

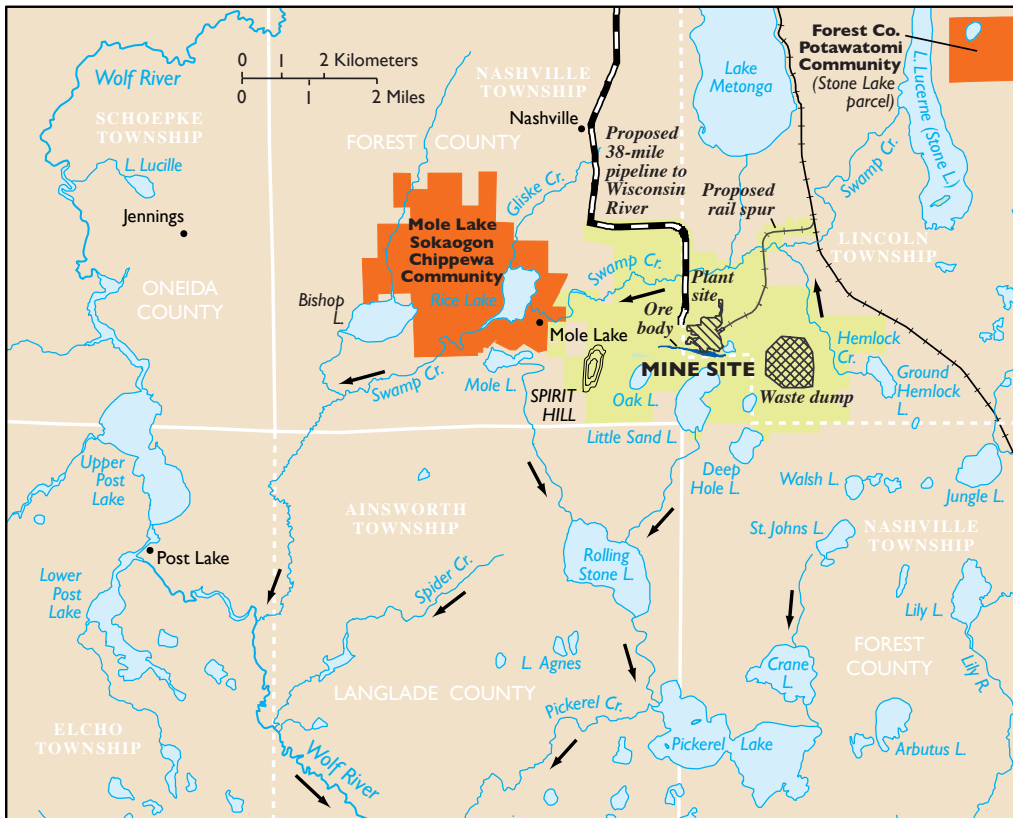
REMEMBERING THE CRANDON MINE REVOLT:

How Native and white rural communities
defended a common home in Forest County, Wisconsin



By Zoltán Grossman and Debra McNutt

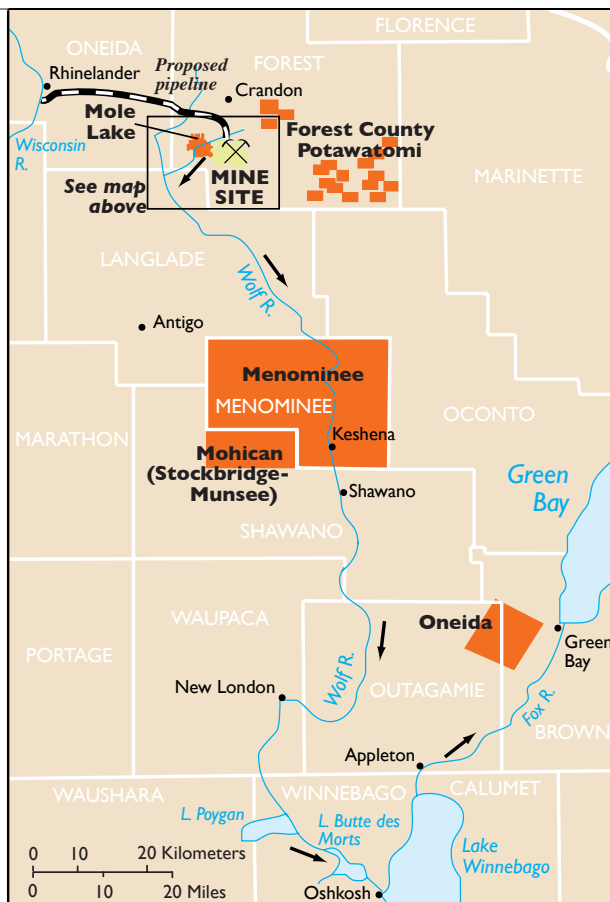
*This article is dedicated to those who helped to
stop the Crandon mine who have now passed on.*



Crandon Mine in Wisconsin

- Reservation and other tribal lands
- Property of proposed mine
- Direction of water flow
- County border
- Township border
- Railroad
- Proposed rail

©Map by Zoltán Grossman.
 Mine area GIS linework supplied by John Coleman, Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC). Proposed mine (fee, purchase option, lease, easement, or buffer zone) from 1994 Notice of Intent fig 2-3, and CMC Land Ownership Map, May 1995. Mole Lake lands from 1995 plat.



When Chuck Sleeter first fished on Pickerel Lake in northeastern Wisconsin in 1983, he fell in love with the stillness of the lake, with the cry of the loons in the distance, and with his success in catching walleyes by hook-and-line. The sheriff's deputy from Wood County, in central Wisconsin, decided to return to fish in Pickerel Lake every spring, and eventually decided to spend the rest of his life there in the Forest County Town of Nashville.

Sleeter had no inkling that the same natural beauty and abundance of resources that he sought would spark two intense civil conflicts in the area, nor that he would find himself at the center of both episodes in the state's history. Nor did he realize that this peaceful rural area south of Crandon would see the historically poor relationship between Wisconsin whites and Native Americans turned completely on its head.

