WILD RICE and the OJIBWAY PEOPLE

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ago Indians used to go and camp, maybe ten families they would go to one lake and camp. They would camp there as long as the rice would last. And it used [to last] a month, because they know how to take care of the rice. They know how to go, when to go, and when you should leave it alone. And now we rice, just as soon as the lakes are open [legally] everybody is ricing. . . . They want to get in there and make all the money they can make. I could just say they are greedy now. Long time ago people wasn't like that. They took their time ricing. They got just as much when they took their time."[89]

Such new competition has been especially difficult for older ricers, used to a more leisurely pace. Said George McGeshick: "It's hard on the elders because they could only go out for a little while; they can't stand that boat ride all day like the young people. I know, when I go out, my feet get tired pushing, and [my wife's] shoulders get tired knocking it in." Some also feel that, as greed partly replaced traditional Indian sharing, trust within the community broke down, precluding the communal spirit once prevailing in the rice camps. For instance, in the days "before there were padlocks," said Fred Jones: "Some guys maybe have two boats ricing time, you know; and one guy didn't have no boat, well he'd go down there, he'd walk over there and tell them, 'Well, if you ain't got no boat, you can have that boat of mine.' "[90]

Some changes in Ojibway culture have discouraged the family move to a rice camp. When automobiles replaced teams and wagons, commuting to the rice lake on a daily basis became possible, precluding the need to drag cooking gear and small children to the lakeside (fig. 15). Despite these changes for practical reasons, the spirit of the harvest persists. On many reservations, people still rise with the sun, breakfast, gather in front of their houses to chat, load equipment on their cars, assign their small children to babysitters, then depart in a caravan to drive to the rice lake—not much different from the daily events of earlier ricing. Rather than attending community meetings to learn what ricing areas have been put off limits by the rice chief, harvesters exchange news informally as to the location of good or poor ricing spots. Instead of attending an evening dance near shore, ricers with cash in their hands might celebrate in local taverns but still are up early the next morning to rice again.[91]

A generally happy time, rice harvesting not surprisingly induces feelings of nostalgia. In 1855 Kagagengs, a L'Anse (Michigan) Ojibway, related to Johann Kohl the long story of a vision he had following his mother's death. When the German traveler asked whether he had dreamt of his mother since then, Kagagengs replied: "Yes . . . every autumn, at the time of the rice crop, I dream of her, that I am going on the path of the dead, and see her and speak with her."[92]

Above all, people identify wild rice as a symbol of what it means to be Ojibway. Ernie Landgren of Nett Lake said, "There's a feeling you get out there

Fig. 15. Nett Lake ricers, 1971, preparing to drive the day's harvest to a local processor for sale or home to finish in their yards

that's hard to get other places. You're close to Mother Nature, seeing things grow and harvesting the results of the water and sun and winds. . . . We sort of touch our roots when we're among the rice plants."[93]

Even without the rice camps, the late August harvest has remained a time of special social interaction. This spirit is evident, for example, in Earl Nyholm's recollections of ricing at Bad River during his youth in the early 1950s. As the Nyholms, Ojibway from L'Anse, had strong familial ties with Odanah people, Earl traveled west by bus during ricing season to stay with his mother's great-aunt, Julia Sibayash Bennet, in her old frame house on Kakagon Road. He and other visiting relatives were up by 5:00 A.M. each day. There was no electricity, and two buckets of water—one for drinking, the other for washing up—had to be filled from a well near the Bad River and hauled to the kitchen. Over breakfast—oatmeal with a little grease on it and black coffee—people picked their ricing partners for the day. By 7:00 A.M. all the ricers gathered at the landing, waiting for a tow to the rice fields, a trip of about forty-five minutes. Nyholm remembered Jim La Fernier of Red Cliff Reservation running a kind of charter service with an old eighteen-foot launch that reminded

Fig. 16. Joe Pete and his wife parching rice at Lac Vieux Desert, Wisconsin, 1941; the use of a rectangular metal trough and broom is unusual.

him of the *African Queen*. The inboard towed up to eight boats at a time, returning to retrieve them in the early afternoon.[94]

Although the Bad River people were settled in permanent frame houses, said Nyholm, Kakagon Road resembled a rice camp at that time of year. There was always a pile of green rice drying on a sheet or canvas in every yard, and alongside each house some older woman parched the rice (fig. 16). Nyholm remembered that in the evenings older people collected in his great-aunt's house, conversing only in the Ojibway language. Several women in their eighties wore long black dresses, black caps or bandannas, and white aprons, and sat in rocking chairs playing cribbage and chewing snuff, using baking powder cans as spittoons. On the cool August evenings, the old wood stove blazed, with wild rice cooking on its top. ("'It really was a smell you don't get ahold of anymore.") Concluded Nyholm, "It seemed that the old people really enjoyed that time of the year. . . . They would really go about the whole process like it was sacred; they really put themselves into it."

