flap of a shoe, tenacious, a reminder of her favorite season of year.

The others think she is just there to babysit the kids, have a day out. Grandma's work. But she was there to watch over the parents too, you know. They were still young ones in her book. And, known only to her, another job awaited her in the woods if she could make the time, if she could slip away, a final task that she had waited nearly her whole life to complete. This was going to be a good ricing season. She dreamt about it. Her dreams told her wild rice would be plentiful. But she also could tell just from looking from shore out at the stalks growing out of the water. A good season, a good harvest, unless those out in the canoes took too many breaks or called it a day too early. Either way, she would give them a hard time when they would bring the canoes back to land, tell them that back in her prime that she would have brought in double the poundage when the wild rice plants were this good. Why not? It was true. She was known for her strength since her earliest days.

The children, always shrieking, going back and forth between laughing and fake crying as they played, brothers, sisters, cousins. When their age, she had been here at Big Rice Lake, too. *Mashkawizi* drifted back to her past. She

was a little child again, in her family home on the reservation, 15 miles away by canoe and overland portage. She was excited, more than excited, but she did her best to control it. She was trying her hardest not to let on to anything. Her family was busy preparing to move to Big Rice Lake for ricing season. Her father was out front sharpening his axe, one of his last tasks he would do before they would head for Big Rice Lake. He had bought this brand new axe before the trip and was determined to make it extra sharp. He had a new saw too. Last year the men came back from hunting a moose, and her father sawed a perfect straight edge on a big bone to make *Mashkawizi* a scraper to help her cook with her mother and grandmother. He sometimes would leave his axe or saw or a long knife wrapped up at Big Rice Lake, for “safekeeping” he would tell the children, more room in the canoe for wild rice. It was a game to find them again when they would get back to the lake.

She was looking forward to the journey. They would paddle and portage there, carrying everything over land until they could slide the canoe back in the water. She looked forward to seeing other members of her family who would come from other villages to join them. Her own family always arrived first to begin the set-up. Thoughts of the weeks ahead made her smile.

But she had a secret too.

It was one that put an uncontrollable smile across her little face, at least when no one was watching. So big, maybe too big, because her mother would catch her. Her mama would look at her, narrow her eyes, crease her forehead,

and ask, "What are you up to?" Oh, nothing. *Mashkawizi* did not like to tell a lie. But as she figured it, she already had told the truth, already had told her parents her plan. It was not her fault they had forgotten.

The little girl shuts her eyes and thinks back. Big Rice Lake last season, the last day there, everyone busy with packing up the camp. All the families had planned to leave earlier but decided to wait for a white trader from town who wanted to come back again to buy another 1,000 pounds of wild rice from them. Money for groceries, for school clothes and winter supplies. School already had been delayed for the wild ricing season. Another day would not matter. So they all waited for the trader to get there this morning. She did not mind another day. Last evening, a big feast of wild rice, turtle and fish stews, roasted duck. Deer meat, too, of course. A fire, music, dancing by the lakeshore ended their last night at Big Rice Lake.

The trader had come and gone that morning. By now the adults and the older children had taken down the wigwams. The nails used for their construction bundled up and tucked away by a group of aspen trees, the usual spot. Her mother hid away a few pans, jars and bottles to use next year. She buried some finished wild rice to store for their return. "Always good to have something here," mama would say. They were packing up the canoes. Grown up work. She had her own belongings to attend to as well. Her clothes, moccasins, dollies made of reeds from the lake. But most of all, her pendant with long strands of shiny glass beads, dangling down in strings of different lengths. She had made it over the

summer, carefully creating just the right pattern, her own design. All hers. She had changed it many times to make it just perfect, just so. She was taking care to pack her pendant up, worried if she wore it on the canoe ride home that it might fall into the water. She had lost things to the water before. She wondered, with the beads so small, would they float? She could just jump in. But she was not going to take any chances.

