



**ISSUE 27 : FALL 2024**  
**OPEN RIVERS :**  
**RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY**

**PROSPECT**

<https://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary journal of public scholarship rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X



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ISSN 2471-190X

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FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

# BIG STONE LAKE STORIES: CROSSING BORDERS

By Jonee Kulman Brigham

*Editor's note: This feature article has been peer-reviewed.*

This is a story of an environmental art project called Big Stone Lake Stories that took place at a summer camp in 2018 in western Minnesota. Big Stone Lake Stories is an application of an Earth Systems Journey, which is a model for guiding participants into greater interconnection with their environment. I developed the model in 2011 as part of my environmental art practice and graduate work in liberal studies exploring the intersection of art, story, and infrastructure. Earth Systems Journey is foremost a form of

participatory public art and secondly an environmental education curriculum model. Big Stone Lake Stories is one of over a dozen applications of the Earth Systems Journey model. Each application is adapted to the specific people, place, and program where it occurs, and with each iteration new insights emerge.

The concept of crossing borders is inherent in an Earth System Journey as it follows water infrastructure across borders of property lines,



*Image by Brett Whaley via Flickr. [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).*

city boundaries, and watershed districts. In Big Stone Lake Stories, the theme of crossing borders took on added meanings prompted by the unique border-water geography of Big Stone Lake itself, which divides two states and sits near a continental divide, and the interpretation of borders in the composition of the journey experience. Other border-crossing themes emerged from the lived experience of the journey. In this first-hand account of the project, I bring my point of view as an artist and journey guide, as well as my

own and others' reflections on our relationship to water and land and how Big Stone Lake both connects and separates us. After introducing the Earth Systems Journey model, I describe the Big Stone Lake Stories project from initial planning stages through the journey itself and conclude with reflections about the project. Rather than offer a comprehensive description of the camp planning and itinerary, I share highlights of the project and emphasize the role of literal and conceptual border crossings.

## The Earth Systems Journey Model: Infrastructure as Border-Crossing

The mission of Earth Systems Journey is to “help youth connect and contribute to the world around them” (Brigham 2014). As defined on its [website](#), an Earth Systems Journey (ESJ) is

a curriculum framework for art-led, experiential, place-based environmental education about environmental flows, (such as water, air, energy or material) through the school building and grounds. ESJ is an approach that teaches ecological and environmental content, principles, analysis and decision skills in way that shows how human-engineered systems are integrated with natural systems. At its core, the design of an Earth Systems Journey is to make a special journey starting from a place of personal experience, following a flow of interest to its source and destination, as far as you can, so that when you return to where you started, your view of that place and its flows is transformed by knowing the larger story that runs through it and the places, and people and natural elements that live in relation to it. What makes the journey “special” is its composition as a transformative experience paying attention to props, interactive and expressive activities, participatory storytelling, and time to reflect and integrate the

experience into a personal story. By using the natural learning form of story, complex systems can be made both engaging, and comprehensible. (Brigham 2014)

While an Earth Systems Journey can explore any number of resource flows, this article refers to the exploration of water, which was the resource of interest for the project described.

An Earth Systems Journey is based on the insights of systems thinking and the power of story specifically informed by the concept of a “hero’s journey” as defined by Joseph Campbell ([1949] 2008). The primary insights from systems thinking that the model seeks to reveal are that everything is interconnected and interdependent, even though our modern life often conceals those interconnections. For example, tap water appears to come from the faucet and disappear down the drain, but it is really a hidden thread of connections across upstream and downstream water infrastructure and landscapes. It is at this point of water use, such as water pouring from a faucet into a sink, that the journey and story of water begins for participants in an Earth Systems Journey.

The design of the journey is based on the structure of the Hero’s Journey and is adapted



to create a quest to discover how water interconnects our human environment to all the surrounding human and natural landscape, as shown in Figure 1. The names of the design elements shown in the diagram are not shared with participants, but rather are used to form a common language for the team designing the journey or reflecting on its design. The journey begins at the top of the circle, at the “home place,” usually a familiar learning environment to the participants, such as a classroom or camp facility. Within the home place is a designated “flow node,” a point within the home place that is familiar and used by participants and which will be the focal point for the journey. This is often a classroom sink, a drinking fountain, or, if following stormwater, a storm drain in a school yard. As in a Hero’s Journey, there is a call to adventure, often in the form of a question like “Where does the water come from and where does it go?” This launches the journey and, after a preparation phase to gather tools, knowledge, and build anticipation, the journey is initiated by traveling to a location upstream of the flow node to follow the flow of the water. This represents the first major border crossing of the journey.

Border crossings are a key part of the hero’s journey structure—whether physical or conceptual. In an Earth Systems Journey, border crossings are major turning points in the experience, as shown in the horizontal line in figure 1, and represent crossing from the familiar human-centered world to the unfamiliar world centered on water flows across a landscape and through infrastructure. Additional border crossings continue after joining the water on its journey through the landscape as human-made and natural infrastructure cross jurisdictional and conceptual borders, bridging the flow of water as it travels across property, city, and watershed boundaries. As the water flows, it also crosses conceptual borders as its identity as a river or lake or aquifer transforms into an identity as commodified water, pumped, moved, treated, measured, delivered, and sold to a customer. At the bottom of the circle, another

conceptual boundary between upstream and downstream occurs at the flow node; for example, in a sink, this conceptual boundary is crossed in the short stretch of water between a faucet and a drain.

At the left of the circle, the “arrival” stage marks crossing the border again to return from the exploration of water flows to the home place where the journey started. Then to complete the journey composition, participants must integrate the story of what they learned and take some action to bring value from the journey back to their community, represented by the “remember and respond” phases in the diagram. These final stages often take the form of participants sharing the story publicly and conducting a service project to embody their identity as water stewards.

