

WISCONSIN NEIGHBORS:

VIDEO PROJECT ON INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

IN NORTHERN WISCONSIN

Summer Research Experience for Undergraduates,

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Summer 2005

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for Faculty/Student Research Collaboration)

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The goal of the Video Project on Interethnic Relations in Northern Wisconsin is to produce a 30-minute video on relations between white majority communities and indigenous or recent immigrant communities in northern Wisconsin towns. It will focus not only on the context of conflict between the groups, but how efforts have been made to build bridges and find common ground. The project will focus on four case studies by gathering historic footage and photos, conducting contemporary interviews, and filming the affected places. First, it will show the transition from the [Ojibwe treaty rights conflict](#) that pit Native spearfishers against white anglers, to the [alliance of the two groups to protect the fishery](#) from the proposed Crandon mine. Second, it will look at the recent [backlash against the Hmong community](#) after the Sawyer County tragedy, and how some neighbors have stood in support of the Hmong. Third, it will examine the influx of Latinos working in meatpacking plants, and their ties built with longtime residents. Fourth, it will examine the tensions in Barron after [Somali immigrants](#) arrived to work in a poultry plant, and efforts that have been made in local schools to narrow the racial, cultural and religious gap with American residents. The video will not focus on the "minority" groups' cultures, but rather on the responsibilities of the majority community to understand and respect their neighbors, and how such respect ultimately benefits themselves.

During the Ojibwe (Chippewa) treaty rights crisis in 1986-92, anti-Indian sportsmen protested Native spearfishers and their families. Non-Indian Witnesses for Nonviolence also monitored and documented the anti-Indian harassment and violence that occurred at boat landings and on the lakes. In the 1990s, the anti-treaty groups (famous for their slogan "Save a Walleye; Spear an Indian") virtually collapsed. In their place, the Native American nations reached out to white sportfishing groups, and developed a strong alliance against metallic mine proposals. Instead of arguing over the fish, they united to protect the fish, and drove out the world's largest mining

companies. In 2003, two tribes actually purchased the proposed Crandon mine site near the Wolf River.

Another potential racial conflict over natural resources began to simmer after the November 2004 shooting deaths of six white hunters by a St. Paul Hmong hunter in the Rice Lake/Barron area. This incident has generated some fear and mistrust in the area, including a letter from a local rod & gun club asking Hmong not to return to hunt in the area next season, and a "Save a Deer; Shoot a Hmong" bumpersticker. There has also been community organizing to counter anti-Hmong prejudice, including neighbors painting over "Killer" graffiti on Hmong homes in Menomonie. The parallels with the Ojibwe hunting/fishing conflicts are evident, as is the possibility of future exploitation of these local tensions by outside groups.

In the same area, the town of Barron has seen a dramatic increase in Somali immigration in just the last 7 years. The Somalis have come from the Twin Cities for jobs in a turkey processing plant, and now make up 13 percent of the population. There have been some conflicts-- particularly in the schools after 9/11 (as happened to Somalis in other U.S. communities as documented in the movie "The Letter", shown on campus in April). The American community is also responding; the school superintendent has lived in Muslim countries, and formed a multiethnic soccer team to lessen tensions.

Latino immigrants have been settling further north and west in Wisconsin since the 1990s. Meatpacking plants have drawn Mexican workers to Norwalk, Curtiss, and other towns, and Eau Claire now has a Mexican grocery store. The Latino meatpackers face a narrower gap with American residents than the Somalis, and have been more involved in social interaction, though tensions have nevertheless been evident as it has elsewhere in the rural Midwest.

SIGNIFICANCE

In face of tensions between "majority" and "minority" communities in Northern Wisconsin, the tendency of many local agencies, academics, and media has been to place the initiative on the community of color. They advocate educating the Somali or Hmong refugees so they can better understand and fit into rural American society, and training agency staff to help them do so. This approach is valuable and necessary, but it assumes that tensions will automatically lessen once the group "assimilates." The approach neglects the other side of the picture and the source of most of the misunderstandings: the white American residents.

What has been missing has been a systematic effort to educate local American residents about the indigenous or immigrant communities--their cultures, religions, histories, why they are here, what they need today, and what they see for the future. Local residents could make connections between present-day immigration patterns, and their own family experiences in fleeing war, poverty and persecution in Germany, Ireland, Norway, etc. With such an educational campaign, local Americans begin to understand why the Somalis need a mosque, a halal grocery, and a role in local events/festivals, so they do not have to leave for the Twin Cities every weekend. Perhaps they could understand why the Ojibwe and Hmong hunt and fish for subsistence rather than sport, or why the Somali women cover their heads.

We have found that many community and school-based diversity education programs have fallen far short of what is needed. They tend to reduce ethnic differences to dances and food, rather than examine deeper identities centered on cultural/religious lifeways. They blame racial/ethnic conflicts only on these cultural differences, rather than on larger power differentials and economic scapegoating in our society. Public informational forums are useful and needed, yet the participants are usually those who need the least enlightening, and citizens who do not attend are precisely those who most need some basic education.