Her mother told her it was time to leave, get in the canoe. Dozens of birch-bark canoes were in the water, ready to go, she would be one of the last to get in, holding everyone up! She did not need that. Then in her hurry, somehow, almost magically, her pendant broke, sending hundreds of little beads into the air. Just then a breeze had kicked up over the peninsula. The breeze at Big Rice Lake was so helpful when tossing up wild rice kernels from a birch-bark winnowing basket. It would carry away the papery husks. But now the breeze worked against her, blowing some of her beads far away. She had no time to pick up even a single one of them, and she did not want to tell her father and mother what happened. She darted to the lakeshore, I am coming. She fretted, stewed, finally after getting back home, she tattled on herself.

A few weeks ago, she told her parents of her plan to get her beads back. Her parents frowned upon the children needlessly digging up the dirt at Big Rice Lake. It contained voices of people of the past – mysterious things in the dirt. Only dig if you must. Let them be, she was told. They do not want to be disturbed. And she usually did. Sometimes the pretty chips of colorful stones

caught her eye. She liked the curves, the sharp edges, carved by people in the past from chunks of rocks they brought there from faraway places. Once she cut herself on a flake that looked like black glass. She thought she had memories of people making them. *Mashkawizi* protested to her parents. She was confident that her beads would require no digging. They would be just as she left them, waiting for her. She was confident they missed her as much as she missed them over the past year. She wondered if they were cold in the winter and decided the blanket of snow would keep them warm and safe. She imagined the squirrels and chipmunks trying to steal them, like they did her food some days.

Over the winter when *Mashkawizi* set out her plan, she had not thought about the other little girls who might want her beads too. But now at Big Rice Lake, she realized she had to be even more careful in carrying out her plan. When no one was watching, she would gather just a few beads at a time. She now had at least a hundred of them back, maybe more. She frowned thinking of that day she lost them, and that breeze at Big Rice Lake that carried them away from her. Her beads, white ones, some in almost translucent gold, and others in shades of blue, a few black ones. By her plan, she figured by the end of ricing time, she would have hundreds more of them back. And she imagined that the beads where pleased to be back with her too as she picked them up one by one. *Boozhoo!* She would whisper to each one. Hello! Maybe it would take many years of ricing trips to get them all back, to recreate her pendant, but she had the time, all the time in the world.



*Mashkawizi* was wrong. She did not have all the time in the world. It would be many years before she would ever be back to Big Rice Lake again. Suddenly upon her return home, it was announced that she would be going off to Indian Boarding School, far away to the south of the state, smack in the middle of Dakota country. How, why her? She never knew, never asked. Other little Ojibwe children would go too, some neighboring kids, some cousins. At least she wouldn't be alone. She had them. The school down south in the years to come would not wait to start classes before the end of ricing.

*Mashkawizi* was afraid to go, to be away, so far. She never had been such a distance from home, trips to go ricing, to sugar bushes to collect maple sap, picking and eating berries, visits to family on the other reservations were her travels. Her parents pretended it would be good for her, learning so much from the educated white teachers. She had heard that "nothing Indian" could be with her down there. But she was skilled at hiding things. And a hundred or so little glass beads took up no room. That was part of the beauty of the beads, so many of them but so small too. So pretty! Each one a little friend to her. White and black, reminding her of the night sky at the lake. Blues of the daytime sky, and the lakes. She sewed up a small pouch of white cloth that she could easily hide in her clothes. Those teachers, who cut off her hair, hosed her down for speaking Ojibwe, never caught on she had them. Every day she kept them was a victory. Years later, she wondered if the beads kept her and her spirit alive. Years later,

*Mashkawizi* again would leave the reservation, to go south for more education, but that time she made her own choice.

The decades moved quickly. Indians had seen a lot, that was for sure. She never would speak Ojibwe in front of her children, she had to protect them, spare them from what she endured in her schooling. She would speak it with siblings, cousins, others her age, but abruptly stop mid-sentence when a little one walked in. *Mashkawizi* and the others did not know the children were sly to them, hiding by the doors or outside under open windows to take in the words.

