methodologically sound, I never want to lose sight of my Native sensibilities and forget to tell a story. For Native people, the story that follows is about our cultural survival and self-determination. There are many ways to tell this story. Here, I will tell it through the ever-changing, complex, contested, and dynamic process of representing Native peoples in both national and tribal museums in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For all the theory that infuses this work, I hope that readers will also engage this work as a good story—one that continues beyond these pages.



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# COLLABORATION MATTERS

## The Minnesota Historical Society, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, and the Creation of a "Hybrid Tribal Museum"

### BEGINNINGS

In a letter dated 14 March 1997, W. Richard West, Southern Cheyenne and founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), wrote in support of the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) receiving an award from the American Association for State and Local History. MHS had recently opened the Mille Lacs Indian Museum at one of its historic sites and had collaborated with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe on all phases of the museum's development. West emphasized the importance of this collaboration as being critical to his work at the NMAI. He stated, "The project's system of community liaisons, quite literally, was in my mind, as I, in the early years of this institution, established a series of direct consultations with Native communities that preceded all planning for facilities and public programs here."[1]

That the collaborative exhibition-development process pursued by the Minnesota Historical Society with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe helped Richard West chart the course for his work at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian speaks volumes. It shows not only the quality of the representations that developed but also the significance of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum to the changing relationship between Indigenous people and museums. How did this collaboration between a state historical society and an Indigenous nation come to fruition and garner the recognition that West's letter reveals? During the initial planning stages for the

new museum, some believed that the Mille Lacs Indian Museum would have local and perhaps regional implications. But others recognized early on that this project could also have national importance.

The Minnesota Historical Society's attempt to collaborate with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe to develop a museum with a new subjectivity as a "hybrid tribal museum" is the focus of this chapter.[2] What happened in Minnesota in the 1980s and 1990s may have happened elsewhere in the museum world, but it is a story worth recognizing as an embodiment of new museum theory put into practice that culminates in new representations of Native American history and culture reflecting the finest in collaborative exhibition development in the late twentieth century.

In this chapter, I explore the development of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, which is located in Onamia, Minnesota. The museum has undergone significant changes in representation throughout its more than fifty-year history. In 1996 it reopened as a hybrid tribal museum. That is, its current form developed through a collaborative partnership between MHS and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. My examination of this museum's development occurs within the larger theme of how Native communities have constructed a collective public memory and history through the medium of tribal museums—or, in this case, a "hybrid" tribal museum. In doing so, Native communities have attempted to take control of the public's perception of their past. The Mille Lacs Indian Museum is a significant site of Indigenous self-representation and reflects an enactment of new museum theory into practice that I witnessed firsthand as an exhibit researcher in 1994 during the redesign process.

This shift in museum development raises a number of significant themes, which I explore. To start, I trace the genealogy of the site from its beginnings as a trading post to its years as an MHS museum to its new subjectivity as a hybrid tribal museum. Next, I track how a new exhibition interpretative strategy that privileges the voices and perspectives of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe emerged at this museum. Finally, I explore the complexities of collaborative exhibition development between a mainstream museum and an Indigenous community. The complexities that arise from a collaboration of this nature persist in the ongoing life of the museum and the kind of programs that the museum offers.

The identity of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum is somewhat contested. Its status is unique, as MHS director Nina Archabal described: "While this museum is not a tribal museum in strict parlance—it is not owned by the Band, the building is not owned by the Band, the collection is not owned by the



Band, the Band is not responsible for its operation or its debt or any aspect of it—they are however very much the owners, the spiritual owners of what finally came out of the Mille Lacs Museum."[3] On one hand, it is a state museum, as Archabal mentioned, and it is part of the historic sites network of the Minnesota Historical Society. On the other hand, it is located on tribal lands and provides primacy in interpretation to the Mille Lacs Band. Given this complex subjectivity, I argue that, while the Mille Lacs Indian Museum represents an important collaborative exhibition and museum project by privileging the voice and perspective of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, it has not yet fully achieved a decolonizing museum practice. The Minnesota Historical Society maintains financial and administrative control. Moreover, the complicated history and genealogy of the site remain an absent-present at the museum, as current programming at the site does not carry forward or complement a decolonizing museum practice.