In the late 1980s, Sleeter would be embroiled in a "walleye war" between white sportsmen and Ojibwe (Chippewa) over access to northern Wisconsin fish (Whaley and Bresette 1999). One of the Ojibwe reservations involved in the treaty rights controversy, the Mole Lake Sokaogon Chippewa Community, lies within the boundaries of Nashville township. By the late 1990s, the silver-haired former deputy had become the township chairman, and found himself in the middle of a fight against the world's largest mining companies, who wanted to open the massive Crandon copper-zinc mine next to Mole Lake. He would help overcome the divisions over the fish, and help bring together Indians and non-Indians, in order to protect the fish.

The Fishing Rights Conflict

Fishing itself would also become a source of conflict in 1983, as a federal judge recognized Ojibwe treaty rights to spear fish on lands ceded by their treaties, outside of their present-day reservations (based on treaties signed in 1837 and 1842). Many white sportfishers opposed the decision, out of a belief that the Ojibwe would destroy the fishery and thus environmentally harm the north's tourism-based economy. Through the late 1980s, an anti-treaty movement organized thousands of sportfishers to protest against the Ojibwe during the spring spearfishing seasons. The tiny Mole Lake community had the second-largest spearfishing contingent out of the six Wisconsin Ojibwe reservations, so it often came under the protesters' verbal and physical attacks. Anti-treaty groups protested in Crandon, and threatened to bring 1,000 protesters to disrupt Mole Lake's tribal bingo hall. Militant protesters threw rocks and directed bomb threats against Mole Lake tribal members during the 1989 season, and fearful Mole Lake parents pulled their children for a day out of the Crandon high school.

During the spearfishing crisis, riot-clad police from around the state were deployed to northern boat landings to prevent further violence, and to arrest protesters who attacked Native Americans or symbolically crossed police lines. Chuck Sleeter was one of hundreds of sheriff's deputies deployed to the lakes for the nighttime spearfishing security. "These were not pleasant duties," he remembers, describing the long dark hours and the snow piling on deputies' shoulders. Like some other police, he became "concerned" by the racial epithets he heard, and "noticed that the bigger the news coverage, the bigger the problem" (Sleeter 2000).

Nashville and Mole Lake

The Township of Nashville lies deep in the woods of northeastern Wisconsin, about 100 miles from Green Bay. The region is covered with pine and birch forests, lakes, streams and wetlands. In Forest County, it is common to spot bald eagles circling overhead, and see the bright green stands of *manoomin* (wild rice) in the lakes. A few farmers raise potatoes and other crops in the poor sandy soils, but most residents make a living from either logging or tourism.

Nashville had an unusual geography for Wisconsin townships, as it was divided into two separate 36-square-mile blocs, with a narrow strip attaching the upper "tile" with a lower "tile" to its southeast. The small area, at the headwaters of the Wolf River, was called home by three distinct groups of residents. Upper Nashville, or the "north end," was inhabited by Sokaogon Ojibwe tribal members at Mole Lake, and descendants of Kentuckians who had moved to the area to log in the early 20th century. After the federal government "lost" an 1855 treaty that had promised them a reservation, the Sokaogon Ojibwe became a landless "lost band."

The Sokaogon Ojibwe were finally granted the Mole Lake Reservation in 1934, on a 1,700-acre tract they had long valued for its huge wild rice beds. The Ojibwe would harvest the "food that grows on the water" from the bright green

beds by knocking the ripe kernels into their canoes. The most prominent feature on the flat landscape around the reservation is Spirit Hill, where many Ojibwe warriors were buried after an 1806 battle with the Dakota (Sioux) over these wild rice beds.

The north-end “Kentuck” family logging firms in the late 1970s sold many of their properties (including Spirit Hill) to the Exxon mining company, which bought up an area larger than the reservation in preparation for opening a zinc and copper sulfide mine (Gedicks 1993, 57-82). The mine site was divided between the townships of Nashville and Lincoln. The tribe opposed the mine because it could contaminate its wild rice beds (one mile downstream) with sulfuric acid wastes, and reduce groundwater levels that feed its community wells. The Crandon mine proposal, named not after the neighboring community but after the predominantly white village eight miles to the north (which is not downstream from the mine site), would cause one of the schisms within Nashville township.

Lower Nashville, or the “south end,” was dominated by lakefront property owners, many of them retirees (from other parts of Wisconsin and the Midwest) who mainly lived on their pensions. The south-end retirees had been drawn by the natural beauty and cleanliness of Pickerel Lake and other area lakes, and tended to join Mole Lakers and some white north-end residents in opposing the Crandon mine as a threat to the environment and the social stability of the area. Tributaries of the Wolf River flowed south away from the mine site toward Mole Lake and Lower Nashville, rather than toward Crandon, Upper Nashville, and Lincoln.

In 1983, the same year that Chuck Sleeter first fished on the south end’s Pickerel Lake, 41 percent of Nashville voters had voted for a moratorium on the mine, but they were defeated by a 49 percent pro-mine vote coming mainly from white north-end voters. Exxon dropped its mine permit application three years later, citing low metal prices. During Exxon’s absence in the late 1980s, the treaty rights conflict over spearfishing divided Indian from white residents, seemingly paving the way for Exxon to return and set the communities even more against each other.

The Mining Conflict Resumes

By the early 1990s, the anti-spearfishing protests grew smaller when many local people grew alarmed by the anti-Indian groups’ open racism, and by their leadership’s refusal to oppose mining as possible threat to the fishery. Growing numbers of sportfishers began to feel that metallic sulfide mining was a larger environmental problem than Ojibwe spearers who harvest only three percent of the walleye.