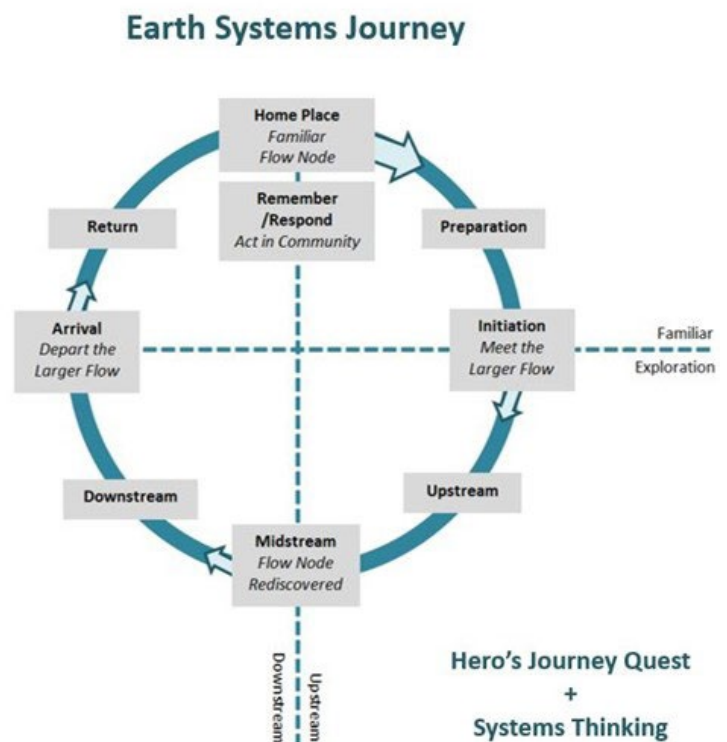


Fig. 1. Earth Systems Journey Model. This diagram of the Earth Systems Journey model is inspired by Joseph Campbell’s concept of the Hero’s Journey ([1949] 2008). The Earth Systems Journey model was first published in 2012 under the original name “Systems Journey.” Image courtesy of Full Spring Studio, LLC.

## Project Invitation and Research

After exploring the Earth Systems Journey website in early 2018, Don Sherman, a Big Stone County artist, teacher, and farmer, invited me to work with him in an art residency that summer to engage youth with Big Stone Lake and regional water issues. He'd been looking for an artist that could help integrate art, science, and water stewardship from an interdisciplinary perspective. As a place-adapted model, an Earth Systems Journey always involves gaining an understanding of local hydrological and cultural history which shape the composition and storytelling of the project. This research also serves to engage local experts and residents.

Big Stone Lake forms the lower edge of the “bump” on the western border of Minnesota as shown in the key map in the corner of figure 2. At

a glance, it looks like a river as so many curvilinear state borders are, but it is actually a lake—a long string bean of a lake, 26 miles in length and a mile wide. But Big Stone Lake used to be a river. About ten thousand years ago, Glacial Lake Agassiz covered parts of what are now Minnesota, North Dakota, and Canada. It was an inland sea that spanned roughly 123,500 square miles and made huge impacts on the land. Over time, as pressure built up along the southern edge of Lake Agassiz along the continental divide, it pushed through the earthen dam creating what is now called Traverse Gap and releasing the powerful Glacial River Warren. Warren gushed forth with such force and volume that it carved out the entire five-mile width of the Minnesota River Valley, including what is now Big Stone Lake. As the glacial lake drained, the water flow reduced,



Figure 2. Big Stone Lake Stories Map. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.



leaving the valley that flanks Big Stone Lake and the Minnesota River (Ryan Bjerke, pers. comm. April 28, 2023, Minnesota State University 2023, Big Stone County Historical Society 2020).

As a border water between Minnesota and South Dakota, Big Stone Lake draws residents and visitors from both states to its shores. The difference in governance and identity across state lines is countered by a common interest in the lake and its welfare. Citizens for Big Stone Lake, for example, is an organization that represents common interests from both sides of the border. Both sides of the border also include fertile farmland. Big Stone County is over 70 percent farmland, and its largest crops today are soybeans and corn (Minnesota Department of Agriculture). The lake attracts tourists and offers camping along

its shores at Big Stone Lake Park and abundant fishing opportunities (Explore Minnesota).

Historically, Big Stone Lake and the Minnesota River into which it flows were also home to the Dakota people. These same waters became tools of border-making between the tribes and the United States, used in multiple cession treaties that increasingly diminished Dakota land. Ultimately, the Dakota Expulsion Act of 1863 eliminated all reservations for Dakota in Minnesota (Minnesota Historical Society). Through the treaty of 1867, the Lake Traverse Reservation west of Minnesota was established for the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of Dakota, 22 years before South Dakota became a state (ehistory.org). The reservation is mostly in north-eastern South Dakota, just across the border from Minnesota.

## Project Design and Planning

The design of the camp responded to the hydrology, cultural history, and geography of the area. The scale of Big Stone Lake dominates and defines the areas around it, and it naturally became a focal element of the journey design, both as a body of water and also as a border water. Big Stone Lake is a waterway of transitions across borders between rivers from its head to its mouth, and between states along its centerline which is the border between Minnesota and South Dakota. As a way of knowing place, the design of the journey took on a practice of border crossings, some planned and some emergent through the experience of the camp. Big Stone Lake's border identity is most obvious spatially in its current role as a border water, but the border-water identity also has roots in history, before Minnesota and South Dakota became states. Even further back, the dramatic story of the Glacial River Warren breaking through the edge of Lake Agassiz along the continental divide marks a turning point in hydrologic history and

is the founding border crossing that creates this lake-river landscape.