Still, Richard West recognized what the Mille Lacs Indian Museum does represent: a place that did the work of collaboration in exhibition development "immensely well"—and at a time when few other museums were following a similar course. Close to twenty years later it is now commonplace to share curatorial authority and engage in collaborative exhibition planning that privileges Indigenous voices and perspectives. At Mille Lacs the new museum theory heavily influenced its methodology and became embodied in the exhibitions that opened in 1996.

## METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

My engagement with the Mille Lacs Indian Museum began in 1994–95 while I was on staff at the Minnesota Historical Society. I have followed the museum's development and reception ever since. Because I was present at the creation of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum as a participant observer, I had an invaluable opportunity to engage with the Ojibwe community advisory board as well as with members of the Minnesota Historical Society Exhibits Department as they decided which narratives and stories would be privileged in the exhibitions. While serving as an exhibit researcher from June to December 1994, I assisted in the overall conceptual development of the permanent galleries.

As part of my work on the project, I attended monthly advisory board meetings with Mille Lacs Band members and MHS staff. I also attended community gatherings—powwows, feasts, the tribal chair's State of the Band Address, and celebrations for the grand openings of new tribal facilities.

This was an especially active period for tribal infrastructure development. Throughout the early to mid-1990s, new community-owned facilities were opening on a regular basis. These new facilities were built with the proceeds from the Band's tribal gaming operations at Grand Casino Mille Lacs and Grand Casino Hinckley, both of which opened following passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988.

My job responsibilities also involved researching the Band's history and culture at libraries and archives in Minnesota and beyond. I conducted oral history interviews with elders and artists from the community; some of these interviews were later used in the exhibitions. And I researched collections related to the Band, including objects, archival records, and photographs that were held at MHS. My main goal was to find archival materials that would enhance the content ideas that the community advisory board was putting forth for the exhibitions. The new Mille Lacs Indian Museum opened in 1996.

I returned to MHS in May 2001 to gather documentation for the exhibitions that were launched at the new facility. I collected the final exhibition text, object lists, curators' records, records from the Historic Sites Department, images, grant proposals, media and public relations materials, and audience research evaluations that had been completed in 1996. I also conducted interviews with key members of the project team who had been involved in museum development. When I returned to the Mille Lacs site itself, I interviewed tribal members who were employed as interpreters about their views of the museum.

The opportunity to return to the museum after years away from the project allowed me to reflect on my experiences as an exhibit researcher in 1994. I viewed firsthand the narratives and objects that were included in the final product. Many of the content ideas were enhanced, and certainly some story lines had changed from the early years of content discussions. Surprisingly, though, many of the key themes that were discussed in the early days comprised the core presentation. These themes had simply been enhanced by documentary evidence, including objects and oral histories obtained from tribal members.

Since that time, I have followed the museum's reception and ongoing life, and I have returned to the site whenever my schedule allowed. In June 2010, I spent time at Mille Lacs interviewing its current site manager, Travis Zimmerman, on the state of the museum fourteen years after its opening. He discussed both the successes and challenges of the museum as he saw them. The museum has suffered several cutbacks over the years as part of the state



budget crisis in Minnesota over the last decade. In spite of this, there seems to be new energy at the site, and Travis and his staff are making plans to extend programming and to revise the exhibitions.

