WALTER BRESSETTE
Treaty Rights and Sovereignty
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INTRODUCTION

Walter Bresette’s Ojibwe name was Makoons. That means “Little Bear.” He worked to protect the earth and his people’s rights like a mother bear protects her cubs.

This Wisconsin native led many **rallies**. He strove to teach others about how rights American Indians retained in **treaties** signed during the 1800s with the United States (US) are still valid today. At the rallies, Walter also helped empower others to take action on their beliefs.

*Courtesy of Cass Joy.*

Walter Bresette (1999)
EARLY LIFE

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

The Bresette family lived in a densely wooded area of the Red Cliff Reservation. They were members of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (Ojibwe).

The family owned a small farm. They raised pigs and chickens and grew a large garden. Walter and his brothers attended Holy Family Catholic School in Red Cliff. He then went to Bayfield High School. Walter played basketball in school. But art was his real passion.

Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory, Holy Family Catholic School, Bayfield, Bayfield County, Wisconsin, 1145.
American Indian Treaty Lands (1800)

The Red Cliff Reservation is located on the shores of Lake Superior at the top of the Bayfield Peninsula. It is about one mile wide and 14 miles long.
RALLIES AND PROTESTS

Walter joined the US Army at age 17. He snuck off base to attend a rally while training in Washington, DC. A large group had gathered to support the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This was the first of many rallies for Walter.

Walter retired from the army in 1969. He then enrolled in Ray-Vogue art school in Chicago, Illinois. There he studied drawing and painting.

Walter took part in an equal rights rally while in school. An American Indian family had been forced out of their Chicago apartment. People rallied to protest the county’s unjust treatment of these American Indians.

Someone asked Walter why he protested. He had no easy answer. So he studied Ojibwe history at the library. He wanted to learn all about American Indian treaty rights.
Walter met and married Flo Pritzker in 1972 while in art school. They moved to Madison, Wisconsin. Two years later they had a son named Nicholas.

Walter was active in local American Indian affairs. He helped one group protect burial mounds near Madison’s Lake Mendota.

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.
Flo and Walter divorced a few years later. Walter returned to Red Cliff to write for a paper in Bayfield County.

Walter met Cass Joy in 1977. She was a student in Madison. After college, she helped tribal groups develop businesses. Cass and Walter had a daughter named Claudia in 1982. They married two years later and had a daughter named Katy. Their son Robin was born in 1986.
In March 1974, two Ojibwe brothers were jailed for spearfishing on Big Round Lake near the St. Croix Reservation in northwest Wisconsin. Some claimed that the Ojibwe should fish only on their reservation. The brothers argued that they did have a right to fish at the lake. The brothers knew that the Ojibwe retained rights to fish, hunt, and gather off the reservation in treaties signed with the US in the 1800s.

A US judge found in 1978 the brothers guilty because they were fishing out of season according to Wisconsin State Law. But another judge reversed the ruling in 1983 because the rights the Ojibwe retained in the 1800s treaties were still valid.

This decision led to disputes throughout northern Wisconsin. These fierce 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).

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-113058.
The Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) hired Walter when his family moved to Red Cliff. GLIFWC helps people understand treaty rights to hunt, gather, and fish.

The Walleye Wars strengthened Walter’s belief that American Indian treaty rights were being ignored. In 1987, he helped found Witness for Non-Violence. This group videotaped rallies held to protest the Ojibwe’s right to spearfish. He wanted to record these protests near Lake Superior to remind people of American Indian treaty rights and tribal sovereignty.

Later Walter helped write a book about the Walleye Wars and the Ojibwe’s struggle for treaty rights.

Spearfishing is still important in the Ojibwe culture today. Here two boys fish for walleye at night.
Walter toured Wisconsin to teach people about American Indian treaty rights and tribal sovereignty. Walter led a rally in July 1991 against a mine being built near Ladysmith, Wisconsin. Protesters believed sulfur from the mine would damage the area’s land and water.

The mine owners built a fence around the mine to keep out protestors. They also topped a rubbish pile with a large US flag.

Walter thought this did not honor the flag. He and two others snuck inside to take down the flag.

On his way, Walter struck an earthmover’s tire with Chief Black Hawk’s war club. He had gotten this club as a gift. Walter wanted to protect the earth just as Chief Black Hawk had tried to protect his people’s right to live on their land.

Black Hawk was a Sauk warrior who worked to protect his people’s homes and land during the early 1830s.
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.
CONCLUSION

Walter died suddenly of a heart attack on February 21, 1999. One friend said Walter would live on if others kept doing the work he had started.

Walter Bresette spent his life teaching others about American Indian rights. He helped form groups like the Wisconsin Green political party and Witness for Non-Violence. Walter did what he felt was just and taught others to do the same. Like Chief Black Hawk worked to protect his people’s right to live on their land, “Little Bear” fought to keep the earth safe and the rights for his people such as to gather, fish, and hunt there. He led the fight that others carry on today.

Courtesy of Cass Joy.

Walter dedicated his life to following his beliefs.
What do you do to follow your beliefs?
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 for 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