In 1992, Chuck Sleeter retired on a tract of land next to Pickerel Lake he purchased from longtime friends Ward and Dorothy Tyra. As a former nurse, Dorothy Tyra had come to know tribal members at Mole Lake and the nearby Forest County Potawatomi Community (Tyra 1997). Chuck fell in love with the Tyras’ Illinois friend Joanne Tacopina, who had summered on the lake since she was two years old. In the same year, Exxon returned to reapply for a permit to open the Crandon metallic sulfide mine. Sleeter and Tacopina attended town board meetings and felt unease that their new chosen home could be despoiled by a mine generating millions of tons of sulfide wastes. When he asked Exxon representative Don Moe if the company could guarantee that Nashville’s water would not be contaminated, Moe replied no. Sleeter committed himself to stopping the Crandon mine at all costs, accusing the company of “depriving us the right to live secure, the right to live with the environment” (Zaleski 1997).

Though they began to oppose the mining proposal, only a few local whites attended Native American events opposed to the mine, including a 1994 national gathering sponsored by the Indigenous Environmental Network and Midwest Treaty Network, which drew 1,000 people to Mole Lake. Menominee elder Hilary Waukau said after a march to the mine site, “Protecting our environment is everybody’s job. If the white man’s society would listen to some of the things we are saying, this would be a lot better society for everyone” (Fantle 1994).



The schisms of the treaty rights conflict were still too fresh, so the Native and non-Native mine opponents tended to work separately. Mole Lake and Menominee joined with the Forest County Potawatomi and Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican tribes to form the Niiwin Tribes (using the Ojibwe word for “four”) opposing the Crandon mine; they were often joined by the Oneida Nation.

Exxon and its Canadian partner Rio Algom Ltd. worked behind the scenes to secure a “Local Agreement” from the pro-mining town board, made up of three north-end members, to allow construction of the mine. Under a 1987 state law, a Local Agreement is legally essential for a metallic mine, because it waives local zoning authority that can later hamper the mine’s construction or operation. Before the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources can approve a mine permit, a Local Agreement anticipates possible local environmental and economic problems from mining, and specifies compensation to the community.

The Town Board members and town attorney held closed meetings about the Local Agreement, and denied holding the meetings to Sleeter and other constituents who asked. When townspeople found out about the secret negotiations with the mining company in late 1996, they were infuriated, particularly at the role of the town’s attorney Kevin Lyons.

In the meantime, the Midwest Treaty Network, which since 1989 had organized Witnesses for Nonviolence to monitor anti-Indian harassment and violence during the spearfishing crisis, began to build bridges to the tribe’s former adversaries: sportfishing groups. At a 1993 anti-mining conference in Ashland, Mole Lake and Menominee officials asked the Midwest Treaty Network to take on political organizing around the Crandon mine, while the tribes would do the legal, technical, and spiritual work necessary to protect the water. The Network formed the Wolf Watershed Educational Project (WWEP) as a campaign to organize Native and non-Native communities downstream from the proposed mine site.

In 1996, the Wolf Watershed Educational Project began a series of speaking tours along the Wolf and Wisconsin rivers, to organize communities against the Crandon project. At the 22 towns visited by the first speaking tour, representatives of tribes, environmental groups, and sportfishing groups spoke, drawing about 1,100 people. Instead of sending the speakers only to speak to their own constituencies, the Network decided to show all three parts of the alliance at each of the communities. Some of the sportfishers in the audience heard a Native American speak for the first time in their lives, and about an issue that concerned them. At one tour stop at a meeting of the Merrill Sportsmen’s Club, a Mole Lake tribal speaker even won the door prize. The speaking tour culminated with a rally at the mining company’s local headquarters in Rhinelander, attended by 1,000 people (Wolf Watershed Educational Project 1996). The series of speaking tours in 1996-2000 resulted in small grassroots anti-mine groups being formed along the rivers (in communities such as Shawano) and around the state (Mutter 2000).

Local Leadership

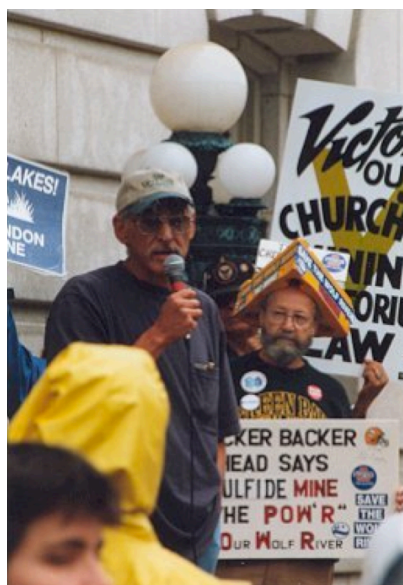
Mole Lake Tribal Judge Fred Ackley was one of the main tour speakers, and often offered guidance at alliance meetings that posed the mining issue as part of a larger battle for the survival of the Earth. Ackley's lengthy admonitions described the Earth "fighting back" against exploitation through hurricanes, floods, and other natural disasters. When Ackley had lived in Milwaukee, he had helped to manufacture mining equipment, and began to realize that the metals would be used for war (Ackley 1999). His traditionalist Ojibwe companion Frances Van Zile was a feisty speaker who urged women to join the alliance as the "keepers of the water." Ackley, Van Zile, and other tribal members and leaders described the mine as endangering not only their groundwater, but also their traditions of hunting, fishing and ricing.

The tour speakers also included Wolf River sportfishermen who had not only educated themselves about mining, but had begun to build a relationship with local tribal members. Foremost among them was a trio of elderly trout fishermen from White Lake, downstream on the Wolf River in Langlade County. Herb Buettner was a resort owner who served as President of the Wolf River chapter of Trout Unlimited and as Chairman of the Langlade County Republican Party. Moved by the environmental values of his Menominee Indian friend Hilary Waukau, Buettner committed himself to protecting the Wolf River from dams, waste dumps, and mines, quietly encouraged by his wife Genie. Buettner was so disgusted by the pro-mine stance of Republican Governor Tommy Thompson that he once removed his campaign literature from the Party table at the county fair, and replaced it with anti-corporate literature.

George Rock was a retired engineer with a biting wit who lives with his wife Marilyn in an 1872 log cabin downstream on the Wolf River, and who served as vice president of the Trout Unlimited chapter and president of the local chapter of the Wisconsin Resources Protection Council. Though he did not live in Nashville, he served as an important bridge (much like Dorothy Tyra) between the white residents and local tribal members he had met when his father had been a local schoolteacher.

