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**GREAT LAKES, PERIL & PROMISE**

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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# CONTENTS

## Introductions

Introduction to Issue 29 | Great Lakes, Peril & Promise  
By Laurie Moberg, Editor, and Joanne Richardson ..... 4

## Features

Our Changing Relationship to Lake Superior, 1975-2025  
By David Beard, Catherine O'Reilly, Joseph M. Lane, Jennifer E. Moore, Timothy Broman, Chance Lasher,  
Robert Dewitt Adams, Luke Moravec, Moira Villiard, Anastasia Bamford, Nan Montgomery, Sheila Packa,  
Krista Sue-Lo Twu, and Jennifer Brady ..... 7

Rights of Nature and the Lake Erie Bill of Rights  
By Sheryl Cunningham ..... 48

## Geographies

Misi-zaaga'iganing (Mille Lacs Lake)  
By Travis Zimmerman ..... 63

## Perspectives

Looking for a US 'climate haven' away from disaster risks?  
By Julie Arbit, Brad Bottoms, and Earl Lewis ..... 70

## Primary Sources

Climate Change Threatens Drinking Water Quality Across The Great Lakes  
By Gabriel Filippelli, and Joseph D. Ortiz ..... 76

GEOGRAPHIES

# MISI-ZAAGA'IGANING (MILLE LACS LAKE)

By Travis Zimmerman

*Minnesota is largely defined by its cultural and geographic relationships to its lakes, large and small. Lake Superior, on Minnesota's north shore, is part of the chain of North American Great Lakes that are well known and internationally iconic. Yet, Mille Lacs Lake, the second-largest lake in Minnesota, is no less impressive and culturally relevant.*

*In "Misi-zaaga'iganing (Mille Lacs Lake)," Travis Zimmerman uses the Mille Lacs Indian*

*Trading Post historical site to explore the social and political history of the region. Today, the site serves a very different function than when the trading post first opened in the 1920s. In an area packed with mega lakes, historic sites (such as the Mille Lacs Trading Post) offer avenues to explore how a body of water connects to residents' sense of place and identity.*

*– Mikala Stokes, Editorial Assistant*



*A sunset on Mille Lacs Lake as seen from Father Hennepin State Park near Isle, Minnesota.  
Image courtesy of Tom Webster (CC-BY-2.0).*

Mille Lacs Lake is the second largest lake in Minnesota and archaeological evidence suggests that it was one of the first areas that humans settled in the region. Many different groups of people have called the area around the lake home. A number of Native American tribes have lived around the lake throughout time. When some of the first Europeans came through the area in the 1600s they were met by the Cheyenne. During the next century, as the Cheyenne migrated westward, the Dakota moved into the area and called the lake Bde' Wakán or Mystic Lake. When the Ojibwe arrived in the mid-eighteenth century, they called the lake Misi-zaaga'iganing, the lake that spreads all over. The first Europeans to travel through the area were French explorers, followed by French and British traders, and eventually Americans that set up towns and settlements around the lake. Following a series of treaties that resulted in the establishment of the state

of Minnesota, loggers flooded into the area for the timber that was found throughout the forest surrounding the lake. By the early 1900s, trading posts and stores could be found around the lake and along rivers in the region. One of these trading posts was run by Harry and Jeannette Ayers, who moved to the area from St. Paul, Minnesota and were granted a trading license by the United States Indian Service in 1918. They were forced to relocate from their original location in 1925 and by the next decade their new trading post was open for business on the southwest shores of Mille Lacs Lake. In the beginning the trading post served as a general store for the local community, but as more tourists came through the area, they started to buy and sell American Indian arts and crafts. Eventually their enterprise would expand to include cottage rentals, a boat building and repair business, and fishing guide services.



*The Mille Lacs Indian Trading Post in 1950. Image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

The lake provided area inhabitants with everything they needed to sustain life. Besides the obvious resources a lake the size of Mille Lacs provides—like walleye, northern, and bass—the lake also provided ducks, geese, turtles, and muskrats just to name a few of the birds and other animals that frequented her shores. Plants like cattails and nettles provided a versatile food source as well as material that could be woven into bags, mats, and fiber that was used for cordage. Along the shores and surrounding wetlands, dozens of plants were used for food, medicine, and dye. The adjacent coniferous forest provided plenty of game that also provided furs and hides for clothing. Local rivers and lakes also were important sources of wild rice, the food growing on the water that led the Ojibwe to migrate into the area from the east coast. Today the Ojibwe, more specifically the Mille Lacs Band

of Ojibwe, still rely on the resources provided by the lake and the surrounding area. Although the great coniferous forest is gone, fish and wild game are plentiful, wild rice can still be found in some lakes around the area, and maple trees are abundant for collecting sap and boiling down to syrup and sugar.