Indians had seen a lot over those decades, that was for sure, she thought again. The lawmakers, they called them, down in St. Paul and in Washington, always wanting to rescue the Indians or erase them. Do not get her started. Stories for another day. Big Rice Lake too had changed. The government put in a dirt road, sometimes so poorly maintained that its holes were as big as her dining room table. A Finnish man across the lake opened up his land for parking for a few dollars so ricers could canoe from the other side of the lake to the wild rice stands. He had a better road. She would bring her own family here later to camp out of their pick-ups when the road was clear. They did daytrips these days, better to get the wild rice home as quickly as possible to get some batches drying and ready for parching. The best wild rice was done up right away, just as her family did here at Big Rice Lake years ago. Just remember, the flame cannot be too high when parching fresh rice. Patience.

In school, a teacher had told them about big factories in the cities, each worker doing a different job, their part, to produce things she imagined like the metal tubs her family used at Big Rice Lake. A factory line, teacher called it. *Mashkawizi* thought about wild rice like that, an outside factory. The adults out in the canoes on the lake were making rice, harvesting it from the plants. But then wild rice had to be finished, first drying it and then parching it in the metal tubs. Longer ago, they used clay pots. Thick pieces from their broken pots sometimes would come up from the earth here at the lake. Her family also would leave behind the metal tubs, for use next year and in later years for use in the spring when people would come to the Sugar Bush here to collect the maple sap water and boil it down to sugar. Parching wild rice gave off a sweet toasted smell. The adults would dig rice jigs in the ground, line them with clay or deerskins, and put the parched kernels in them. She liked to dance on the kernels to loosen their hulls. Her moccasins had a smoky smell long after they left Big Rice Lake. Next came winnowing to get rid of all those hulls, by putting the kernels in a big birch-bark tray and tossing them up in the air for the breeze to carry them away. She wondered who the first Indians were to devise such a plan, their own factory line, so smart. She had learned the word industrious in school. Once, she told a teacher about the Ojibwe's own industrious acts but was told that was different.

*Mashkawizi* now was a great-great grandmother. Her age? She was not quite sure any more. Others kept track of that for her. She still riced but not today. Someone had to watch these kids, and there was that other job waiting in

the forest. She felt inside her pocket. Yes, the little pouch still was there. How many hundreds, thousands, of times had she done this, making sure the buckskin pouch did not go missing?

Now was the time. Her brother was teaching the children to make a flute out of a certain type of tree branch, using his little pocketknife. She told the others she wanted to take a walk into the woods. She saw full-grown trees that had sprung up over the mounds where her elders had been buried when she was little. She spotted colorful tiny ribbons on the trees. Someone had been here, remembering them. *Mashkawizi* knew the trails. The timber wolves and deer and moose were using them now. Bears too. She caught a tail of a red fox out of the corner of her eye. The woods were full of life. Some people still used the trails too. But she would know the way even without the little, faint pathways left in the bush.

Her mother gave birth to her before sunset here in a wigwam, her grandmother at her mama's side. It was a hard birth, her mother told *Mashkawizi*, with the newborn crying so hard after coming out that she silenced all the noises from the forest and lake, even the frogs who at dusk croak almost in concert, echoing across the lake, as if they own this place. Some of the others told her family that she was so tiny, barely even a seedling maybe not ready for this big world. Her grandma told them no, she was strong, that she had quieted this whole countryside when this little one had decided to come out, announce herself

and join her people. All took notice. Weak? No. That is how she received her name. *Mashkawizi*. She is Strong.

Not too long from now, she knew that she would come to eat her last meal of wild rice and have her children bury her here too. She would tell her children to tie up little ribbons of blues, black, white and gold on these trees when they come to visit her. Mashkawizi could be sly too, knowing they would ask why those colors, and then she could tell the story of her beads, of her lifelong journey with them. It will be remembered far into the family's future, handing it down to the children to come and handing down this place too to them through her story.