Bob Schmitz was a white-bearded retired telephone workers' union president from Green Bay, where he had become experienced in the art of rank-and-file organizing, along with his wife Millie, and gotten to know Oneida tribal members. As an avid hunter and fisherman, he had a cabin in White Lake, and joined fellow World War II veteran Hilary Waukau to protect the Wolf River (Schmitz 1997). Schmitz's gruff language and colorful humor punctuated alliance meetings .

Schmitz and Buettner also brought in another elderly veteran of a struggle to stop a mine in northwestern Wisconsin. Former school principal Roscoe Churchill was a gentlemanly farmer from Ladysmith who raised Appaloosa horses. He had joined the county board and rallied opposition to a copper mine next to the Flambeau River, but lost the battle with the powerful Kennecott Corporation. Roscoe and his wife Evelyn were considered the grandparents of Wisconsin's anti-mining movement.



Native elders such as Ackley, Van Zile and Waukau, and retired white sportsmen or farmers such as Buettner, Rock, Schmitz and Churchill were also joined by younger people concerned about the growth of corporate power. University of Wisconsin students from Stevens Point, such as Dana Churness and Deanna Erickson, attended anti-globalization protests around the country, but returned to Wisconsin to assist the local “people power” movement against multinational corporations in their own backyard. At alliance meetings, they listened as elders such as Ackley and Buettner stood to speak at length about the environment and democracy, drawing from their respective oral traditions.

Participants of the Wolf Watershed meetings often brought cakes for each other’s birthdays, and passed cards for those who were ill. Buettner would tell others at the meeting that he felt “closer to you people than to people I attend church with on Sundays.” The meetings were held monthly at different reservations and border towns, and brought together organizers from different communities face-to-face in one circle, a key element in building the alliance.

Building the alliance

The movement against the Crandon mine effectively drew from four strands in the state’s history. It epitomized Wisconsin’s history of progressive populism, which mistrusts Big Business. It exhibited the environmental ethics of John Muir and Aldo Leopold, which are still strong in rural areas of the state. It tapped into the historic resentment of rural northern residents against state government agencies in Madison (such as the Department of Natural Resources). It also relied on the historic perseverance of Native American nations (such as the Ojibwe, Potawatomi and Menominee) to protect their treaty rights and tribal sovereignty.



The resultant statewide alliance not only drew together Native Americans and their former sportfisher adversaries, but grassroots environmentalists with labor union locals and federations, and rural residents with urban students. In poor logging communities such as Forest County (much like in the Western U.S.), resource companies had been able to portray “mainstream” urban-based white environmental activists as yuppies or hippies who do not care about rural jobs. The companies trying to open the Crandon mine attempted to pit Native Americans against white residents, anti-mine environmentalists against union members building mining equipment, and rural northerners against urban residents. But they appeared to fail each time to divide Wisconsinites by race, by class, or by region.

What mining companies faced along the Wolf River was something new--an environmental movement that was rural-based, multiracial, middle-class and working-class, and made up of many youth and elderly people. The Wolf Watershed Educational Project never met during deer hunting season, because nearly all of its members’ families hunted. This movement did not just address a corporation’s environmental threats, but also their threats to rural cultures, local economies and democratic institutions, their "boom-and-bust" social disruptions, and their mistreatment of union employees. In 1997, a diverse range of groups around the state came together to pass the Sulfide Mining Moratorium

Bill, forcing companies to “Prove It First” by showing examples of sulfide mines that had operated and been reclaimed without violating environmental laws (Midwest Treaty Network 1997).

This type of “people power” movement also defeated Perrier springwater drilling in central Wisconsin (Kanno 2003). Another rural alliance unsuccessfully opposed an electric transmission line in northwestern Wisconsin, which would have also provided power to the Crandon project (Save Our Unique Lands 2005). Most importantly to Nashville and Mole Lake mine opponents, the phenomenal growth of rural grassroots movements meant that were no longer alone.

The Nashville Revolt

On December 7, 1996, Nashville citizens met in a Special Town Meeting to prevent their Board from signing the agreement. About 340 people turned out for the New England-style meeting in the tiny town hall, including retirees, small loggers, lakefront property owners, and Mole Lake tribal members. After conferring with Attorney Lyons, Town Chair Richard Pitts adjourned the meeting before it began, and called in county police to close the building. Pitts was loudly booed by the crowd, as retired men and women stood on their chairs and shouted: “This is America? This is democracy?” The Nashville Revolt had begun.

Tom Ward, an outspoken north-end elderly resident who was county chapter president of the anti-mine Wisconsin Resources Protection Council (WRPC), commented of the aborted town meeting, “What we are seeing here is government of Exxon, by Exxon, and for Exxon” (Ward 1997). Five days later, the Town Board signed the Local Agreement; it was later joined by the governing boards of the adjacent township of Lincoln and of Forest County.

Ward and others urged Sleeter to run against Pitts in the following spring’s local election, and recruited two other candidates to run for the other two board posts: retired law enforcement officer Duwayne Marshall, and Mole Lake tribal member Robert Van Zile, a serious, thoughtful spiritual leader of the Ojibwe community. Sleeter explains that the south-end residents and Mole Lake tribal members needed to team up in order to win the election, and a Native American candidate would help boost tribal voter turnout.

In the April 1997 local election, 98.4 percent of Nashville’s eligible voters cast ballots—the highest turnout of any election in the history of Wisconsin at the time. Sleeter won 55 percent of the vote, with Marshall and Van Zile also winning board seats, and Tacopina winning the town clerkship. Crandon mine opponents celebrated the victory as a demonstration of growing local opposition to the project. The defeated town board refused for weeks to turn the keys to the town hall over to the new town board (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 1997).