Understanding the cultural history of the place influenced the formation of the team, the inclusion of perspectives, and the recruitment of campers, with participation of teachers and students from the nearby Tiospa Zina Tribal School. Throughout the planning there was an emphasis on using this project to strengthen connections between local artists, local experts, local youth, and the community to build capacity for continuing these kind of projects. Thus, the team of collaborators grew, each with a voice to share about the places we visited or the ways we explored those places through culture, art, science, and stewardship.

Most of the project team convened for pre-camp planning in July 2018. At this time, I had my first contact with the beautiful, slightly green waters of Big Stone Lake and with the places that would form the elements of the Earth Systems Journey



as shown on the map of figure 2. The home place was Bonanza Education Center (BEC), located midway along the eastern shore of Big Stone Lake, where campers met each morning of the week-long camp. Within BEC, the flow node that would launch the journey to follow water was a utility sink in the lower level and a gathering stage nearby. Special points of interest on the upstream portion of the water story included the continental divide at the headwaters of the Little Minnesota River, an artesian well where the ground water rises from the earth, a well pump at BEC, and the pipes leading to the utility sink. On the downstream side, significant points of interest included the septic system, the Big Stone Lake beach at BEC, a boat ride across the lake,

an overlook part way down the lake, and the dam where the water from Big Stone Lake becomes the head of the Minnesota River.

Circulating the opportunity through local networks, the team focused on recruiting middle school youth interested in the combination of arts, science, and the outdoors. We also encouraged participation from youth who might not be able to afford a summer arts camp without support (which we were able to offer). The local 4-H chapter managed the registration. In all, we had 21 participants, most of whom were aged 10–12. Six of the campers were Indigenous and recruited through connections with Tiospa Zina Tribal School.



*Fig. 3. Campers gather on the wooden stage that was the home base of the journey in Big Stone County, Minnesota, 2018. Image courtesy of John White.*

# The Journey

Like all Earth Systems Journeys, we designed the camp so that campers would participate in a week of art and education activities that involved appreciating and learning about the interconnected water system and the history of the place, while also connecting with local

artists. This camp culminated in presentations to Citizens for Big Stone Lake, in engagement with community members and tourists at Cornfest (a local festival), in a website, and in an ArcGIS StoryMap featuring images, stories, and video from the week.

## Day 1: Gathering and Engaging with Place

An Earth Systems Journey begins with connecting to place and each other, preparing for the journey, and being called to adventure. The first day of camp started with the typical camp activities of orientation and introductions. Campers received sketchbooks, colored pencils, and iPads for photography. The photographs were to stand alone as creative expressions but would also be used in a GIS StoryMap included in the project website, linked to locations and appreciations of Big Stone Lake.

Midmorning, we gathered in the lower level of the Bonanza Education Center in what would become our home place and reference point for the journey. While the utility sink in the basement had been chosen as the interpretive point for where water flows in the building (the flow node), it was in a small room which was not amenable to gathering. So we paired the sink with a ceremonial place to gather around water. As shown in figure 3, in the middle of the lower level was a circular wooden platform with inlaid patterns extending to the concrete floor around it in the form of a large compass rose. Above this wooden platform was a circular two-story space connected to the main level so that the platform had a sense of being a stage. This stage is where the Big Stone Lake Stories water journey began. Here, we gathered around an empty water vessel I had placed at the center next to an empty bucket and a ladle. As the Journey Guide, I introduced the quest for our water journey: to explore the

water of the place, including in this building, and to learn where it comes from, where it goes, and how we can help protect the water. By the end of camp, we would share the story with the community so they could understand their local water connections, too.

To begin, we needed to connect to the water flowing in the building. A team of campers used the empty bucket to gather water from the sink in the nearby utility room and placed the filled bucket on our stage. In a ceremonial activity called *Words for Water* shown in figure 4, I invited each camper to scoop water from the bucket and pour it into the vessel at the center of the stage as they spoke some words about water, such as names for water, how they valued water, or questions they had of water. The ceremonial nature of this, with one camper conducting the ritual while the others listened in a circle, was intentional. We too often take water for granted, but this week we physically placed the humble water from the utility sink at the center of our story and honored our connections to water in all its forms.

After the water itself, our next guests were two representatives from Tiospa Zina Tribal School (TZTS) who are also members of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of the Lake Traverse Reservation across the lake in South Dakota. Mike Peters, director of Dakota Studies at TZTS, shared Dakota history and cultural perspectives,





*Fig. 4. A camper participates in the participatory artwork, “Words for Water.” Big Stone County, Minnesota, 2018. Image courtesy of John White.*



connecting stories of Big Stone Lake with Dakota star teachings from caves downstream in the Twin Cities. Siyo Peters, human resources director from TZTS, shared Native poetry as she ladled water into the vessel. Like the often invisible and undervalued water of our places, Indigenous peoples are also too often ignored. Thus, our journey began with acknowledging water as well as Indigenous peoples and their original and continuing knowledge of this place.

After lunch we moved outside and unrolled a large canvas satellite map of the Big Stone Lake area on the ground as shown in figure 5. The only markings beyond the photographic record were the watershed edges. Campers used the forms and features on the map to try to find where they were and where they lived. We began adding to

the map by stitching our current camp location with a red “X.” Although the state border at the center of Big Stone Lake was not marked, the different timing of the satellite maps for each of the states hinted at the border, with the water abruptly shifting from algae green one side to a darker, clearer water on the other side of the border.