In the examination that follows, I engage the museum's past, present, and future with a critical eye. What is the museum's status then and now as an embodiment of an important collaborative process between a mainstream museum and a tribal nation? Even after numerous engagements with its exhibitions over the past sixteen years, I find that one of the most striking aspects of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum is the power of its stories. This hybrid tribal museum located on a rural reservation in northern Minnesota has become an important site of tribal history and memory, which its exhibits vividly capture. The Band's stories of cultural continuance are powerfully rendered and convey their pride as a tribal nation. Former site manager and Mille Lacs Band member Joycelyn Shingobe Wedll claimed: "We wanted to focus on our strengths as a community. We wanted to show how we were able to live through the injustices and still be strong in our culture, our language, our community—how we hung onto the very things outside people wanted to destroy. Our spirit was never broken."[4]

## THE MILLE LACS BAND OF OJIBWE: THEIR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MUSEUM

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe are an Algonquian-speaking people who originated on the east coast of North America and migrated to the Great Lakes region. The reasons for the migration are many, including both internal and external forces. Ojibwe scholar Anton Treuer states, "In part because of tribal warfare and in part because of the prophecies, the Ojibwe slowly began moving westward around fifteen hundred years ago."[5] The oral tradition of the Ojibwe people mentions specific prophecies that encouraged their migration to "the land where food grows on the water." This brought them into present-day Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. At the time of contact with the French in the seventeenth century, the Ojibwe were "already well established at Sault St. Marie [Michigan] and the surrounding area and no longer had ties to their old village sites on the Atlantic Coast."[6]

In the seventeenth century, the Ojibwe first entered the Mille Lacs region, the ancestral homeland of the Dakota people, and by the mid-eighteenth century, they had expelled the Dakota from the area.[7] During the nineteenth century, the Ojibwe in Minnesota were forced to sign several treaties with the U.S. government that resulted in major land cessions, and an 1855 treaty

established the Mille Lacs reservation, along with six other reservations for the Ojibwe, in northern Minnesota.[8]

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the U.S. government placed increasing pressure on the Mille Lacs people to give up their lands at Mille Lacs and settle on the White Earth reservation farther north. The Mille Lacs Band successfully resisted these efforts, and a defining characteristic of its identity today is its status as "nonremovable." The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe currently has more than four thousand enrolled members, the majority of whom reside in one of three districts that comprise their north-central Minnesota reservation.[9]

The Mille Lacs Band story, though unique in many respects, resonates with the experiences of tribal nations across the United States as well as with broader themes in Native American history. Alongside their stories of resistance are stories of invasion, violence, disease, warfare, forced surrender of vast amounts of lands through treaties signed with the U.S. government, destruction of tribal economies, and forced assimilation programs. Both sets of stories form a significant part of the Band's heritage. Indeed, the innovative ways that the Mille Lacs people have responded to the last 200-plus years of colonization are more than just stories of survival. These narratives reflect Native survivance, a concept advanced by Gerald Vizenor, a White Earth Ojibwe writer and literary scholar. He defines "survivance" as

> a sentiment heard in creation stories and the humorous contradictions of tricksters and read in the tragic wisdom of literature; these common sentiments of survivance are more than survival reactions in the face of violence and dominance. Tragic wisdom is the source of Native reason, the common sense gained from the adverse experiences of discovery, colonialism, and cultural domination. Tragic wisdom is a pronative voice of liberation and survivance, a condition in native stories . . . that denies victimization.[10]

One of the defining characteristics of the Mille Lacs community is the ability of its members to preserve their language and culture in the face of ongoing colonization. Scholars and Ojibwe leaders alike have long acknowledged that this community has "fared better than most of their neighbors" in maintaining their culture.[11] As Anton Treuer explains, the Mille Lacs people have been able to preserve their Big Drum culture and their traditional religious ceremonies "in the face of consistent efforts to remove them from their homeland, including the burning of their homes in 1901 and the withholding of allotments until 1926 for all who did not relocate to White Earth."[12] He



acknowledges the power of the drums and the strong leadership on the reservation as critical to the people's ability to retain this cultural knowledge for all Ojibwe communities: "The people of Mille Lacs have maintained regional Big Drum culture for all Ojibwe people through the strength of their teaching and the strength of their learning."[13] One could argue that the exhibitions at the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum have the potential to become part of this ongoing tradition at Mille Lacs of cultural preservation, education, and continuance.