Newspapers around the country reported on Nashville’s blow against the mining company, but few noted the unprecedented victory by a Native American in the town election. On election day, some tribal members had complained of having their voting credentials challenged by sympathizers of the pro-mine town board. Sleeter later reported that one 18-year-old had to return four times to the polls with his birth certificate, rent receipts, and other documents. For them, Robert Van Zile’s victory had a special resonance. His sister Frances Van Zile remembers, “I was surprised when my brother was elected...I sat down and I cried. I never thought it could happen but it did” (Van Zile 1999).

The Nashville revolt involved many local white residents whose primary concern had not been the mine, or any environmental issue, but rather how their local democratic decision-making process had been undermined by secret talks between their local government and an outside corporation. WRPC organizer George Rock told Nashville residents that they were “being treated like a Third World country,” in a way that Native Americans were used to being treated, and that “now white people are being treated the same way because they’re in the way” (Rock 1997).

Mole Lake Judge Fred Ackley remembers his amazement that white residents would vote for an Indian to protect the environment. As a Mole Lake elder, Ackley also remembers his amusement that the north-end “old-timers” would accuse the south-end retirees of being “newcomers,” when his Native family lived in the area “far longer than either of them” (Ackley 1999).

When the new town board finally secured the keys to the town hall, they found many documents missing, and found that the treasury had been bankrupted. The new town government investigated the Local Agreement process, and discovered that the former board had met to hammer out the deal in 55 closed sessions, in violation of the state's Open Meetings Law, and that Attorney Lyons had stood to make \$250,000 in the Agreement (Fantle 1999).

The new town board rescinded the Local Agreement in September 1998, touching off a running legal battle with the mining company in state courts. The town charged the mining company with violations of federal organized crime statutes, and took the unusual step of raising legal funds for the lawsuits through an Internet web site. Sleeter beat back a recall challenges from former town officials in June 1998 and won re-election in 1999 and 2001—winning by progressively larger margins each time.

The Nashville revolt has become an inspiration to others around the state and the country. Schoolchildren in DePere (near Green Bay) played out the Nashville conflict in class skits, though the teacher faced difficulty in finding students who wanted to play the mining company representative instead of Sleeter. State court hearings on the Nashville case were attended by national figures such as Green vice-presidential candidate Winona LaDuke and the Indigo Girls musical group, and attracted the attention of mining industry journals around the world. A March 2001 state court decision on the local agreement went against the Nashville town board. The decision was upheld by a state appellate court in January 2002. Nashville lost in state court, but had more importantly won in the court of public opinion.

Native/white relations

With media attention focused on Nashville's revolt against the Crandon mine, few observers noticed that the township was concurrently going through another transformation: a sudden and dramatic improvement in the township's relations with the Indian reservation within its boundaries. The township and tribal governments had been at odds for decades, but the 1997 election offered a chance for a new start. Remembering his experiences at the boat landings in 1989, and the disenfranchisement of tribal voters in 1997, Sleeter joined with Van Zile in building bridges to the tribe.

Sleeter appointed tribal members to the town elections board and board of adjustments. He attended every tribal council meeting, where he was put first in the agenda to report on town matters. Tribal members who had previously sat in the back of town board meetings, Sleeter noted, gradually moved to the front and joined discussions. The tribe asked Sleeter's advice on media and legal matters pertaining the mine, while the township passed an intergovernmental cooperation resolution promising to consult with the tribe on issues of mutual concern.

The tribe and township faced a potential dispute over the expansion of the reservation, which would take land off of the town's tax base. In 1994, Mole Lake had purchased 1,306 acres just to the north of the reservation, providing new land to overcome a severe housing shortage, and applied to put the land in federal trust. The old Nashville board strongly opposed trust status as economically harming the town, thereby joining nearly all local governments around the country who stand to lose taxes when tribal lands are put into trust. Instead of opposing the "inevitability" of trust status, Sleeter and the new Nashville board actually asked the federal government to approve it. The town received certain compensation from the tribe in the form of services, defusing potential conflict and providing a new model for intergovernmental cooperation.

In formal contracts and informal agreements, the township and tribe exchanged services such as snow plowing, road grading, garbage pickup, and fire and medical protection (in a consolidated fire district). When the tribe faced delays in paying an outside contractor for emergency road grading, the township treasury fronted the funds. When the township was mandated to provide elderly emergency shelters, the tribe allowed access to its new elderly services building. And in a virtually unprecedented move, the tribe gave Sleeter the status of a U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs "screener," enabling the township to join the tribe in receiving free equipment that is no longer used by the federal government, from federal installations such as closed military bases.

Besides cooperation between tribal and township governments, the local anti-mining alliance created more social mixing and cultural understanding. Joanne observed that Mole Lake children have helped her husband put up campaign signs. When the tribal schoolchildren had problems with a racial incident on their school bus, they started the untrue rumor that the Nashville town chair would sue the perpetrator. Participants reported being invited to each other's parties

for the first time, and tribal spiritual leaders were asked to provide prayer invocations at non-Indian events, such as the 2000 wedding of Chuck Sleeter and Joanne Tacopina. After attending these invocations, Trout Unlimited organizer George Rock commented that “passing a pipe becomes part of the understanding” that extended the alliance beyond mere tactical convenience (Rock 1999).



Local residents may have initially united with the tribes to protect the Class I trout stream from the potential threat of sulfide mining, with the belief that tribal governments would help stop the project. Yet in the process, local white residents also came to also understand Native American sovereign rights and cultural concerns. Mine opponent Sonny Wreczycki, who lived downstream in the Langlade County Town of Ainsworth, decided to protect Indian burial mounds located on his property, and began looking into the possibilities of restoring wild rice beds destroyed by settlement around his off-reservation Rollingsstone Lake (Wreczycki 1997). Fran Van Zile observes that non-Indians in the area now pay special attention to wild rice, and observes that “people...I never heard from before...call and ask me how to prepare wild rice....Before, they thought Indians don’t still do that stuff” (Van Zile 1999).