In a Summer 2003 [SREU project on Somali immigrants in Barron](#) (involving Dr. Grossman and Poli Sci major Jessica Schaid), the authors proposed that new diversity programs concentrate on going to the public, rather than expecting the public to go to them. The video project is an outgrowth of these recommendations to local governments for proactive education. The most important forum is the high school: ground zero for any interethnic conflict in a rural community. High school students formed a large part of the anti-treaty protests, and have been a center of recent anti-Hmong sentiment. (Elsewhere, national white supremacist groups have targeted high school students for recruitment, partly by exploiting local interethnic tensions.)

If UWEC helps to build diversity curriculum, speakers, videos, etc, for Wisconsin high schools, we could not only serve our local communities (a mission of the UW System enshrined in the Wisconsin Idea) but also prepare students for the bigger picture they would receive in college. Students who "get" diversity in UWEC classrooms have often already been exposed to such concepts in high school. Materials developed in basic English for a high school audience can be readily used in social clubs, local governments, social service and health agencies, etc.

This 30-minute video is a start to this process, produced to stimulate discussion (perhaps with a guest speaker) in a high school or college class, or church, business group or service agency, and also to be an ideal length for broadcast on community or public television. It is important that the language be accessible and straightforward, not abstract, academic or alienating to youth. The video will directly address questions of power, community identity, and racial double standards faced by communities of color. Individuals and their good or bad intentions are not always the point --the point is the effect of (often unintended) collective biases on the newcomers.

The emphasis of the video would be on measures taken by the neighbors of the targeted communities to make them feel more welcome and comfortable, such as the Witness for Nonviolence during the Ojibwe spearfishing crisis, the clean-up in Menomonie and the recent prayer service in Rice Lake, and the soccer team in Barron. Such efforts at building bridges to diverse communities in are often missed in a crisis atmosphere, because media attention is often focused more on conflict than cooperation. Yet documenting these responses could be just as valuable as enhancing cultural understanding of particular ethnic groups. The affected community may be Ojibwe yesterday, Hmong today and Somali tomorrow, but the roles of the white community and its responsibilities to respond stay rather constant.

UWEC as an institution has prioritized the concept of "Rethinking Diversity." Part of this rethinking may be to view the classroom and campus as directly affected by events and attitudes in Northwestern Wisconsin, and in turn to view the educational institution as able to affect these events and attitudes. A visible UWEC role in these Northern Wisconsin community issues could

incidentally play a positive role in recruitment and retention of a more diverse faculty and student body.

OBJECTIVES

1. To provide a video research and production project for an undergraduate student.
2. To document conflict and cooperation between the white majority community and "minority communities in Northern Wisconsin towns.
3. To conduct interviews and shoot footage for a film documentary.
4. To allow the undergraduate researcher to establish links with indigenous and immigrant communities
5. To give the undergraduate researcher experience in comparative work, by comparing different geographic case studies and ethnic groups' experiences.
6. To produce a film documentary that can be used for public education and school curriculum, and possible television broadcast.

FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

Dr. Zoltan Grossman is an assistant professor of geography, whose research areas include global and domestic interethnic relations and American Indian Studies. He earned his Ph.D. in Geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2002, supported by fellowships from the Udall Foundation and U.W. Foundation. Dr. Grossman has written and spoken extensively on geographic issues in the U.S. and around the world. His doctoral dissertation, "Unlikely Alliances: Treaty Conflicts and Environmental Cooperation Between Native American and Rural White Communities," documents reconciliation efforts around the country between Native American tribes and local farmers, ranchers, and fishers in the 1970s to the present. He has been involved for 15 years with Ojibwe, Menominee and other Native communities. Dr. Grossman has been a professional cartographer and map editor for 17 years. He was chief editor of *Wisconsin's Past and Present: A Historical Atlas* (U.W. Press, 1998), and *Mapping Wisconsin History* (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 2000), by the Wisconsin Cartographers' Guild. He has taught Human Geography, Native Geographies, International Environmental Problems and Policy, and The Geography of Russia and Eastern Europe. He collaborated in a previous SREU project on Somali communities in rural Minnesota and Wisconsin. Dr. Grossman's faculty website is at www.uwec.edu/grossmzc

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Jason Prairie is well suited for this video project. Jason is now a Production Assistant for WEAU TV-13, where he operates cameras and the audio board, and produces graphics. He is the main graphics creator on weekends for Channel 13. He is working toward a Bachelor's Degree in Broadcast Journalism, with a topical minor in Film by December 2006, as part of his career plan to be a professional TV producer-director. He is also a member of the Production Team at TV10- the on-campus UWEC television studio-taping events and filming/ editing commercials, creative short videos and fillers shown on-air. In Fall 2004, he was promoted to Co-host/Producer of "Expose Yourself," a weekly, 30-minute studio TV program dedicated to short film. He has shot and directed numerous films for film competitions-including one that won first place and advanced to the regional finals competition. Jason is also a member of University Activities Commission Films Club, choosing and organizing films to be shown at the on-campus theater every weekend. He was on the committee for UAC Films that organized and held the 5th annual Student Independent Film Festival, and was the emcee for the event.

PLANS FOR DISSEMINATING RESULTS

1. Production of a 30-minute video for school curriculum and community groups in our region
2. Promotion of the the video through a media campaign.
3. Posting of full audio interviews, written transcripts, articles and links on a campus website.
4. Possible broadcast of the video on public and community television stations.

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