The exhibition-planning process for the Mille Lacs Indian Museum emerged in the early 1990s, when the community was experiencing rapid cultural, economic, and political change due to its successful tribal gaming enterprises. Mille Lacs leaders believed that it was critical to contextualize these changes within a historical framework. Their priority was raising the historical consciousness of Band members to help them understand not only their past but also the myriad changes in their contemporary lives.[14] The overarching narrative structure of the exhibition was to emphasize Mille Lacs Ojibwe survivance. As I will discuss later, its final form in place today does not provide an extensive context on colonialism and its ongoing effects. Yet the exhibition does place the Mille Lacs voice at the center of the narrative. It presents a rich, ongoing history, but it does so in a manner that avoids challenging or difficult topics, specifically, the impact of colonialism.

## THE MILLE LACS INDIAN MUSEUM: THE HISTORY OF THE SITE

The genealogy of the Mille Lacs site as a trading post and later as a museum begins in 1919, when Harry and Jeanette Ayer moved to the Mille Lacs area, where they spent forty years operating a trading post on the reservation.[15] During their tenure at Mille Lacs, they also developed several other businesses, including a fishing-resort complex and a boat-building company. Many of their businesses employed Mille Lacs Band members. Ever the opportunists, the Ayers capitalized on the emerging tourist industry following completion of Minnesota Scenic Highway 169, and they developed a highly profitable business selling Native arts and crafts to tourists. They later opened a museum on the site to showcase their collection of artifacts, most of which were collected from the Mille Lacs Ojibwe people during the early to middle part of the twentieth century.

While the Ayers were successful in their various ventures, their story parallels those of other white traders across the country. The exploitative practices of white traders on reservations during this period made the traders

far wealthier than those whose goods they marketed. As Roger and Priscilla Buffalohead argue in their important tribal history, *Against the Tide of American History: The Story of the Mille Lacs Anishinabe*, "[Harry] Ayer's talent for turning the special knowledge of the Chippewa [or Ojibwe] into business enterprises profited himself far more than it did the people."[16] In 1959, the Ayers donated their 1,400-artifact collection, museum, and property to the Minnesota Historical Society. Many in the community believe that the Ayers acquired the land under dubious and unethical circumstances. In 1960, the Minnesota Historical Society renamed the site the State Indian Museum and held a dedication ceremony on the reservation.[17]

Under the Minnesota Historical Society's ownership, the museum remained a popular tourist destination, and Mille Lacs Band members continued their association with the site. They were employed as tour guides, sales clerks, and craft demonstrators. Beginning in the late 1970s, they were also employed as site managers. During this period, the museum buildings began deteriorating, risking the safety of the exhibits and objects. In response, MHS began planning a new museum. This ended up being a seventeen-year process, which culminated in the opening of the new building on the site in 1996.

In the early years of MHS control, the museum was not tribally controlled or even tribally partnered. Although some tribal members worked as guides, craft demonstrators, and sales clerks, they did not have much input in developing the exhibitions. The lack of Ojibwe curatorial input was evident in the exhibits. Kate Roberts, the MHS curator and the Mille Lacs Indian Museum co-curator, recalled:

> What had been up there prior to this museum was the standard interpretation of Native American culture. It started very early, with a large precontact section and went through and talked about seasonal living—we all know the topics that were typically covered in those Native histories. It in no way brought the stories up to the present. And that was the number one goal of the community advisory board [for the new museum]—to make sure that people know we are still here, we are still alive, and we are not still living as they portrayed it.[18]

The exhibitions in the old site did indeed reflect their time. They tended to use outdated ethnographic subject headings, and objects were placed on pedestals and mounted in glass cases. All of the interpretative text was presented in a distant, third-person, curatorial voice, and the Mille Lacs Ojibwe's perspective on their history was notably absent. The few quotes from community members that the curators included described historical events from their perspective, but contemporary images did not accompany the quotes. Incorporating both would have conveyed the continuance of the Mille Lacs Ojibwe culture.