Cassy Olson, the coordinator at Bonanza, led the campers to the artesian well hidden in the woods that started a small stream leading to the lake. We followed the stream down to the beach where the campers had their first encounter with Big Stone Lake, wading into the water, skipping rocks, and making their own Big Stone Lake map in the sand. As they dug a long trench to represent the lake it filled with water from the



*Fig. 5. Author and campers gather around the canvas map which is the basis of the “Land Markings” artwork. Big Stone County, Minnesota, 2018. Image courtesy of John White.*



lake itself. There they were, using the lake and its shore to map the lake and its shore. Digging and drawing in the sand, like other nature play, is a great way to bond kids (and adults) to a place. Their marks become part of the environment, and by extension they do, too.

Part of the camp's purpose was to connect kids to artists and art activities. I introduced some of my artwork, pointing out that camps like this are part

of my art practice. Then the campers met Don Sherman, the camp organizer, who also made paper from invasive plants in the lake, and musician Lee Kanten, who shared his new song about Big Stone Lake. Making paper with Don and music with Lee were threaded into the afternoons of each day, along with camp photography by artist John White, building relationships between campers and artists in their community.



*Fig. 6. Campers participate in the “Continental Divide” ceremonial artwork with hydrologist Ryan Bjerke (center). Big Stone County, Minnesota, 2018. Image courtesy of John White.*

## Day 2: Upstream to Midstream Travels

On the second day, we joined Ryan Bjerke, area hydrologist from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, upstream at Browns Valley. After we pulled out our canvas map again, Ryan explained where we were and the important glacial history that happened here, where Glacial River Warren burst through an earthen dam releasing waters from Glacial Lake Agassiz that then carved the Minnesota River Valley and Big Stone Lake itself. We were also standing at the Laurentian Continental Divide. In a performative artwork called *Continental Divide*, we placed the map on the dividing line, and campers lined up on either side, pouring water in opposite directions, either bound for the Gulf of Mexico to the south or for Lake Winnipeg to the north. Further downstream, at a scenic overlook, campers could visually connect the story of River Warren to the vast valley below and imagine the glacial river at its peak: nearly five miles wide and filling the valley. They sat to sketch while Lee sang our lake song. Back at camp, Ryan showed maps of Lake Agassiz to complete the glacial story.

After exploring the expansive scale of hydrological history upstream from camp, we brought it back down to the place we'd started: where did the water for the utility sink come from and where did it drain to after use? Ryan showed cross sections of the landscape revealing the groundwater and aquifers below the surface.

Cara Greger, Big Stone Lake State Park assistant manager, joined us to show campers how water actually gets to our utility sink. Roughly 50 feet from the building was a well marked by a simple cylinder emerging from the ground. Removing the well cap, we peered down to the pipes and workings that drew the water from below. We went into the utility sink room to see the exposed pipes coming from the wall to the sink faucet. There it was: the water that was part of the hydrological cycle throughout the landscape was ultimately directly connected to the water from the tap.

We then considered the sink drain: where does the water go next? The waste pipes in the utility room disappeared below the floor. We went outside to see them travel slightly down the hill to where Cara pointed out a short cylinder protruding from the ground. This was the inspection pipe for the septic system. She explained that the dirty water and sewage drains from the utility sink and other water fixtures in the building and enters an underground septic tank where liquids and solids separate. Then the water moves into a drainage field and eventually safely returns to the local water system. The solids must be pumped out of the septic system every couple of years. The water in the sink came from the land and it returned to the land, and eventually the lake.



## Midstream Reflections

That day, we traveled from miles upstream to our spot at the middle of the lake and we engaged with over ten thousand years of history. That was a lot to take in, and campers enjoyed relaxing with some kickball, paper making, music, and a closing circle as the day concluded.

It was a lot to take in for me, too, so that night, at my bed and breakfast along the lake, I walked down the stairs and sat at the end of the dock to center myself by the water. I grew up on (and in) a lake and I find that is where I feel most at peace. I have a friend who is also a lake person and we both recognize the lake-ache from being away from big water too long. We both have memories of childhood summers spent half underwater,

with the sparkles and silver ripples above, and the blue-green muffled soundscape below. The surface of a lake is a magical threshold. Right at the edge on a dock, or with my head just above water, the lake envelopes me, calling me home.

That night, on the dock above the water, I thought about the lake's glacial history, the abundance of fish and rich soils that come from that history, its border identity, its central place in its watershed, its cultural significance to original and descendant Dakota people and settlers, and its personal meaning to me or anyone seeking the calm of its presence. How could a lake, that is also a river, be so many stories all at once? I let myself consider this in a poem I wrote on the spot.