Although the traditional camps have mostly disappeared, the Ojibway recognize ricing as a link with their past. Some Indians, especially urban dwellers who have spent little time on their home reservations, have taken up ricing late in life as a means of reestablishing their roots. One man ricing at Leech Lake in about 1965 took his small sons out on the lake just to show them how it was done. They spent all day harvesting only twenty pounds, all of which they kept. Where signs of a cultural renaissance are evident among the Ojibway today, the urge to return to the rice camp may be among them.[95]

way to sell rice for supplemental income, most had modest, informal rice dealings. In the 1960s, when paddy production became a reality and wild rice became big business, the small size and informality of Indian sales became so disadvantageous that many people stopped selling rice altogether. When Kathren Borgelt sampled public opinion about the introduction of paddy rice at Nett Lake, one resident told her, "It will knock out the husband and wife who go out ricing." This reply reflects as much a *cultural* as an economic concern. Generally the more conservative Ojibway—those closest to the traditional culture—are less involved in selling their wild rice than the more entrepreneurial Indian citizens.[2]

Statistics from White Earth are revealing. A 1937 survey of the type of housing families occupied reflected several patterns indicating a conservative-progressive split in the community. The conservatives most likely still spoke principally or exclusively the native language, eschewed mission churches for the medicine lodge, adhered to a traditional diet, and showed greater efforts at self-support, with less dependence on government handouts. (Homemade furniture was an indicator.) That fall, forty-three of the 150 families on the reservation went ricing. By far the preponderance of the ricers lived in tarpaper shacks—thirty-five versus eight families living in more modern, frame houses. Although both groups saved at least some rice for their own use, only four of the thirty-one families actively selling rice in the informal wild rice market at White Earth lived in the poorer housing. Since only eight families who riced lived in frame houses, this total meant that an additional nineteen "progressive" families were no longer harvesters of wild rice but simply brokers in the business, interested in profits, however small they might be.[3]

The cards seem stacked against Ojibway wishing to assume a greater share of the wild rice market. The industry is now almost completely out of their hands, and they will probably suffer economically from this monopoly. (Estimates of the Indian share of the market in 1986 were as low as 2 to 3 percent.) Because governments and courts still fail to take decisive positions, the situation may already have reached that point of no return: "Unresolved issues suggest that the wild rice controversy will continue until governmental initiatives lead to a comprehensive resource management policy that deals with the various interests at stake, or until one of the interests succeeds in dominating wild rice cultivation, processing, and distribution."[4]

While economic and legal issues remain unresolved, threats to the wild rice crop and the Indians' rights to harvest it continue. Some of these, such as tourism, are recent. Other problems, like fluctuating water levels and pollution, have been around for some time.

TOURISM

In 1986 Congress passed legislation adding Long Island in Lake Superior to the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, managed by the National Park Service. Of the twenty-two islands in the group, both Madeline and Long islands had been excluded from the establishing bill (1967)—the former because it was considerably populated and developed, the latter by accident. The southernmost of the Apostles, Long Island is a narrow, 2½-acre sandy spit forming the northern boundary of Chequamegon Bay and sheltering it somewhat from the ravages of lake action. According to changes in Lake Superior water levels and currents bearing sand, the island has at times been connected to the mainland, forming a peninsula—hence the Ojibway have referred to it as the sandy point where the water breaks.

Wisconsin Democrats in Congress introduced legislation intended to add the island to the park system. In economically depressed northern Wisconsin, the national lakeshore had proven a business boom to the nearby town of Bayfield, much less so to Ashland and Washburn, situated too far south on Chequamegon Bay to reap much benefit from increased tourism. With two marinas in place, a third under construction, and projections for increased boat activity in the area generally, Ashland and Washburn business interests clearly would be served by Long Island's incorporation in the national lakeshore. The island provided spectacular long beaches on both sides, but access was legally prohibited. Because it had been recently discovered as a breeding area for the piping plover—an endangered species—drafters of the legislation were able to enlist the support of the National Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, and the Sierra Club, despite the clear intentions of developing the island for recreation. Ignoring the lack of much local enthusiasm at a preliminary public hearing in Ashland and a resolution of the Bad River Ojibway tribal council strongly opposing the bill, its sponsors represented it as having broad support.