Chuck Sleeter observes that the “heartlifting” emotional battles over the Crandon mine have enabled Nashville and Mole Lake to examine the “racial part of the puzzle.” He understands why tribal members “don’t trust white people” who have taken advantage of the tribe, or have wanted something in return for help (Sleeter 2000). Tom Ward sees the alliance as “breaking down the racial gap,” with the mine as a focal point that establishes longer-term common ground (Ward 1997). WRPC Mole Lake organizer Sylvester Poler goes further in describing Nashville as having a combination of open-minded white residents who no longer view Indians as the “other people,” and tribal members who are no longer content as “good Indians” who can be safely ignored or patronized (Poler 1998).

Nashville and several other townships along the Wolf River supported the tribe’s successful application to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to strengthen tribal environmental standards under the federal Clean Water Act, in effect using sovereign tribal authority to protect upstream waters for Native and non-Native residents alike (Gedicks 2001, 127-158). Nashville’s support was key in the 1999 approval by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency of Mole Lake’s strengthened water quality regulations, aimed at the Crandon project (Bergquist 2002).

Under the Clean Water Act, the federal government can recognize the sovereign environmental laws of qualified tribes on the same level as states. This “Treatment-As-State” (TAS) program also extended to the Clean Air Act. The Forest County Potawatomi, who had parcels of land 5 miles downwind from the mine site, declared the air over its reservation as Class I air quality, in a move aimed largely at the heavy metallic dust that would be emitted from the mine (Forest County Potawatomi Tribe 1995). The tribes used the federal trust responsibility to extend their environmental influence outside the borders of the reservations, to in effect protect the air or water of non-Indian communities. At least one poll showed that non-Indian Wisconsin residents would prefer tribal regulations if they safeguarded the environment more than state laws (Associated Press 1996). The anti-mine movement was using parallel tracks in its strategy, concurrently using the powers of local, state, tribal, and federal governments to stop the mine. Even if some of these efforts were set back, the movement was moving forward on at least one of the tracks at all times.

Economic cooperation

To keep both Native and non-Native youth in the economically depressed area, Nashville and Mole Lake also began to explore sustainable economic development initiatives, as alternatives to the “boom-and-bust” mining economy, and to the often shaky tribal gaming industry. As part of their intergovernmental cooperation agreement, the Mole Lake tribe and the new Nashville town board carried out a survey of community economic needs, including a series of town meetings in 1998. Sleeter recalls that, at the first survey meeting, tribal members sat on one side of the town hall room, and non-Indian residents sat on the other side. As each side described their ideas for how the community could get out of poverty, they slowly discovered their needs were virtually identical. The meeting ended in both sides of the room applauding the other, and subsequent seating arrangements were more mixed.

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Rural Development Office informed Mole Lake and Nashville that they had been chosen as part of a federally funded enterprise zone. The Northwoods NiiJii Enterprise Community, Inc. included three sets of neighboring partner communities: the Mole Lake Ojibwe Band and Nashville, the Menominee Tribe and the city and county of Shawano, and the Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe Band with the Vilas County townships of Woodruff, Minocqua, and Lac du Flambeau, and the Oneida County townships of Arbor Vitae, Boulder Junction, and Manitowish Waters. “NiiJii” is the Ojibwe word for “friend,” and each of the three sets of partner communities bridged the Indian/non-Indian gap in what had been the most intense areas of conflict over treaty rights in Wisconsin.

The Enterprise Community was awarded a 10-year seed money award of \$2.5 million, to finance “Indian and non-Indian working relationships,” based on principles of economic opportunity, sustainable community partnerships, and strategic vision for change (Northwoods NiiJii Enterprise Community 2000). As part of the award process, Sleeter and Poler met with Vice President Al Gore. By 2001, the program had brought \$11 million to its member communities, to fund water systems, schools, elderly housing, student employment, manufacturing centers, housing rehabilitation, water quality, and ecotourism. Vice President Gore and Governor Thompson were no longer in office, and Exxon and Rio Algom had been replaced as Crandon mine project companies by the Australian/South African mining conglomerate BHP Billiton, the world’s largest mining company.

A similar but smaller local effort, the Northwoods Economic Development Project, opened a Tourism and Mining Information Center in Mole Lake in 2000. The Center, built as a counterweight to the mining company’s Public Information Center up the road in Crandon, distributed literature about local tourist attractions and materials opposing the mine. During the Center’s opening, about 80 tribal members and Nashville residents stood in a circle, as Van Zile conducted a pipe ceremony and Sleeter joined tribal leaders in a flag-raising ceremony. The ceremony symbolized not only the common environmental position of the Native and non-Native communities, but their plans for a common economic future.

Efforts such as the Northwoods NiiJii Enterprise Community and the Northwoods Economic Development Project, combined with the growth of gaming employment and environmental cooperation, began to alter the relationship between Native and non-Native communities in northeastern Wisconsin. Lac du Flambeau, Mole Lake, and Menominee had previously had a relationship with predominantly white “border towns” that was contentious at best, and had even flared into violent civil conflict.

The list of Northwoods NiiJii communities resembles the communities once mentioned prominently in police incident reports—of clashes between Menominee warriors and white vigilantes over a Native-occupied novitiate in 1975, between Lac du Flambeau spearfishers and white anglers in 1989, or of friction between anti-mine Mole Lake tribal members and pro-mine white Nashville leaders in 1996. Even aside from these open conflicts, the border towns were places of tension and fear for tribal members who faced racism in their schools and grocery stores. Their white residents would rarely venture to the reservations, which many believed were havens of poverty and crime, and the source of economic and environmental threats that projected outside reservation boundaries.

By the 2000s, the relationship between reservations and “border towns” was turned on its head. The very same communities that had been in the headlines as the worst flashpoints of Native-white conflict in Wisconsin became the communities most at the forefront of economic and environmental cooperation in the state. The borders of fear between them became borders of cooperation, and began to develop into internal borders within a larger common place, such as

the Wolf River watershed. The conflicts over natural resources had ironically educated non-Indians that tribes had retained their Indigenous cultures, and legal powers as sovereign nations.