*Mashkawizi* found her spot. The ground still indented with a jiggling pit, where she had danced on the wild rice when she was a wisp of a girl. She was so light then, it took others to finish it. Some said it was boys' work to do the dancing, but no one could tell her why. She remembered stories about long ago when only women gathered wild rice.

She looked out at the lake, offering it a pinch of tobacco, like father did and his father before him. The top ends of the long poles used to push the canoes through the wild rice beds still were popping up above the stalks. They still were ricing. Good, she had time. She would not be missed while the ricers still were on the lake. She could just see them coming to try to find her, to save her, yelling out at her. "*Nookomis, Nookomis*, grandma, grandma, where are you!" She knew what to do. She had planned it out. She decided not to waste time. Long ago she thought there would always be the next season here to finish

another of her plans. Never count on having another chance. For the Ojibwe people, sometimes patience must be pushed aside, or you would be the one pushed aside. She thought of her family still out there ricing, after those lawmakers and game wardens and others like them often made it so difficult to keep it up.

*Mashkawizi* thought she spotted a gleam of blue dancing off a ray of sunshine. A little bead telling her, Here I am. Do you see me? She reached into her pocket for the pouch. Still there, she thought when her fingers found it, they never left her in all these many years. Now she had the chance to get more of them back, no one watching her but the forest itself. Her little beads, her little friends. Oh, they had been with her for so long, through a lot, she laughed to herself. She laughed at herself laughing, because in her plan she envisioned tears at this moment. Oh, she thought, if these beads could talk, the stories they would tell. How different would their telling of their own story be from hers? Then she realized they do talk – they talk to her all the time. Could she do without them?

She never knew why she never made herself another pendant, or brooch as her fancy daughter called them, with the beads. Or why she never turned them into something for her children, or their children. She thought, Did they really belong to her? Her auntie gave them to her, bought with ricing money. They were hers. But did they belong here, back with the others, to make them

complete? She knew she must do right by them. Now, at this moment, a lifetime in the making.

Waiting for the air to still, *Mashkawizi* gently poured the beads into the palm of her hand so not a single one would drop to the ground or blow away. She marveled at their colors, that of the lake and skies. She looked out at the lake, still ricing out there. Her family, she knew, still would be ricing for generations to come. She then put half of her beads in her other hand. She outstretched her arms. She thought of everything deep in this ground. Then she waited. It was coming, that breeze, barely perceptible at first. That breeze that a lifetime ago stole her beads from her. Her grandfather once told her that the breeze at Big Rice Lake came from *manitou*, a gift to the Ojibwe people to help them finish their wild rice, carry away the hulls, no place else had a ricing breeze like here. After the children danced on the wild rice, breaking up the hulls, her mother would toss up the kernels from a birch-bark winnowing basket, and this very breeze from this very spot would fan away the husks.

As that air swept over her, *Mashkawizi* threw the little beads up and backwards over her head. She could feel some landing on her hair, clinging to her as if saying do not leave us. She shook them out. Others carried away by the breeze. They are home now. Reunited. Back where they belong. Along with what the ancient ones had left here in the ground too and with what her own family had left here too. Do not be frightened. You will be safe here, she told them. Soon the snow would come to blanket them, keep them warm when the top of

the lake turned to ice and the breeze turned cold enough to freeze your eyes. The wild rice plants would wave at them when the weather warmed and their stalks rose above the waters. The forest creatures would watch over them too. After all, they had kept up the trail leading right back to this place. Soon she would be there too in the earth farther into the woods, joining the other spirits. No one would bother to take these little beads or her. *Bizaan*. At peace.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### CONCLUSION