Additionally, culturally sensitive topics, such as spirituality, that are now typically excluded from museum presentations were featured in the old museum. For example, a display describing the Midewiwin Society, the original spiritual practices of the Anishinabe, included disrespectful and erroneous information. It also featured culturally sensitive ceremonial objects. Following the advice of Roger Buffalohead, a Ponca Indian historian hired by MHS to revise the exhibits in the early 1980s, the Midewiwin materials were removed from display. He argued that the Midewiwin was still a "viable religion" and that the current display was "written from the perspective of the dominant culture and in certain places [was] either demeaning of the system of religious beliefs or provided interpretations that [were] mis-leading."[19]

During the exhibition-planning process for the new museum (1993–96), the community advisory board—comprised predominantly of elders—recommended that all things associated with the Midewiwin religion, including objects, music, clothing, and symbols, not be displayed.[20] The exhibition-development team at MHS honored this request. Discussions of spiritual and ceremonial life were not included in any of the new exhibits, nor were sacred objects. At the time of the museum opening, tribal member Darren Moose stated the reason for this decision: "It's a private part of us. It's all we have left."[21]

In the years following Buffalohead's revisions, a majority of the interpretation in the old museum, though influenced by changing ethnohistorical scholarship, still focused mostly on the Band's pre-twentieth-century experience. The older museum also provided significant coverage of Dakota history and Dakota-Ojibwe relations, including the warfare that ensued between the two nations in the eighteenth century. These topics would eventually receive scant attention at the new site. The community advisory board wanted this to be a Mille Lacs tribal museum, not a pantribal Minnesota Indian museum or an Ojibwe national museum.

## CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS, CHANGING AUTHORITY: THE SEVENTEEN-YEAR STRUGGLE TO BUILD THE NEW MUSEUM

The lack of the Band's involvement from 1960 to 1979 resulted in a museum that was clearly not a site of tribal history and memory. But after an extensive

self-study by the Minnesota Historical Society that began in 1979, a shift occurred. Mille Lacs Band members increasingly participated in planning for the new museum. These consultations led to the museum eventually evolving into a site that represents the Mille Lacs Indian community through the exhibitions in the new museum that opened in 1996, while the Minnesota Historical Society maintained financial and administrative control over the site.

The evolution of this site as a hybrid tribal museum came after years of consultation, research, and collaboration between the two parties. In 1979, under the direction of the newly appointed deputy director, Nina Archabal, the site was evaluated through a self-study funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The consultants hired to review the Mille Lacs site were all leading museum professionals and scholars with extensive experience working with Native American communities in various capacities. They included George H. J. Abrams, director of the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum; Nancy O. Lurie, curator of anthropology at the Milwaukee Public Museum; and Thomas Vennum Jr., ethnomusicologist in the folklife program at the Smithsonian Institution.[22]

All of the consultants recognized the historical significance of the site and stressed the importance of developing the new museum to showcase its collection. As Thomas Vennum claimed, "By accident and bequeathal, the MHS now finds itself the guardian of one of the richest tribal treasures in the country—the Ayer collection."[23] Vennum stressed the symbolic importance of the site to Ojibwe people, in that it marked "the permanent establishment of the Ojibwa in Minnesota." It also served as a place where their ceremonial life continued. Furthermore, he described Batiste Sam and Maude Kegg, the two Mille Lacs Ojibwe women who were conducting the lion's share of the interpretation at that time, as "national treasures" because of their "vast knowledge of the culture."[24]

Given the historical significance of the site to the larger Ojibwe communities in the Great Lakes region and Canada, Vennum recommended establishing a national Ojibwe museum. This idea would resurface in 1984 after another NEH-funded study.[25] However, the idea would later be abandoned as the Mille Lacs community advisory board emphasized that the new museum should be a Mille Lacs Ojibwe museum, not an Ojibwe national museum. This focus is what finally made it to the exhibition floor as the Mille Lacs Indian Museum in 1996.[26]