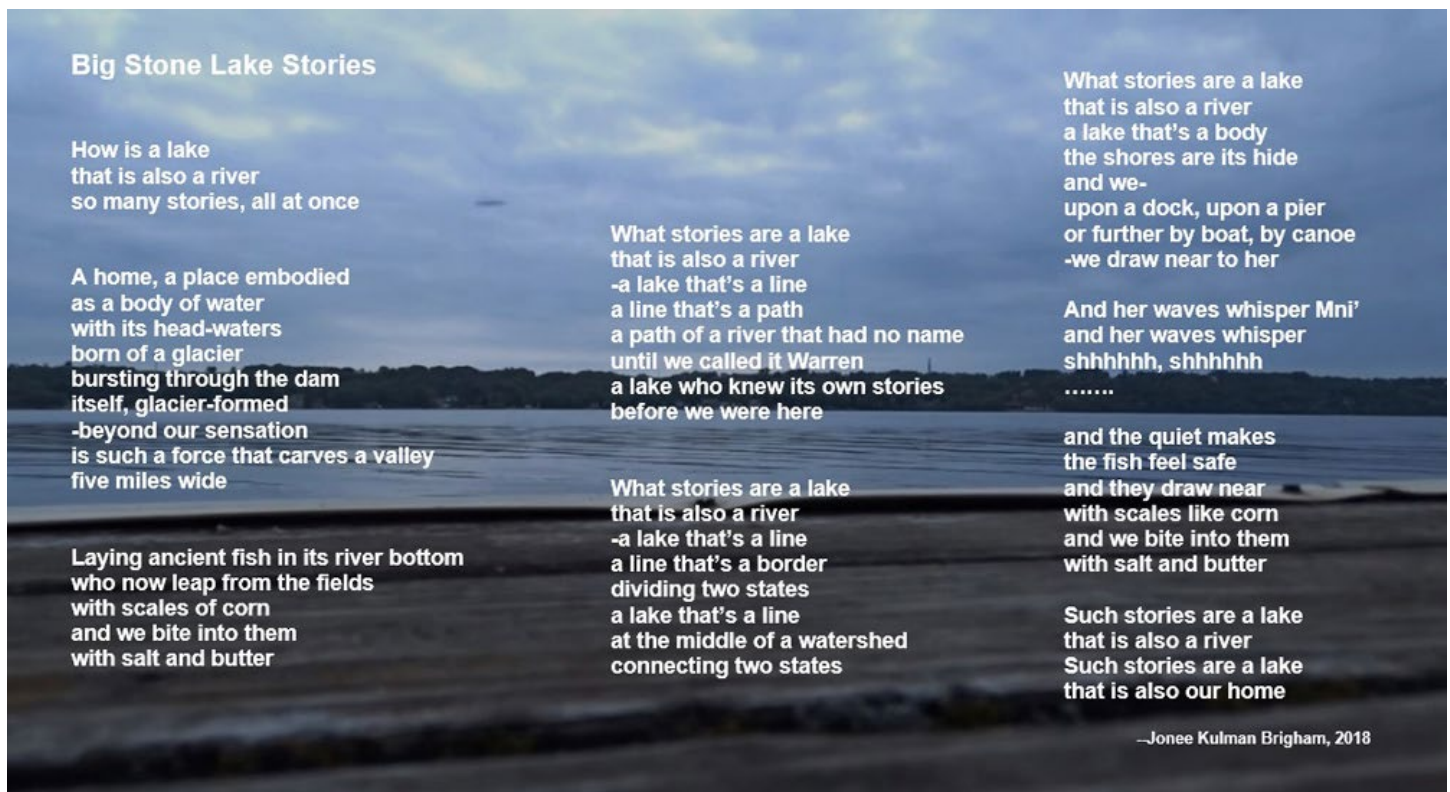


Fig. 7. "Big Stone Lake Stories." Poem and image by Jonee Kulman Brigham, 2018. Big Stone County, Minnesota. The composition was also published as a video poem, [read by the author](#).



## Day 3: At the Lake and Across the Border

The plan for day three was to have two groups: one half would stay back and learn about fishing while the other group would take a boat across the lake to explore the other side, including a scout camp. Then we'd switch and then we'd make art in the afternoon. The first group boarded the boat to cross the lake which also meant crossing the state border. I went with the first group in the boat that Lee was steering. As we were traveling across, I asked Lee to stop the boat. After writing the poem the night before, I realized that pausing halfway across the lake to



*Fig. 8. Leaders (Don Sherman shown) and campers making temporary environmental art while stranded across the border from camp. Roberts County, South Dakota, 2018. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*



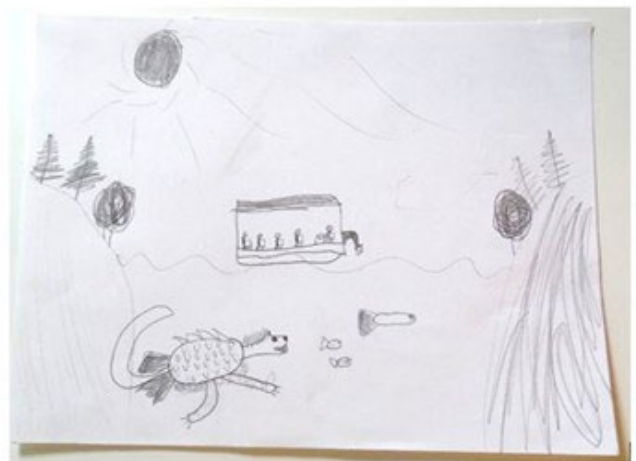
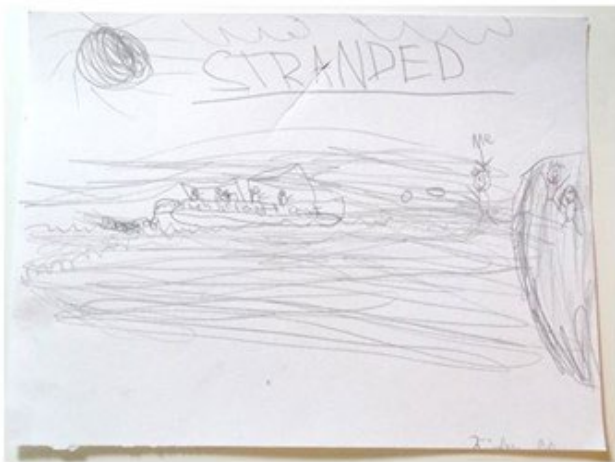
contemplate the invisible border crossing would be an opportunity to see the lake in more ways. Lee turned off the motor, stopping the boat halfway across and about midway along the lake's length. I recited the poem, being extra quiet at the part where the lake speaks, and the real waves seemed to *shhhhh*, *shhhhh* along with the reading. We all paused to absorb this quiet moment at the center of everything. Then Lee restarted the motor, and we proceeded to cross the border.

Now in South Dakota, we toured the Boy Scout camp, got a photography lesson from John White, and explored the shoreline as we waited for the boat to pick us up and return us to back to Minnesota. However, the boat didn't come.



