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A history of defiance

A new documentary chronicles the fight of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Ojibwe against the Enbridge Pipeline



On the morning of October 22, 2022, I was approaching the federal courthouse in Madison when I encountered a film crew. Milling among the lawyers dressed for court were a score of mostly Ojibwe people adorned in beaded shirts, and embroidered skirts. As the mismatched crowd filed into the courthouse the camera operator told me I had just missed a smudge ceremony — a sacred ritual performed by the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Ojibwe to purify the venue, before a judge was to hear the **tribe's case for shutting down a pipeline** that flows through their Northern Wisconsin reservation.

Footage from this ceremony doesn't show up until the penultimate chapter of the new documentary film **Bad River**, which premieres in Los Angeles on March 7 and opens in Madison (**at the AMC Fitchburg 18**), Ashland and eight other cities on March 15. The film chronicles the controversial Line 5 pipeline that Enbridge built through the reservation in 1953. Some of those leases expired in 2013, and if current rulings stand the 12 miles of pipeline on the reservation must be removed by 2026.

Bad River is Mary Mazzio's 11th film. A recovering lawyer, she likes underdog narratives and has a knack for financing projects centering on them. She was drawn to the project as a stark parable against mixing oil and water, but the story's scope grew during extensive interviews with band elders. They wanted to talk about battles against mining and for their treaty rights. The stories kept rolling back time, through the Walleye Wars of the 1980s, the American Indian Movement, and through repeated attempts at relocation, assimilation and erasure dating back to the early 1800s. "What an amazing genetic history of defiance, of fighting back," says Mazzio.

White settlers ultimately stole more than 1.5 billion acres from Indigenous people in the United States and that's the uncomfortable baseline of this story. "You can't blame it on anything other than the intent to take over, dispossess, eradicate, and replace an entire population," says Dr. Scott Manning Stevens, an Akwesasne Mohawk who teaches Native American studies at Syracuse University.

Bad River portrays that theft on a more intimate scale, but the specificity hurts. People who don't want their children to know the venom and vitriol that many people in Wisconsin brought to the boat landings in the 1980s will feel particularly uncomfortable. It would not be surprising if this film gets banned by some school districts in the upper Midwest.

Extraordinarily, only four non-Natives have a voice here. Most dramatically, Sister Eileen McKenzie, president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, based in La Crosse, acknowledges complicity in "cultural genocide" in their treatment of Bad River school children. "Our congregation as well as other congregations were involved in a system of white supremacy," she admits. "It was racist."

Mazzio's unwavering commitment to Native voices doesn't gloss over the past even as it builds hope for the future. More than 50 members of the Bad River Band speak on camera, and the seamless chorus of so many voices — of a nation, speaking its heart and its truth — is the transcendent strength of this film. In the closing minutes, each Band member addresses the generations to come with humor, love, and an exhilarating generosity of spirit.

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