The consultants also stressed the importance of establishing a community advisory board comprised of Mille Lacs tribal members to advise MHS on



the development of the museum. Noting the previous lack of involvement of the tribal people as a serious concern, they encouraged MHS to develop such a board to ensure that this facility would indeed represent the history of the community it proposed to represent. Vennum reported that during his visit to the museum in 1979 as part of the self-study, the site manager at the time, Mille Lacs Band member Floyd Ballinger, told him that the Mille Lacs community did not visit the museum. Vennum viewed this as a major concern and cautioned MHS staff about proceeding with plans that did not involve the Mille Lacs Band:

> This to me should be a strong warning to the MHS—if the community cannot identify with the present site, will it feel anything but resentment about more of the same conceived along the standard, "bigger and better," White formula? According to the plans I have seen, the total facility will be the most imposing structure on the reservation, housing the historic treasures of the Mille Lacs people which, for reasons of history, fell into White hands which continue to guard them and make decisions about their disposal. Unless the Mille Lacs site is somehow made more meaningful to the community, under these circumstances, I can foresee a potential for trouble.[27]

The recommendation to begin discussions with the Mille Lacs Band on the planning of the new site corresponded with then deputy director Nina Archabal's commitment to include them in the process. In an interview with Archabal, she recalled her concern over the lack of involvement of the Mille Lacs Band in the early stages of the process in 1979:

> When I arrived here and became deputy director, I learned two things: that [Mille Lacs was] no ordinary place with no ordinary people with no ordinary collection; and I learned that the Society had a plan to replace the building. I remember very well a meeting at the Hill House early on with a number of staff members. . . . I remember hearing a presentation about the Society's plan to replace the Mille Lacs Indian Museum building, and I asked what I thought was a reasonable question . . . : "What involvement did the Mille Lacs Indian community have in the decision about replacing this building and about the kind of work we would be doing?" And the answer was, "None—we don't really have a relationship with the Mille Lacs community," even though at that time we were employing Mille Lacs people to help with the interpretation and to welcome our guests at the museum. That was deeply disturbing

for me to hear. That was . . . not based on any kind of knowledge of the field, prevailing standards; it was based on common sense. And I said this project cannot go forward without involvement from the Mille Lacs people.[28]

During the interview, Archabal discussed the challenges of building trust with the community. The site had embodied a history of exploitation and exclusion for the Mille Lacs Band, as their relationship with Harry and Jeanette Ayer had been complex, to say the least. Band members recounted the history of the relationship to Roger Buffalohead, which he wrote about in *Against the Tide of American History*, and later to George Horse Capture in 1984, and the story is fraught with colonial entanglements. While working on the project in 1994, I heard some Band members mention the land title issue (I will give more attention to this story later in the chapter) and the questionable ethics of the Ayers, but these issues did not come up regularly in conversations.

By 1994, in some ways one could argue that the struggles over how to interpret the Ayers' story at the revised museum had been resolved. The new museum would emphasize the Mille Lacs Band story, while the "Trading Post" exhibit nearby would discuss the Ayers' presence on the reservation. However, the absence of the history of the Ayers' relationship with the Band is very much an absent-present at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum. What is missing are the Band's views of the Ayers' presence. Their experiences with the Ayers are part of the deep history of the site as well, and what has been left unexpressed may yet be overshadowing Band members' relations with the museum today.

Certainly, the legacy of that relationship was evident in the early days of the new museum, when MHS was trying to move forward with the revised project. Nina Archabal recounted an awkward first meeting with then tribal chair Arthur Gahbow. The meeting was indicative of the lack of trust between MHS and the Mille Lacs Band that existed at the time. She recalled:

I remember my first meeting with Art Gahbow, who was then head of the Mille Lacs Band. This would have been in 1978 or 1979, and I would say, to be perfectly frank, that his attitude was not particularly welcoming. As I came to know him, Art Gahbow was a great jokester and a great prankster. I didn't understand that initially, and I remember going in to see him. It was late in the afternoon, and I was with then director Russ Fridley. Art was eating popcorn, and he didn't offer us any popcorn, which I thought was a little odd, and as I think about it now, I think about it as quite un-Indian not to share his food. He sat there . . . with



his back to us. And when we talked to him about the society having some ideas about building a new building there, he told us that the Band controlled a strip of land between the highway and the museum site, and his plan was to put a turnstile up there and to collect tolls to keep people out of the museum. So, I figured this was hardly a good way to begin, but we began. . . .