Reservations and border towns turned their proximity to each other from a problem into an advantage. Former anti-treaty protesters took jobs in tribal casinos, and attended environmental rallies. Rhinelander fishing guide Wally Cooper had not only attended but had spoken at rallies of the anti-treaty movement in the late 1980s, but by 1996 was on stage with Mole Lake tribal members at rallies against the Crandon mine “because Native Americans can stop the mine.” Yet Cooper also reported that “we’ve seen a lot more cultural awareness” because of the environmental alliances, and as “the tribes grow more prosperous” (Cooper 1997). Frances Van Zile remembers feeling “really surprised” at seeing Cooper at anti-mine meetings. During the boat landing protests, she had “always wondered if someone was listening—he was” (Van Zile 1999).

Menominee Treaty Rights and Mining Impacts Office coordinator Ken Fish also reached out to sportsmen to protect fish, even as the Menominee Tribe asserted its own treaty rights. The Oshkosh president of Walleyes for Tomorrow, Tom Soles, had opposed the Menominee tribe’s 1995 lawsuit for off-reservation treaty rights, but nevertheless began to work together with Ken Fish in 1996, to oppose the Crandon mine (Soles 1997). When anti-treaty sportsmen such as Cooper and Soles were brought into the alliance by sportsmen (such as Rock, Schmitz, and Buettner) who had prior contact with tribal communities, the movement significantly broadened. In the meantime, the Menominee Treaty Rights and Mining Impacts Office opened the “Niiwin House” next to the proposed mine site, which became a key center for the statewide opposition, and a common meeting place for Wolf Watershed Educational Project meetings.

By the late 1990s, northern Wisconsin tribes with successful casinos were funding festivals and musical events in white “border towns,” which were increasingly exposed to the Native cultures that they had trivialized and commercialized for decades. Mole Lake’s small casino hosted country bands, drawing many local “Kentuck” residents. Incidents of racial prejudice and job discrimination still occurred in white-owned stores and restaurants, but there were fewer and weaker organized anti-Indian groups backed by local governments. Some white businesses continued to resent the casinos and tribal environmental laws, but increasing numbers of northern residents in polls began to view them as enhancing the tourism-based economy.

This process of racial reconciliation and cooperation in northern Wisconsin reached an advanced stage in Nashville and Mole Lake, but the participants agree that there is still a long way to go. Sleeter reported that town board meetings were still disrupted by pro-mine citizens, who continued to call him an “Indian lover.” He also felt a constant need to assure tribal members that he would not “sell out” their environmental interests in the mining case. Sylvester Poler points out an essential difference between the two communities when he warns, “Whites can move away...We are here; we are going to fight...This is our last stand. We don’t have any other reservation to go to” (Poler 1998).

The Death of the Crandon Mine

A 2001 poll by the respected Chamberlain Research Consultants showed that 57 percent of northeastern Wisconsinites opposed new metallic sulfide mines in the state, roughly even with the statewide figure of 55 percent statewide. The same poll showed that 65 percent of northeastern Wisconsin residents favored a ban on cyanide in mining, compared to 58 percent statewide (Chamberlain Research Consultants 2001). A bill to ban cyanide in mining—backed by many tribal governments, county and local governments, environmental groups, sportfishing clubs, and unions—passed the State Senate in 2001, but was blocked in the State Assembly (Wisconsin Campaign to Ban Cyanide in Mining 2002). Nevertheless, the campaign connected the mine with cyanide, and so played a role in building the opposition.

Wisconsin’s movement made an impression on the global mining industry. One industry journal identified the state as one of four battlegrounds for the global mining industry. The London-based industry journal *Mining Environmental Management* (March 2000) stated that “The Wolf Watershed Educational Project (WWEP), a U.S.-based alliance of environmental groups, Native American nations, local residents, unions and students...is just one example of what is becoming a very real threat to the global mining industry: global environmental activism” (Khanna 2000). The Vancouver-based Fraser Institute rated Wisconsin at or near the bottom of its annual “mining investment attractiveness score” in 1998-2001 because of the state’s “well-publicized aversion to mining.” (Fraser Institute 2001). Toronto’s

North American Mining (Aug. 1998) claimed, “The increasingly sophisticated political maneuvering by environmental special interest groups has made permitting a mine in Wisconsin an impossibility” (*North American Mining* 1998).

BHP Billiton began to face protests against the Crandon mine even outside Wisconsin. At its shareholder meeting in Melbourne, Australia, shareholders had to walk through a gauntlet of environmentalist signs urging a withdrawal from Wisconsin as a “risky investment.” Mole Lake representatives, including Robert Van Zile, attended the 2002 Sustainability Summit in South Africa, and met with the CEO of BHP Billiton. The National Mining Association complained that Wisconsin environmentalist websites run by “barbarians at the gates of cyberspace,” were spreading anti-mine strategies around the world (Webster 1998).

Confronted with stiff and growing resistance, BHP Billiton sold the Nicolet Minerals Company in March 2003 to the Northern Wisconsin Resource Group, owned by the Connor logging family that had originally sold much of the mine site to Exxon in the 1970s. The company searched worldwide for a corporate partner with mining experience, but could find no takers.

On October 28, 2003, the 28-year fight to stop the proposed Crandon mine came to a sudden and dramatic end. Mine opponents not only defeated the controversial zinc-copper project, but the Mole Lake and Potawatomi tribes gained ownership and control of the mine site.

The Forest County Potawatomi and the Sokaogon Ojibwe paid more than \$16.5 million for the 5,939-acre mine site. Tribal members and non-Indian mine opponents flooded into the Nicolet Minerals Information Center to celebrate. The Nicolet Minerals Company, now actually owned by Mole Lake, dropped all mining permit applications for the Crandon mine.



As he hung a giant “SOLD” sign on the building, Potawatomi tribal member Dennis Shepherd exclaimed, “We rocked the boat. Now we own the boat.” The two tribes divided the Crandon mine site between themselves, to ensure that a toxic, metallic sulfide mine could never threaten them in the future. Mole Lake acquired more than \$8 million in debt, and established a fund to raise money for its half of the mine site purchase, and eventually reached a deal with the mining company (Imrie 2006).