Figure 13.01: Big Rice Lake at dusk in 2017

The breeze at Big Rice Lake – perfect for carrying away the hulls of parched wild rice kernels or a young girl’s tiny beads – will blow over you today as it has done for countless generations. I have felt it on the lakeshore at the place where thousands of years of indigenous peoples have transformed the plant growing out of the water into food. But I never was fortunate enough to catch even the slightest glimpse of *Mashkawizi* or other spirited beings, or hear the softest of whisper from them as the leaves rustled in the trees, or feel their gentlest of touch on the back of my shoulder. But I was fortunate that the lake monsters that the elder told me about never tried to drag me into the waters. Yet

her monsters were with me. The monsters were a warning from her. They were with me as I first sat by the computer to write, a reminder to respect this land and lake. *Mashkawizi* came later, embodying what the elders here and my own family have told me, in hopes that Big Rice Lake's story would carry on in a more human way after this academic thesis is digitized and stored way for history.

Goals of this project included examining how seasonal or extended uses by the Ojibwe people at Big Rice Lake may have corresponded with earlier prehistoric subsistence patterns, and whether there existed different use patterns or intensities after treaties created reservations. As noted earlier, these are relatively straightforward questions, but they are helpful when considering the persistent use of Big Rice Lake by the Ojibwe people themselves and those who came before them.

Anthropologist Keith Basso has written that "in native discourse, the local landscape falls neatly and repeatedly into places – and places, as Franz Boas (1934) emphasized some years ago, are social constructions par excellence" (1996: 74). Social constructions are realities that people create to help order their world. This native discourse – demonstrated through Ojibwe stories, memories, stewardship and activism – informs and reinforces cultural identities within their own communities. These identities are not just one's given heritage or legal tribal status but are being actively constructed, with Big Rice Lake a continuing part of that process. This thesis asserts that these stories, memories, stewardship and activism involving wild rice and specifically Big Rice Lake are meaningful to

Ojibwe communities and their continuing identity. The archaeology of Big Rice Lake, with its known and documented deep antiquity of its wild ricing, is one component of this process.

I am thinking about my time at Big Rice Lake after the elders had gone home after our day there. Dusk is coming on. There is not another human around. But sounds abound from the rhythm of forest and lake. If you listen intently, you will hear animals moving branches and snapping twigs in the bush. Birds, abruptly, interjecting whoops and calls. Insects buzzing. Frogs croak repeatedly and so loudly that their echoes turn the small bay before me into an amphitheater, the same croaking that the story imagines *Mashkawizi* silencing when she came into the world, born in a wigwam at a ricing camp here. Waves from the shallow lake gently lap against the shore. The waters now are turning a slick midnight blue, and the sky's horizon slowly is fading from vivid yellow to dark brown orange. Another day is nearly done. Tomorrow it begins again.

Big Rice Lake seems idyllic space. But it is not untouched

As with other lakes home to wild rice, it is endangered by declining stands of the aquatic plant, climate and other environmental changes, and watershed pollution. Big Rice Lake particularly has been hard hit. They are better locations to go ricing today. But Ojibwe harvesters still come back even if it is for a short trip to harvest and affirm their connection to the lake. They also are demanding government officials revive the Big Rice Lake's wild rice stands and protect such habitats across the wider Ojibwe landscape of northern Minnesota.

Elders interviewed for this research project and for past studies on mining operations continually expressed concerns about the health of Big Rice Lake's wild rice stands. Some elders will tell you that every lake or river with wild rice plants has its own character, its own taste. Big Rice Lake also has been known for its big kernels. A local newspaper in 2019 reported that Big Rice Lake has been "famous for producing not just abundant rice, but some of the highest quality wild rice anywhere in the world." One action being taken is protect the genotype of the lake's wild rice rather than simply reseed the lake to revive the plant (*The Timberjay* 2019).

The Lake Superior Ojibwe people were told this land no longer was theirs. After the treaties that reduced tribal land ownership, this research suggests they started coming here in bigger numbers. Trying to elicit people to discuss the meaning of place or a place's importance to their identity can be elusive and challenging. But the Ojibwe elders through stories and action revealed the meaning of Big Rice Lake to them. They turned our day here, spontaneously, into a lake cleanup.



