Wisconsin Biographies

WALTER BRESSETTE
Treaty Rights and Sovereignty

PBS Wisconsin Education

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GLOSSARY

civil rights (n): rights or privileges that all citizens of a country have according to law

effigy mound (n): human-made mound shaped into forms such as animals

protest (v): gathering to oppose something

rally (n): people meet to support a cause

reservation (n): land set aside for a group of people to live on

segregation (n): the act of keeping people or groups apart

sovereignty (n): independent self-governance

spearfish (n): to fish with a spear

treaty (n): an agreement between two or more nations; usually about peace or land
CONCLUSION

Walter died of a heart attack on February 21, 1999. His death shocked many people. One friend said Walter would live on if others continued the work he had started.

Walter spent his life teaching others about American Indian rights and how to protect the earth. He taught others to do what they thought was right like he did. Walter “Little Bear” Bresette never gave up. Like a modern day Chief Black Hawk, he fought to save his people and the earth. Others carry on his work today.

Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................... 2
Early Life ............................................. 3
Rallies and Protests ................................. 5
Return to Wisconsin ............................... 6
Walleye Wars ......................................... 8
Mine Protest .......................................... 10
Conclusion .......................................... 12
Glossary ............................................. 13

Walter dedicated his life to following his beliefs.
What do you do to follow your beliefs?
Walter Bresette’s Ojibwe name was Makoons. This name means “Little Bear.” He fought to protect his people’s rights like a mother bear protects her cubs. Treaties signed in the 1800s meant the Ojibwe kept rights such as the right to hunt and fish in the area. Walter also taught others to care for the earth.

Tribal Sovereignty

American Indians were living in Wisconsin when early explorers came to the land. When the US and American Indians signed treaties, the groups agreed American Indians would have sovereignty, or the ability to govern themselves. This means tribes have the right to create a government, control tribal lands, and make and enforce laws. Sovereignty is still valid today.

American Indians follow laws from two governments: federal and tribal.
Walter toured the state teaching about treaty rights and tribal **sovereignty**. He also worked to protect the earth. In July 1991, he led a protest against a mine being built near Ladysmith, Wisconsin. His group thought sulfur from the mine would harm the nearby plants, animals, and water.

Mine owners put a US flag on a rubble pile in the mine. Walter thought this did not honor the flag. He and two others snuck in to take it down.

On his way to get the flag, Walter struck an earthmover’s tire with Chief Black Hawk’s war club. Chief Black Hawk was famous for saving his people’s homes from being seized by US agents. Walter saved the earth from the mine like Chief Black Hawk saved his people’s homes.

**EARLY LIFE**

Henry and Blanche Bresette’s son Walter was born on July 4, 1947. He had five brothers named Stanley, Dennis, Jim, Randy, and Joe.

The Bresette family lived on the Red Cliff **Reservation**. They were members of Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (Ojibwe).

They owned a farm with a large garden and a few pigs and chickens. The Bresette boys went to Holy Family Catholic School. Walter later went to Bayfield High School. He played basketball and loved making art.
Walter got a job teaching others about Ojibwe rights because he wanted to improve people’s understanding of them. He also formed a group that taped the protests so people in the future could learn about the events.

The Walleye Wars lasted from 1983 into the 1990s. Walter later helped write a book about them.

Spearfishing is still important in the Ojibwe culture today. Here two boys fish for walleye at night.
Two Ojibwe brothers were jailed for spearfishing in northwest Wisconsin in March 1974. Their trial judge found them not guilty. Treaties signed in the 1800s said the Ojibwe kept the rights to hunt, fish, and gather in the area. Some people protested the Ojibwe’s right to spearfish. The protests were known as the Walleye Wars.

Treaties are written agreements between two nations, but American Indians were often mislead or deceived during treaty negotiations and signing. The Ojibwe wrote this statement to the US government explaining that verbal promises made to the Ojibwe did not appear in the treaties. It is written in Ojibwe (left) and English (1864).

At age 17, Walter joined the United States (US) Army. A large group had gathered to support civil rights. Walter wanted to attend, so he snuck off the army base. He went to many rallies in his lifetime. Walter left the army in 1969. He then studied drawing and painting at an art school in Chicago, Illinois. There Walter heard that an American Indian family had been forced from their apartment. He and others thought this was unjust. They rallied to protest and support that family.

Someone asked Walter why he protested. He had no answer. So he went to the library to learn more about justice and American Indian treaty rights.
Walter met and married Flo Pritzker in 1972 while at art school. The couple moved to Madison, Wisconsin. They had a son named Nicholas two years later.

Saving American Indian rights was important to Walter. His work kept Madison-area American Indian burial mounds from being wrecked.

Walter worked to protect effigy mounds like this. American Indians sometimes built them to mark territory or bury their dead. The effigy mound is outlined in this photograph so that it can more easily be seen.

Walter with three of his children (from left to right: Katy, Robin, and Claudia) and his friend Rick Whaley.

Walter and Flo divorced a few years later. Flo and her son moved back to Illinois. Walter returned to Red Cliff to work for a paper. Later, he wrote a journal for an American Indian group.

Walter met Cass Joy in 1977. She was a student in Madison. Their daughter Claudia was born in 1982. The couple married two years later. Daughter Katy was born that same year. Son Robin was born in 1986.