The tribes bought the site at a “rummage sale” price partly because the grassroots movement had driven away potential corporate partners for the Nicolet Minerals Company, and therefore had caused the sale price to drop by tens of millions of dollars. Nicolet’s former director, Gordon Connor, Jr., complained that Wisconsin’s “anti-corporate culture” defeated the mine, adding, “We have engaged every significant mining interest in the world. The message is clear. They don’t want to do business in the state of Wisconsin.” (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 2003).

Former Nicolet Minerals President Dale Alberts said that the Crandon mine “is dead and gone forever. I think it is essentially the end of mining in the state. It is a bitter pill” (*Green Bay Press Gazette* 2003). In testimony before Congress, Alberts later testified before Congress that Mole Lake’s enhanced “Treatment-As-State” water quality standards “established a very difficult hurdle for the mining project,” admitting that tribal sovereignty was the key element in blocking the mine (Alberts 2004).



For the local Mole Lake and Nashville people who have spent so much time and money to defeat this project, the victory brought a sense of peace after a quarter century of struggle. At the Nicolet Minerals Information Center, Mole Lake veteran Jerry Burnett brought out an American flag he had long carried upside down, as a symbol of distress, and turned it upright. Burnett told the gathered crowd, “I fought in Vietnam. When I came back, I swore I would not fight another war except in defense of my country. And then I had to fight the mining company to defend my own soil. We have won this war. Now the war is over.”

On November 7, 2003, the Wolf Watershed Educational Project met for what many members thought would be its last meeting. The key players from Mole Lake, Nashville, White Lake, and other Wolf River communities were all present, as were supporters from Stevens Point, Milwaukee, Madison, and elsewhere in Wisconsin. The anti-mine veteran Roscoe Churchill cut a victory cake jointly with Mole Lake Vice Chair Tina Van Zile, who had played a pivotal role in environmental research and the site purchase. They held a victory powwow, which was later held in Green Bay, drawing hundreds of dancers and 11 drums (representing each Wisconsin Indian tribal nation).

Yet when the future of the alliance came up for discussion, members of the alliance warned of looming threats to the Wolf River watershed, including the possible resurrection of proposals for an underground high-level waste repository in the granite bedrock of the Wolf River Batholith, and new mining proposals. The Native and non-Native activists (who ranged in age from 20’s to 80’s) had worked with each other for years, and wanted to continue meeting to continue the relationship between their communities. The question was settled when the union organizer Bob Schmitz stood and exclaimed “We can’t dissolve this group. What we have here is *power*.” Mine opponents continued to meet informally, as Mole Lake opened a new resort hotel, and turned the old mine site into a series of hiking and ATV trails.

Legacies of the Crandon victory

In 2011, new alliances developed to oppose iron taconite mining plans in the Penokee Range upstream of the Bad River Ojibwe Reservation (Penokee Hills Education Project 2013, *The Water Edge’s* 2013). The entire state of Wisconsin was swept by grassroots protests against the agenda of Republican Governor Scott Walker, including his attacks on labor unions, public education, and the environment. In many ways, the Crandon struggle was a precursor to this recent anti-corporate upsurge, and even some of the opposition group names (such as Penokee Hills Education Project) were drawn from the earlier movement.

Like at the Crandon site, the neighboring tribe took a strong leadership role in the movement for clean water. The Penokee mine site was geographically split between different jurisdictions (Ashland and Iron counties) with differing attitudes toward the mine, much like the Crandon site was split between Forest County townships. Gov. Walker's DNR has "fast-tracked" the proposal, much as former governors Earl and Thompson had tried at the Crandon site, only to see the project repeatedly delayed on multiple fronts, and restarted in a "stop-again, start-again" war of attrition. After only four years of opposition, the project was defeated in 2015.



The historic defeat of the Crandon mine was more than a victory of "people power" against corporate power. During the treaty rights conflict over Ojibwe spearfishing, Native Americans and sportfishing groups fought over the fish resource, but during the Crandon fight they united to protect the fish, and began to heal some of their divisions. The tribal purchase of the Crandon mine site brought the relationship between Native Americans and rural whites full circle from conflict to cooperation, and marked a small rollback in the history of Native land dispossession.

The Crandon victory repeated the success of other "unlikely alliances" between Native American and rural white communities (in Washington, Oregon, South Dakota, Montana, and other states) that had previously been in conflict over natural resources (Grossman 2013, 2017). A recurring irony is that in the regions where tribes had asserted their treaty rights and sovereignty the strongest, and the conflict with white neighbors had been the most intense, is ironically where the later environmental alliances were easier to develop. Treaty claims in the short run caused conflict, but in the long run educated whites about tribal cultures and legal powers, and strengthened the commitment of both communities to value the resources.

Today, the Spirit Hill sacred burial grounds are back under tribal control, and native tall grasses are growing back in what would have been the Crandon mine's main parking lot. On a local level, the relationship between white township residents and tribal members changed how they live on the land, and is redefining their concepts of "home." When Chuck Sleeter first dropped his hook in Pickerel Lake two decades ago, most Natives and non-Natives in Nashville had accepted a meaning of "home" that was based on political and racial boundaries. They lived side-by-side, but not together in the same place, in the treasured headwaters of the Wolf River.

In present-day Nashville and Mole Lake, the meaning of "home" is changing. No longer does the Native American "home" and the white majority's "home" stop at the reservation boundary. It encompasses both tribal and non-tribal lands in a common place defined by the flowing of streams and groundwater, the weaving of canoes through wild rice beds, and even the scraping of shared graders and snow plows over local roads.

Frances Van Zile describes this shift in consciousness when she says that many Nashville white residents now "accept Mole Lake as part of home. It's not just my community. It's everybody's home." She concludes, "This is my home; when it's your home you try to take as good care of it as how can, including all the people in it....We have to take care of this place, including everybody in it. I mean everybody that shares these resources should take care of it. It's not just my responsibility... everyone in the community takes care of home."

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