WALTER BRESETTE
Treaty Rights and Sovereignty
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Introduction

Makoons.

This was Walter Bresette’s Ojibwe name. It means “Little Bear.” An apt name for Walter because he worked to protect the environment and Ojibwe treaty rights as fiercely as a mother bear protects her cubs.

Walter led rallies in the 1980s and 1990s to educate others on how the rights the Ojibwe retained in 1800s treaties with the United States (US) still hold true today. Walter led others by example both to protest and support their rights and to protect the environment.

Courtesy of Cass Joy.

Walter Bresette (1999)
Early Life

Walter Bresette was born on July 4, 1947, to Henry and Blanche Bresette. His family lived in the densely wooded area of the Red Cliff Reservation in northern Wisconsin. Walter was the fifth of six brothers: Stanley, Dennis, Jim, Randy, and Joe. His family was members of the Anishinaabe Loon Clan of the Red Cliff Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa (Ojibwe). Members of this clan were seen as messengers.

The family farmed 35 acres, raising pigs and chickens and growing a large garden. Young Walter and his brothers attended Holy Family Catholic School in Red Cliff, Wisconsin. Later, he went to Bayfield High School where he played basketball. But art was his true passion.

Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory, Holy Family Catholic School, Bayfield, Bayfield County, Wisconsin, 1145.

Holy Family Catholic School was built in 1910. Walter attended the school from Kindergarten to eighth grade.
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.
At age 17, Walter followed family tradition by enlisting in the US Army. He served as a communications specialist. Before being sent to Japan during the Vietnam War, Walter was stationed in Washington, DC. While there, he snuck off base to attend a rally on the National Mall in support of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This was one of Walter’s first rallies. It inspired him to attend many other political rallies.

In 1969, Walter retired from the army and enrolled at Ray-Vogue College of Design in Chicago, Illinois. He focused on drawing and painting techniques.

Walter joined in another equal rights rally while in college. A Menominee family had been ousted from their Chicago apartment. Walter and a group of American Indian activists thought this treatment was unjust and accused county officials of discrimination. They staged protests outside Wrigley Field. At the rally, someone asked Walter why he protested. Walter could not answer the question. So he studied Ojibwe history at the library to better understand American Indian treaty rights.
RETURN TO WISCONSIN

Walter met and married fellow artist Flo Pritzker in 1972 while attending Ray-Vogue. They moved to Madison, Wisconsin. Walter worked as a design assistant for a law publication. Son Nicholas was born two years later.

An active member in local American Indian affairs, Walter served as the chair for the advocacy group United Tribes of De-Jope. In 1975, the group prevented American Indian mounds from being bulldozed at Camp Wakanda 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 that same year. Flo moved her son back to Illinois. Walter relocated to Red Cliff to work as a columnist for Bayfield County newspaper *Chequamegon Sun*. The Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council hired Walter as a public relations specialist in 1978. Walter wrote the council’s newsletter, *Wisconsin Inter- Tribal News*.

In 1977, Walter met Cass Joy, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After earning a planning degree in Environmental Studies, Cass worked for the State of Wisconsin as a business developer for tribal communities.

In March 1974, two Ojibwe brothers were arrested for spearfishing on Big Round Lake in northwest Wisconsin. Even though the lake was not part of the Ojibwe’s reservation, Mike and Fred Tribble argued that treaties written in the 1800s preserved the Ojibwe’s the right to fish on the lake. These rights served as an example of American Indian tribal sovereignty.

The case went to federal court. In 1978, a judge found the treaty rights invalid. The Ojibwe took the case to the US Court of Appeals in protest. That court reversed the ruling in 1983, affirming the tribal sovereignty outlined in the 19th century treaties.

This decision sparked protests among sport fishers. They did not want the Ojibwe to exercise their right to fish off their reservation. These sometimes-violent protests became known as the Walleye Wars.

The Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) hired Walter as its communications director, and the Bresette family moved to Red Cliff.

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).
The newly created GLIFWC supplied information about Ojibwe treaty rights to fish and gather, as well as about environmental management and conservation.

The Walleye Wars confirmed Walter’s belief that American Indian rights were being forgotten. To combat this, he helped found Witness for Non-Violence. The group videotaped protests against Ojibwe spearfishing rights that took place near Lake Superior.

Walter helped organize treaty support rallies as GLIFWC’s communications director. The commission grew uneasy when Walter insisted on recording the protests. GLIFWC’s leaders worried Walter’s actions drew too much attention to the dispute, making it hard to keep spearfishers and their families safe. So the group fired Walter.

Later Walter co-authored *Walleye Warriors: An Effective Alliance Against Racism and for the Earth* with Rick Whaley to detail the struggle for Ojibwe treaty rights.

Spearfishing is still important in the Ojibwe culture today. Here two boys fish for walleye at night.
Walter traveled Wisconsin to teach people about American Indian treaty rights and sovereignty. In July 1991, he joined others near Ladysmith, Wisconsin. They planned to protest possible damage a new mine’s sulfur could have on the environment.

This prompted mine owners to build a fence around the site and top a debris pile with a large American flag. Walter thought this dishonored the flag. He and two others snuck in to take down the flag.

On the way in, Walter “counted coup,” or ceremoniously struck, an earthmover’s tire using Chief Black Hawk’s war club. This memento had been given to him after a speech in Tampa, Florida. Just as Chief Black Hawk fought to protect his people’s rights to live on their land, so Walter fought to protect the environment.

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.

Tribal Sovereignty

American Indians follow laws from two governments: federal and tribal.
Conclusion

A massive heart attack caused Walter’s sudden death on February 21, 1999. His death came as a shock to many people. “Even though he’s gone from this world,” stated one of his friends, “his work is not and through it he will continue.”

Walter spent his life teaching others about American Indian rights. He also gave speeches about climate change and mobilized people around environmental issues such as mining.

He founded and co-founded many groups like the Wisconsin Green political party and the Anishinaabe Niijii anti-mining group. Walter also organized support for the Seventh Generation Amendment to the US Constitution to protect air, water, wildlife, and other renewable resources for future generations. He believed the actions of one generation impact the next seven.

Walter “Little Bear” Bresette led others by example. He dedicated his life to moving people to act for what was right. Walter knew that the rights the Ojibwe preserved in the 1800s treaties still applied today. Like Chief Black Hawk before him protected his people’s rights, Walter fought for the tribal sovereignty of his people. He also believed that failing to protect the environment threatened his people’s rights. So like the bear he was named for protects its cubs, Walter fought for the environment. His life’s work led others to continue that fight today.
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