That was a hard beginning, but from then on, with hard work and persistence and, I would say, with a good heart on the part of this institution, we moved forward, and we learned a whole lot. I remember having an open house at the museum building early on to begin that process of involving local people. And we were giving away food—literally giving away food. We had nice platters of food that we had purchased from some caterer and spread them out and invited people. And, to my very great shock, no one came. And I think that was a measure of just how distrustful people were. I have to believe that, at that point, with the community having over 80 percent unemployment, free food under any situation other than the most strained social relations would have been something that would have drawn people out, and it didn't. That was very disturbing to me and another sign of just how deep-seated the distrust really was.[29]

Building trust with the Mille Lacs Band members became a major goal for those working on the project, and plans were initiated to involve Band members in the development process. The recommendations by the consultants, combined with strong leadership and support at MHS led by Nina Archabal, led to the formation of a museum advisory board at Mille Lacs in the early 1980s. The individuals involved with planning the museum changed over time. However, the following Mille Lacs Band members, many of whom were also part of the Mille Lacs Reservation Curriculum Committee, played a significant role in the early development of the project: Floyd Ballinger, Francis Boswell, Maude Kegg, Batiste Sam, Georgiana Day, and Joycelyn [Shingobe] Wedll. Non-Band member Don Wedll, employed by the Band as the commissioner for natural resources, played a key role on the committee as well.[30] The consultation process between Band members and MHS included both formal and informal meetings. For MHS staff, it involved spending time on the reservation, getting to know people, and finding out from them what they wanted for the museum—their ideas. As Nina Archabal recalled:

We began a process in which I myself was involved in making repeated visits to the community to get to know people. That was certainly the

major objective: to gain some understanding and some relationship with them, and also to get some idea from them, to involve them in the process of thinking about what the museum could be, what its content ought to be, what purposes they might have for it. We began to hold a series of meetings. . . . I would guess there were close to twenty of what I would call group gatherings of various kinds. . . . We would begin by having lunch with the elders. There was an elder nutrition center on the reservation, and we would go to the nutrition center instead of inviting people to the museum. I remember very well the meals and what we ate, but I remember particularly learning the protocols. The elders always ate before we ate, and they ate at a separate table, and then we would be served the food and we would eat as well. Then we would go and sit together and talk about their ideas, their feelings, their connections, their hopes and dreams for a museum, but [we would] also get a sense of who they were and get to know a little about this community and what really went on. We would then stay on in the afternoon. And we invited schoolchildren to come, and we gave away pizza and Coca-Cola, and that did draw young people, because we were interested in learning what the young people wanted and how they saw their own community. I remember those as being very lively gatherings. . . . Then, in the evening after dinner, we would also bring the adults together and oftentimes the children came with the adults. . . . I would say that, over time, these efforts not only were related to the museum but my own personal recollections of them are as much social gatherings and friend-making occasions . . . getting to know them by sitting around, literally just kind of hanging out together. Those meetings, I think, were incredibly important.[31]

Archabal's description of the process of collaboration mirrors what others have experienced with collaborative processes elsewhere over the last decade. The collaborative exhibition-development process becomes a time of relationship building and getting to know one another—establishing good relations. Reflecting on the development of Glenbow Museum's permanent gallery *Nitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life*, which opened in Calgary, Alberta, in 2001, Curator Gerald Conaty emphasized the importance of working with a community where contacts have already been made. He stated that the museum's decision to focus on Blackfoot history and culture for its revised First Nations gallery stemmed from wanting to build on already-established relationships, which take years to build: "By then, we had a strong relationship [with the Blackfoot], and if you're going to do something collaboratively, you have to have that relationship, and it takes years to develop. And I knew who to talk to. That's also key. . . . We had that relationship."[32]

Another interesting point about the process at Mille Lacs is that Nina Archabal took the Mille Lacs Indian Museum project outside of the usual purview of the MHS Historic Sites Department and placed it under her control in the deputy director's office. From the beginning—and most likely heavily influenced by the consultants in the self-study—the Minnesota Historical Society recognized the potential that the revised Mille Lacs Indian Museum could embody as a critical new direction in museum practice. The Mille Lacs Indian Museum could place the institution on the proverbial map of more community-based museum practices. It could also provide an opportunity for MHS to do the right thing, and the Minnesota Historical Society could garner national recognition as a museum pursuing cutting-edge collaborative work with Native peoples.