When the Ayers moved their business to the southwest shore of Mille Lacs, they did so to be closer to the community of the Ojibwe that were scattered throughout the area. They relied on the members from the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe to assist with their operations and worked closely with the Band, often advocating on their behalf in dealings with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Harry Ayers was also an avid collector of American Indian items and by the 1950s he had accumulated over 1,000 pieces of Ojibwe material culture.



*Mille Lacs Indian Museum today. Image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



*Mille Lacs Indian Museum, 2012.  
Image courtesy of Brady Willette and Minnesota Historical Society.*



*Birch bark basket workshop.  
Image courtesy of Charlie Vaughn and Minnesota Historical Society.*

In 1959, the Ayers donated these items along with the trading post and other buildings on site as well as the land to the Minnesota Historical Society. The Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post opened as a historic site in 1960. The first museum was a building used to store Harry's collection that was attached to the trading post. The site was a unique collaboration between the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and the Minnesota Historical Society. This museum stayed in operation until 1992, when it was torn down to break ground for a new museum. When the planning for this new museum began in the early 1990s, an advisory council made up of elders from the Band and other community members made sure that the relationship to the water was reflected in the architectural design of the building. As a result, the entire east side of the museum is all windows

that face the lake and mimic the shoreline of Lake Mille Lacs. The current museum, which opened in 1996, brings the history, culture, and art of the Ojibwe alive through tours of the Four Seasons Room where visitors can learn about seasonal activities that have been practiced for hundreds of years. The Four Seasons Room and the other exhibits highlight the significance of the lake to the Ojibwe way of life, and the importance of the lake throughout their history as they struggled for survival and eventually retained their hunting and fishing rights when those rights were upheld by the United States Supreme Court in 1999. The site also includes programs, workshops, and the trading post that continues to sell authentic Native American arts and crafts made by members from the local community and Native artisans from throughout the United States.



*Mille Lacs Indian Trading Post today.*

The partnership between the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and the Minnesota Historical Society, and the stories that are told at the site have created both challenges and opportunities. Since the site is located on a reservation, many people assume that it is a tribally run museum, owned and operated by the Mille Lacs Band. Since it is a partnership, that creates some confusion. Another challenge, which is common amongst a lot of museums, especially museums that tell the story of any community, is keeping the exhibits and stories fresh and updated. The current museum has been around for more than 20 years, and besides a few minor additions, it has not changed much in the last couple of decades.

As the old adage goes, with every challenge comes opportunity, and the site has had the opportunity to bring in traveling exhibits throughout the past several years to get people to keep coming back to the museum. In the fall of 2019, the museum was the host site for another traveling exhibit entitled *We Are Water MN*. This exhibit highlights the importance of water in people's lives by exploring how we relate to water, how we use water, how water unites communities, and how water affects every element of our lives. This exhibit also examines how we care for and protect water for future generations. This exhibit travels around the state and focuses on the stories particular to the areas that are hosting it. At the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, the exhibit includes stories of Mille Lacs Band members and other local community members and their relationship to Mille Lacs Lake and other watersheds in the area. *We Are Water MN* is led by the Minnesota Humanities Center in partnership with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Minnesota

Departments of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources.

Hear *Gary Benjamin's We Are Water MN* story, "*Water is medicine.*" (*transcript*)  
See more stories in the [online map](#).

In addition to the traveling exhibit, the museum has further, future opportunities to continue to connect the stories of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe with Mille Lacs Lake. Positioned on the shores of the lake, future programming ideas include a walking trail that visitors will be able to explore that will take them out to the lake and around the site. This trail will have interpretive signs of aquatic plants and animals that were used by the Ojibwe. These signs would be bilingual, including the common English name as well as the Ojibwe name. This trail could be used when the museum building is not open and hopefully birdwatchers and other nature lovers could utilize the trail. Potential partners for this project could be the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and the Lake Mille Lacs Scenic Byway Committee.

As museum professionals, we often talk about interpreting history where it happened and the power of place. The Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post is located in an area that is rich in history, has an incredible amount of biodiversity, and resides along the shores of one of the largest lakes in Minnesota. Located centrally in the middle of the state, the site is only a couple of hours from most major cities in Minnesota, so can be visited as a day trip. We invite you to come visit and experience for yourself the history, culture, and art of the Ojibwe, as well as to explore the beautiful area around Lake Mille Lacs.

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## About the Author

Travis Zimmerman is from the Crane Clan of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Travis has a B.A. in history from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, and is currently the site manager of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, which is part of the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) where he has worked for the last 13 years.