*Fig. 9. Campers on and around the dam at the point that divides Big Stone Lake from the Minnesota River. Big Stone County, Minnesota, 2018. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*

A part had broken on the motor and we were temporarily stuck on the west side. While we tried to calm the campers about being stranded, we also saw how very exciting this was to them. Somehow, being stuck across the lake from home just reinforced the lake's identity as a border place with two sides, and we were on the wrong one. We passed the time playing by the water, taking pictures, and making little land art sculptures. Finally, the repaired boat returned and we rejoined the rest of the campers.



*Fig. 10. Many campers who had been “stranded” on the other side of the river, chose to draw that scene as one of their favorite parts of camp. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*



## Day 4: Downstream and Reflecting on the Journey

The next day, we carpooled downstream to the other end of the lake to the dam that manages the lake elevation. We walked across it and stood at the center on the threshold of the lake's mouth and the start of the Minnesota River. A little downstream, we learned about the importance of inspecting a boat for aquatic invasive species so that we can all protect the water. We stopped at the pavilion by the south end of the lake and took some time to journal, practicing observing with all our senses and our emotions.

Back at camp, we began the process of preparing our water journey story to share with the public. We looked at photographs that campers had

taken throughout the week and each student made a drawing about the journey from their own perspective. Some participated in paper making, and we all ended with music and a closing circle.

Although the camp was not focused on the theme of borders, a sense of the lake as a border-water emerged in some of the drawings, especially drawings by campers that had been stranded (see figure 10). Being delayed on our return had heightened the campers' sense of being across the lake from their home base at BEC. Each of the drawings prominently features the edge between land and water as campers depict themselves waiting for the boat. There is a tension



*Fig. 11. Campers measure as they make designs for rain gardens they proposed at Bonanza Education Center. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*



of anticipation, waiting for the boat to come and allow them to cross back over the border. But the people—and even the underwater lake animals—all appear happy. None of the pictures showed the dashed borderline that is the official

threshold between the states. Instead, the lake is a wide border place, a territory to travel across, inhabited by boats and, in one case, animals that dwell below.

## Day 5: Protecting Water and Preparing Our Story

An Earth Systems Journey includes a stewardship project. Friday morning Adam Kleinschmidt from the Soil and Water Conservation Society came to camp to teach us about stormwater and how we can protect the lake by making a rain garden. Teams of campers collaborated to design the location, size, and plants to include in a rain garden. These designs would be considered by the Bonanza Education Center board as ways to improve the grounds.

On Friday afternoon the campers made final preparations for their community presentations. Some of the campers brought instruments and

joined Lee Kanten to craft a lake story and musical performance. Some campers added stitching to the canvas map to highlight the continental divide and mark the places we went. Others made more paper or drew in their sketchbooks. During the afternoon, sponsors and friends of the camp arrived for a private rehearsal of the story and music performance. They joined the campers and camp leaders in a closing ceremony in the lower level where the camp began. Again, we poured water into the vessel at the center of the wooden stage. This time we shared our wishes and our gratitude for water as a way to end camp.



*Fig. 12. Lee Kanten and campers share poetry, story, and music at the meeting of the Citizens for Big Stone Lake. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*



## Day 6: Community and Cornfest

An Earth Systems Journey culminates with the participants returning from their adventure with a story to bring back as an offering to their community. On Saturday morning, campers and leaders presented the story of the project and performed music at a meeting of the Citizens for Big Stone Lake. Citizens for Big Stone Lake is made up of local people from both sides of the border who share a common interest in the well-being of the lake and promote and implement conservation projects.

Afterward, we headed off to share the project story with the wider community at the annual Cornfest by the lake in Ortonville. Begun in 1931 as a way to boost community spirit, Ortonville's annual Cornfest features a corn feed, a parade, music, and other community activities and displays (City of Ortonville). At our booth along the lake, we offered activities that brought the camp's water stories to the public. Visitors could stitch their favorite place along the lake on the *Land Markings* canvas map, and they often shared the



*Fig. 13. A Cornfest visitor makes a stitch on an island to mark their favorite place on Big Stone Lake as part of the interactive “Land Markings” artwork. Big Stone County, Minnesota, 2018. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*



stories of those places as they found the locations from landmarks and features. Visitors could scoop a ladle of water to pour in the *Words for Water* vessel, adding their appreciation to the water as campers had during the week. Don and a camper taught visitors to make paper from

invasive lake weeds. We also invited the public to add their own Big Stone Lake Stories to the StoryMap by uploading pictures and observations from their phone. On stage, Lee and the performing campers shared the camp's water story and music.

## After Camp Reflections

While some stories were written for the local paper and the [website](#) documents the camp, there is no single definitive nor comprehensive story. This article is just one possible selection of memories and how they intersect the theme of crossing borders. While the camp did not explicitly focus on borders, border themes are inherent in the Earth Systems Journey model and are prominent in the landscape and its history.

