

SCREENS

## 'Bad River' documentary dives into Wisconsin tribe's pipeline fight

By Rob Thomas  
Mar 9, 2024



A father and son sit on Waverley Beach on the shore of Lake Superior in a scene from "Bad River."  
PHOTO COURTESY OF 50 EGGS FILMS

The tagline on the poster for the documentary "[Bad River](#)" says "a story of defiance."

And director Mary Mazzio makes clear that the defiance by the Bad River Band of Wisconsin's Lake Superior Chippewa tribe didn't start with its fight against the Canadian energy company Enbridge.

The company has a pipeline running through 12 miles of tribal land, and the Bad River Band, fearing it will rupture and pollute the lake, declined to renew Enbridge's lease for the land. But when Enbridge refused to remove the pipeline, Bad River took the company to court. [An appeal to the case was heard earlier this year](#) by the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, and Mazzio predicts it will end up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

The documentary, which opens Friday in theaters, including on two screens at AMC Fitchburg 18 in Madison, pulls back the lens to ground the ongoing legal fight in a broader historical context going back hundreds of years.

And it tells that story in a lively way that centers the Bad River Band itself. Nearly all the on-camera interviews in the film are with members of the tribe, and the soundtrack is peppered with hip-hop tracks by producer Mato Wayuhi that reflect the film's defiant spirit.

Mazzio even used two narrators in conversation with each other. Oscar-winning actor Edward Norton often gives the "official" historical version of events, while actress Quannah Chasinghorse ("Reservation Dogs") tells the story from the tribe's perspective. The result is a lively and galvanizing take on recent events that Mazzio hopes will resonate with audiences both inside and outside Wisconsin.

"It's a film about sovereignty, and standing up for what you believe in," she said. "Everything else falls away."

Mazzio talked with the Cap Times about why it was important to tell the full story of the Bad River Band, and why this was the right moment to release the film.



### Was the approach from the beginning to make this a different kind of story about Indigenous communities?

Going in was completely different. Going in, we have this extraordinary David and Goliath story. Here you have a small Indigenous community, the Bad River Band. And on the other side, you have a massive Canadian conglomerate. This is a really extraordinary story with likely nuanced issues and complex issues, to dig into.

Then I started interviewing tribal elders. And they wanted to talk about Enbridge but then they wanted to talk about the mining battle, the Carlyle Schools. This really turned into a historical retrospective, where this challenge with the pipeline is the newest chapter. But it isn't the oldest and it isn't going to be the only chapter.

### And by knowing that history, the viewer really understands the foundation of the resistance and defiance that they're showing now.

Exactly. They're fighting with monumental effort, and they're doing it not just for themselves, and they're not doing it just for their children or children's children. But they're doing it to protect Lake Superior for all of us. And I think Patti Loew says in the film, "Here we are, this tiny little band. And we actually are standing up to the planet, we're standing up for this country."

Here's a group of people that are economically and historically neglected with all kinds of issues that they face. And yet here they are turning down this kind of money to protect a resource for all of us. If I could learn to be more community oriented like that, and think about what my role is here, not just for myself, but in service of others, wouldn't that be magical?



Director Mary Mazzio and cinematographer Joe Grasso pose while filming "Bad River" in Wisconsin.  
PHOTO BY RICHARD SCHULTZ

### The 2023 decision by Judge William Conley to remove the pipeline within three years is being appealed by both sides. Why was now a good time to release the film when the outcome is still unclear?

The ruling took a very, very long time, almost a year. And we were like, 'We cannot come up with the film before that initial ruling.' But once the ruling was in, the outcome didn't necessarily matter. This is another chapter in an ongoing series of struggles that the Bad River are standing up for and speaking against.

I think it's RunningHorse Livingston who says in the film that 'Win, lose or draw, we showed up for the fight. We showed up to protect what was really important to all of us as Americans.' And I thought that was a really beautiful sentiment.

### What impact would you like "Bad River" to have, both on people living in Wisconsin who may have been following the headlines, and people in far-flung locations who know nothing about this fight?

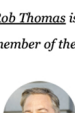
I hope that the story will open people's eyes in Wisconsin about who the Bad River people are, if they are not in close concert with the Bad River Band. That can be as close as Ashland, and as far away as Madison or Milwaukee or elsewhere.

For the greater nation, I think the story really is about, shedding light on this group of people who are largely in obscurity, and are really killing themselves, in many, many ways. I don't use that phrase lightly. They are, at great personal cost, a great collective cost, fighting against all odds to protect this valuable resource for all of us, for all Americans. This is a story that has had some regional press but almost no national press.

### What are you most proud of about making "Bad River"?

At the end of the day, this isn't focused on any one person. It's a beautiful chorus of voices. And that's really because the elders wanted to take the film in the direction it went. And I think it was important to honor their lead, and I tried to do the best that I could.

*Rob Thomas is the features editor of the Cap Times and has been writing about movies since 1999. He is a member of the [Critics Choice Association](#).*



Rob Thomas  
Features editor