The Indians were justifiably concerned. To begin with, Long Island has played a vital role in their culture as historic, sacred land. The site of a key battle with the Dakota, it was also an important resting place in the Ojibway legend of the migration along the south shore of Lake Superior. Sacred songs mentioning the peninsula in this trek were known by priests of the medicine lodge as far west as White Earth Reservation, who had never seen Long Island but knew it from oral tradition.[5]

Perhaps even more important were the ecological and economic implications of the legislation, for the island acts effectively as a protective reef for wild rice stands in the Kakagon sloughs, just to its southeast, where Ojibway have harvested rice each fall for more than a century. In recent years the rice crop has shown signs of deterioration, and the increase of motorboat traffic,

mostly by non-Indians fishing for sport in the sloughs, has been suspected as one culprit. Because passages through the sloughs are technically navigable state waters, the Ojibway are powerless to control boat traffic. Excessive boat speeds can effect wake damage to the wild rice plant, to say nothing of water pollution by gasoline engines. Additional boat traffic to Long Island is certain to spill over into the rice beds, hence the tribe's concern.

Various conservation groups testifying on behalf of the bill focused attention exclusively on saving the piping plovers' nesting areas, while congressional supporters, in what seems a contradictory position, extolled potential tourist attractions of the island—not only its fine beaches but also the abandoned lighthouse, which might be restored as a historic site. They rehearsed the island's importance in American history, beginning with the missionaries and fur traders. Since the Bad River Ojibway were not invited to testify, no one ever mentioned the role of Long Island in Indian history, even though it had once been the homeland of the Ojibway.

Beyond the island's cultural value to the Ojibway generally and to the Bad River band specifically, the economic aspects of the legislation posed a more immediate threat. Particularly in the crucial summer months—exactly when tourism is at its peak in the area—the wild rice plant cannot tolerate pollution or the constant action of boat wakes. Many people at Bad River, with incomes already well below the poverty line, count on wild rice to supplement other food sources and get them through the winter. A few sell modest amounts of rice to tourists passing through the reservation on U.S. Highway 2. As a product harvested on Indian land, this rice costs the taxpayer nothing and, it might be argued, actually decreases federal welfare costs.

Congress passed the bill (H.R. 2182, S. 1019) in 1986, albeit with language more protective than that of the original House version. What the future holds for the Bad River wild rice stands is uncertain, but this example illustrates how the interests of tourism endanger existing rice beds. Earlier, in other locations, whites who bought vacation homes on lakes in the north woods wanted sport fishing, water-skiing, and motorboating, and they frequently weeded out the rice and prevented Indians from harvesting. Should seeding new lakes to increase the crop available be undertaken on public waters, as the Wisconsin DNR and Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission have suggested, restrictions against other types of human activity may be required to ensure proper wild rice growth and Indian access to harvest.

Another threat is the potential for wild ricing to become a totally recreational activity. Wildfowl once hunted for food became so scarce by the late nineteenth century that stiff conservation measures, such as the section of Public Law 430, known as the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1913), were enacted. This law empowered the United States Department of Agriculture to

set open seasons and punish violations, thereby discouraging market shooting. Another solution to that problem, also still in operation, made hunting a totally recreational sport, with licenses and strict time and bag limits; the average duck hunter gets only a small harvest for home consumption. Non-Indians have long been licensed to take part in the wild rice harvest; many of them have found it enjoyable and return to it as a yearly activity. No one has yet seriously offered "ricing for fun" as a lure for tourists, but should the total natural stand of rice on public waters diminish, there is bound to be increased pressure on existing beds, as more ricers, Indians and whites alike, compete for the crop.[6]

POLLUTION

Throughout the treaty period, the federal government offered the Indians goods, services, or cash in exchange for timber, minerals, or food resources it wished to exploit. Government promises of exchange were not always kept. As whites clear-cut virgin forests, drilled for and extracted minerals, or otherwise removed what they wanted from the land, they were rarely careful to clean up, often leaving ore tailings, sawmill wastes, and other ecologically unsound residue. In many instances such pollution has had an adverse effect on traditional food resources. After the 1873 Treaty Number Three opened the Rainy River area to settlement, for example, wastes from lumbermills in addition to commercial overfishing by non-Indians using pound nets severely damaged the breeding population of sturgeon. As wastes from the Fort Frances, Ontario, pulpmill were pumped into the river from 1905 to 1910, the spawning grounds of the fish were further polluted, causing a decrease in sturgeon population from which it has never fully recovered. Mercury dumping by the Reed International paper mill at Dryden, Ontario, has caused pollution to the English-Wabigoon-Winnipeg river system so severe that all commercial fishing has been banned. This deprived the Grassy Narrows Ojibway of food and income directly and indirectly: in the wake of the disaster, summer resorts were closed, and Indians were no longer hired as fishing guides.[7]

In negotiating treaties with Indians, the government usually selected for reservations land it foresaw serving no other useful purpose. The land given the Menominee, for example, was of no particular use for farming because it was so rocky. It is a great irony that a century later the Wolf River batholith attracted attention as a potential dumpsite for nuclear wastes. As crystalline rock has been judged the most suitable containment for storing nuclear waste material, it is not surprising that five of the twelve sites initially selected by the U.S. Department of Energy turned out to be on Indian land. The Menominee have protested the selection as a violation of their treaty rights and