Reflecting on the project as a series of border crossings, I can see how those themes emerged in the ways students engaged. After the *Continental Divide* participatory art enactment, I noticed one girl's eyes light up when she made a personal connection, realizing that the sign by her grandpa's house that labeled the continental divide was part of this larger geologic and hydrologic story. Another participant wanted to do the stitching

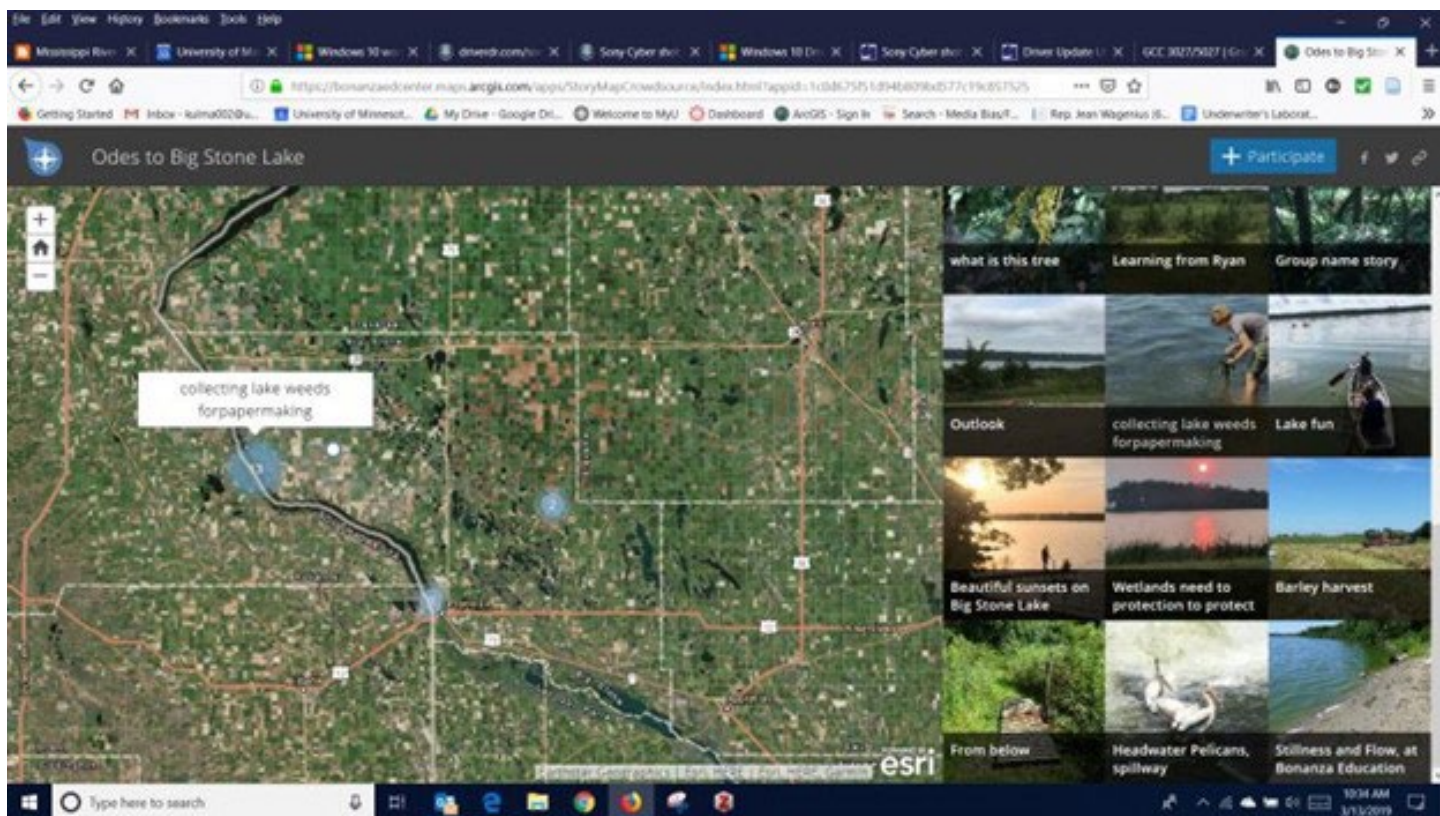


Fig. 14. *Odes to Big Stone Lake*. Screen capture of *GIS StoryMap* shows pictures and comments from campers and Cornfest visitors about Big Stone Lake. Big Stone County, Minnesota, 2018.



of the continental divide on the “Land Markings” artwork. Campers were particularly interested in the landscape at places of transition, where water itself crossed a boundary, such as emerging from an artesian well or passing over a dam. As

## Team Reflections

To reflect further on the border-crossing theme for this article, I asked the camp leaders about how Big Stone Lake and the Big Stone Lake Stories project both connect and separate.

Artist and project coordinator Don Sherman grew up in the area and initiated the camp with a motivation of connecting people to each other and to place. In an interview for the local paper, Don described how the need for social engagement was at the core of his goals for the camp (Dwyer 2018). He elaborated saying, “What I am most proud of is seeing the dial turn away from self and towards others...Our job as artists is to try to ensure a future by discovering pathways to the power of connection, imagination, and social engagement, where science and art combine to form a healthier and more able society” (Don Sherman, email to author, July 7, 2023).

Hydrologist Ryan Bjerke played a central role in helping campers understand the waters of the area, bringing enthusiasm for the stories the land and water hold. He shared many perspectives on both separation and connection. He saw geopolitical separation in the way the lake divides states, and the differing way those states apply water law, even on the same body of water. He also highlighted—as he did in camp—the significance of the Continental Divide that sends area waters either north to Hudson Bay or South to the Gulf of Mexico. The dam used to control water levels also separates a majority of the aquatic life and organisms from crossing the lake-river border. But Ryan also noted the way this water connects us to history, saying that it is a “direct link to the age of glaciers and the landscape-scale changes they wrought.” He points to how the lake, as an

shown in the earlier drawings, their own border crossing on the boat, and the complications with its return, was a particularly dramatic experience of the lake as a border.

aggregator of runoff, connects the surrounding natural and human changes on the land in a watershed that spans three states. Finally, he recognizes the recreation connection that so many feel for Big Stone Lake (Ryan Bjerke, email to author, April 25, 2023)

Jean Kanten, camp grant evaluator, is also a co-owner of Big Stone Lake Fish and Ride along with her husband, Lee Kanten. Their organization sponsored the camp boat ride. Jean reflects, “I can tell you that my experience with the lake has been amplified through my connection with the local nonprofit Big Stone Lake Fish and Ride. We take seniors, vets, people with disabilities, and others who have limited access to the lake out on cruises and fishing excursions—for free thanks to donors and volunteers. For me, that speaks volumes about what a connector the lake can be” (Jean Kanten, email to author, April 25, 2023). In contrast to experiences on either side of the border lake, Jean speaks to being on the water itself and how that enhances a human-lake connection.

