

'Bad River' documentary about Wisconsin tribe's struggle for rights premieres Friday

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Actor Edward Norton is one of the narrators of "Bad River," a documentary about the Bad River tribe's fight for treaty rights and sovereignty in Wisconsin for nearly the last 200 years. Patrick T. Fallon/AFP Via Getty Images

Edith Leoso talks of a prophesy by tribal elders before 1969 that promised times will improve for Indigenous peoples when an eagle lands on the moon.

Leoso, the tribal historic preservation officer for the [Bad River Ojibwe Tribe](#) in northern Wisconsin, is one of several Bad River elders and professionals featured in the ["Bad River" documentary](#) opening this weekend in Wisconsin.

The film — narrated by actor Edward Norton and Indigenous model and actress Quannah Chasinghorse — [focuses on the tribe's fight for treaty rights and sovereignty in Wisconsin](#) for nearly the last 200 years.

It opens Friday at the AMC in Wauwatosa, as well as in select theater across the country, with half of all profits being donated to the Bad River Tribe.

The Bad River Tribe, like all six Ojibwe tribes in what is now Wisconsin, resisted removal to the west in the mid-1800s by ceding millions of acres to the U.S. government. But it retained certain treaty rights, especially those concerning hunting, fishing and gathering.

In the late 1800s, the Dawes General Allotment Act threatened reservation land by allowing its property to be bought by non-tribal people and organizations.

Many Indigenous people lost their property by being defrauded, according to tribal historians.

Also, around that time and for decades later, tribes had to contend with forced assimilation through boarding schools for children.

In the film, Myron "Burnsie" Burns talked about how a black car would drive around the reservation, looking for children to grab to force them into boarding school. Their hair was cut and they were punished for speaking their Indigenous language or practicing traditional ways.

"When we were kids, that black car used to ride around," Burns said in the film. "We see that coming, we run."

At Catholic boarding schools on the reservation, families were punished or reprimanded for practicing traditional ceremonies, such as burning sage or tobacco, by church officials who said that was pagan.

In 1956, the Indian Relocation Act moved adults and families off the reservation and into cities for the purpose of finding work and housing. But many only found racial abuse from residents and police, poverty, loss of culture and drug and alcohol addiction.

Indigenous people were long past fed up and recalled that prophesy about the eagle landing on the moon. But Leoso said many started to lose hope because the eagle can't fly that high.

Then in July 1969, Apollo 11 landed on the moon and everyone around the world heard those famous words from astronaut Neil Armstrong, "The Eagle has landed."

"That was the sign we Indians needed to stand up for ourselves, despite what might happen to us," Leoso said in the film.

"Red Power" movements, such as the American Indian Movement, were organized shortly after to stand up against police brutality and demand rights for Indigenous peoples.

Many recalled that U.S. treaties with most Indigenous nations included a clause that said if federal land or property becomes abandoned, it reverts to Indigenous ownership.

Officials in the government forgot or ignored those clauses, but many Indigenous groups started acting on those treaty rights in the 1970s with the takeovers of abandoned federal properties, such as Alcatraz Island and the Coast Guard station in Milwaukee.

The Ojibwe tribes in northern Wisconsin also started practicing their treaty rights to hunt and fish for their families in the Ceded Territory, even outside state-mandated hunting and fishing seasons.

In the film, Bad River tribal member David O'Connor discusses how his father was arrested and fined by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for fishing out of season.

His father took his case to federal court, armed with the knowledge of the treaty between the tribe and U.S. government, and won against the state.

A series of other federal cases upheld those treaty rights. Tribal members started openly practicing their rights, to the ire of many who didn't understand and accused tribal members of receiving special treatment.

This led to massive protests at boat landings that often turned violent and racist against tribal members in an era known as the "Walleye Wars" in 1980s Wisconsin.

All of these events are discussed in the documentary. Much of the second half focuses on the Bad River Tribe's current [fight with Canadian-based Enbridge about its Line 5 oil pipeline](#) that cuts through the reservation.

Tribal officials fear an oil spill. The company has had a history of them, such as in Michigan in 2010.

More: [Controversy, legal fights over Line 5 pipeline keep it in the news. We break the issues down.](#)

Enbridge representatives said they're working to reroute the pipeline around the reservation due to the opposition.

"The proposed relocation project will reroute a segment of the Line 5 pipeline around the Bad River Reservation, send millions of dollars in construction spending into local communities, create over 700 family supporting union jobs and keep affordable and reliable energy flowing that millions of consumers in the region rely on every day," said Enbridge spokeswoman Juli Kellner.

Mike Wiggins, former Bad River chairman, said the planned reroute is still within the reservation's watershed and a spill there would pollute tribal members' drinking water.

"I think the reroute is a treaty reservation water rights issue for our nation," he said.

The film says Enbridge representatives had been trying to influence tribal elections to remove Wiggins, who has fought against the company.

Wiggins lost his reelection bid for chairman last year after serving for 12 years.

He said Enbridge tried to paint him as the lone voice against them, but he said it's not just him. A majority of the tribe and tribal council want Enbridge's pipeline gone and sovereignty over their own reservation.

He said he was aware of Enbridge's meddling in tribal politics, but doesn't dispute the election results.

"At the end of the day, elections are about the will of the people," Wiggins told the Journal Sentinel. "We had a good, fair election and I lost."

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