Figure 13.02: No Motorized Vehicles sign



Figure 13.03: Waterfowl habitat sign

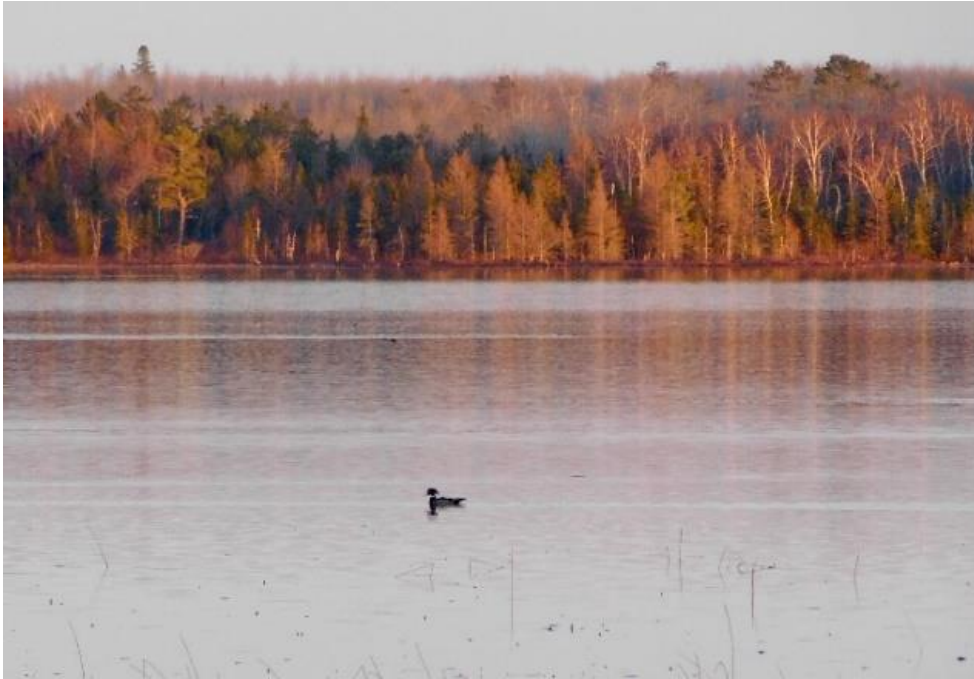


Figure 13.04: Duck at Big Rice Lake



Figure 13.05: Winter at Big Rice Lake.

APPENDIX A

IRB LETTER

April 28, 2017

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Expedited Review

IRB# FY2017-158

Status: Approved

Mr. Travis Armstrong and Prof. Amy Gusick  
Department of Anthropology  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Mr. Armstrong and Prof. Amy Gusick:

Your application to use human subjects, titled, "Big Rice National Register Nomination/Thesis," has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The informed consent document you submitted is the official version for your study and cannot be changed without prior IRB approval. A change in your informed consent (no matter how minor the change) requires resubmission of your protocol as amended using the IRB Cayuse system protocol change form. **Your application is approved for one year from April 28, 2017 through April 27, 2018. Please note the Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is up for renewal and ensure you file it before your protocol study end date.**

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee include the following 4 requirements as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 listed below. Please note that the protocol change form and renewal form are located on the IRB website under the forms menu. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years. Please notify the IRB Research Compliance Officer for any of the following:

- 1) Submit a protocol change form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your research protocol for review and approval of the IRB before implemented in your research,**
- 2) If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research,**
- 3) To apply for renewal and continuing review of your protocol one month prior to the protocols end date,**
- 4) When your project has ended by emailing the IRB Research Compliance Officer.**

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any Departmental, Organizational, Governmental, Agency, Tribal, or additional approvals which may be required to conduct this research. If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval identification

number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Caroline Vickers*

Caroline Vickers, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

CV/MG



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