Like Jean, Lee Kanten’s reflection focuses on the connecting qualities of the lake. His bond with the lake was reflected in his presence in camp, as well as in the song he wrote for it. His reflections capture a life of experiences with the lake, concluding with the camp experience itself:

I grew up on Big Stone Lake. Learned to swim down at the Pier. I’ve water skied the length of it. We used to swim the mile across it just to get a candy bar at Schmidt’s Landing. I’ve walked the entire perimeter of it, hugging the shoreline up the Minnesota side to Browns Valley, then back

down the South Dakota side past Hartford Beach to Big Stone City and home to Ortonville.

Big Stone Lake is, to me, a supreme connector of people. It constantly draws our eyes and our cameras. It is peaceful and powerful. It is what we who live here really share. All that was evident

during the event we put on at the Bonanza Education Center. Kids learned firsthand the cycle of water, the importance of it, the nature of it...they learned of their shared role in keeping our waters, including Big Stone Lake, clean. (Lee Kanten, email to author, April 25, 2023)

## Remembering a Final Border Crossing

At the end of the camp, as the leaders and campers prepared for the community presentation and display with excited, nervous energy, it was harder for some of the participants to sustain their focus on the projects when there was a kickball field and the lake nearby. Were we

forming a border between our idea of culminating activities and their more active natures?

The three older girls from Tiospa Zina Tribal School and I got into a little game that day. I'd offer an activity, and they would shift the conversation to the lake: "So when can we go down to



*Fig. 15. Lee Kanten steers his boat to carry campers across Big Stone Lake. 2018. Image courtesy of John White.*



the lake?” Repeatedly throughout the day, I heard variations on “Is it time to go to the lake yet?” We were all smiling throughout this exchange, but I could feel their longing for the water. They were stuck inland—across a border of my making—between stories of the lake and the lake itself.

Finally, late in the afternoon, after we’d done the closing ceremony with the water vessel, we all

went down to the lake to say goodbye. It was a high-algae day and one of the boys remarked that it looked like green tea. That didn’t stop them. The campers took off their shoes and waded right in. The three older girls from the Tribal School did too, but they didn’t stop at knee height. They kept going until only their heads were above the green surface, laughing and splashing each other. The borders were gone and they were at home.



*Fig. 16. “Green Tea.” A camper wades into the water, his legs disappearing below the algae-green surface. Big Stone Lake, 2018. Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*

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*Fig. 17. "Immersion." Three older girls from Tiospa Zina Tribal School conclude their camp experience by immersing themselves in the water of Big Stone Lake. 2018.  
Image courtesy of Jonee Kulman Brigham.*



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## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the team, funders, and participants for many things including: giving her the privilege of traveling upstream on the Minnesota River to cross the urban-rural divide as a guest artist to help Don and the community fulfill their vision of the camp; the way donors stepped up to make it possible for any youth, independent of their means, to participate; the trusting collaboration across the many leaders, artists, and educators; and the openness and readiness of the leaders to respond to my desire to have Indigenous voices (which later led to Indigenous camp participants), especially considering that the camp and the areas we journeyed to are on Dakota homeland.

An Earth Systems Journey involves many partners, and this camp was no exception. The camp was made possible by a generous community of contributors. Don Sherman, project coordinator and paper artist for the camp gathered the team as well as the sponsoring organizations and worked with me as the guest teaching artist to compose the elements of the journey. Lee Kanten was the musical artist. Photographer John White helped document the camp as well as teach about photography. Cassy Olson, Bonanza Education Center coordinator, provided environmental education, and hosted the camp, coordinating with Suzanne Souza of 4-H to manage camp recruitment and logistics with the help of other partners. Mike Peters and Siyo Peters of Tiospa Zina Tribal School and members of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of the nearby Lake Traverse Reservation shared Dakota historical and cultural perspectives. Additional team members and presenters can be found at the [Big Stone Lake Stories website](#), which was used during the project for recruitment and updates.

None of this would be possible without sponsors of the camp which included: Southwest Minnesota Arts Council/Legacy Fund, Big Stone Arts Council, Big Stone County Environmental Services, The Big Stone Lake State Park, Big Stone County Board of Commissioners, Big Stone Soil and Water Conservation District, University of Minnesota Extension, Big Stone County 4-H Program, Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships, Big Stone Fish and Ride, and Citizens for Big Stone Lake.

## Recommended Citation

Brigham, Jonee Kulman. 2024. "Big Stone Lake Stories: Crossing Borders." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 27. <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.11733>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.11733>

## About the Author

Jonee Kulman Brigham is an environmental artist and writer at Full Spring Studio, LLC in Maplewood, Minnesota where she makes art that explores the connection and flow between people and the rest of nature. In artists' books, installations, and participatory public art, she uses story or a sequence of events supported by poetry, images, and ceremonial actions. Her Earth Systems Journey public art model is based on her belief that infrastructure, such as water mains and power lines, tells a story of how our daily lives are interconnected with nature—whether from a sink through pipes to the river or from a light switch through wires to the sky. Jonee is also an architect, senior research fellow at the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota, Institute on the Environment Fellow, and citizen-Earthling. While her work crosses boundaries, it is united by her concern for human-nature relationships. See more at [Full Spring Studio](#).