During the initial stages of planning the museum, tribal members, including Tribal Chair Gahbow, believed that the museum could be an important economic development enterprise for the reservation. The plans for the new site corresponded with other economic development initiatives the Band was considering at that point. MHS and tribal leaders saw its potential as a "primary magnet for related commercial development [that would] . . . include a lodge, restaurant, service station, and convenience store."[33] Certainly, this mirrors the development of other tribal museums during the period, which were being established to "exploit the tourist industry and growing public interest in Indian cultures."[34]

Additionally, tribal leaders envisioned these museums as helping to address the high unemployment rates plaguing Indian Country. The museums could create jobs close to home, so Native people could remain in their communities. In *Concept Plan for the New Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Cultural Center*, published in 1985, the planning committee clearly viewed the project as an opportunity to capitalize on the public's interest in American Indian history and culture. The document claimed that visitors could be "a source of income to the community businesses surrounding the museum and an important market for community-made arts and crafts sold at the museum shop."[35]

The Band believed that the museum could offer important educational possibilities as well. Tribal leaders hoped the museum could serve dual educational purposes—both for their own community and for the public. Tribal youth could learn Ojibwe artistic traditions and they could also learn about

their history and culture through exhibitions and programming. Non-Indian visitors could learn about the complex history of Native American people, and the site could also dispel commonly held stereotypes predominant in American society.

The plans for the new museum as an economic development enterprise changed with the successful gaming operations that were established on the Mille Lacs reservation in the late 1980s. The revenues from these businesses provided the community with funds to build schools, clinics, government facilities, and day care centers, making it unnecessary for the museum to fulfill the role as a community center and commercial enterprise. As a result, MHS and the Mille Lacs Band scaled back their plans for the site and focused their efforts on developing a facility that would serve exclusively as a museum.

Following years of consultation with the Mille Lacs Band, two self-studies, and the development of a building plan, MHS successfully secured a $4 million appropriation from the state of Minnesota to build the new museum in 1988. This award—as well as other grants, including over $1 million from the Economic Development Administration and $500,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities for exhibition development—provided the necessary funding to complete the project.[36]

After securing the crucial $4 million state appropriation in 1987, planning for the museum stalled for several years due to a complicated land title issue. The negotiations and eventual resolution of the problem represent a critical juncture in the history of the museum. In 1993, after years of negotiations, MHS and the Mille Lacs Band eventually reached a decision. In fifty years, the Mille Lacs Band would have the exclusive rights to acquire the land and the museum from the Minnesota Historical Society.

Here is what happened. The problem over the land title issue arose during the consultation process with the elders at Mille Lacs. It became evident that MHS did not hold clear title to the land on which the museum was located, and this created a major problem for MHS. It could not invest the $4 million appropriation from the state of Minnesota without "substantial certainty of land tenure or ownership."[37] During community meetings, elders and others kept raising the issue that the land that Harry Ayer transferred to MHS in 1959 had a clouded title. At the time of the transfer, both the Minnesota Chippewa tribe and the Mille Lacs Band opposed the transfer, but the Bureau of Indian Affairs approved it nonetheless. Ayer also transferred to MHS roughly one hundred acres of prime lakefront property that he acquired during his tenure on the reservation.[38]



George Horse Capture, a Native American museum professional hired as a consultant for the project in 1984, made note of the land title controversy in his report to MHS. He described the seriousness of the land question and the Band's position to MHS and claimed that "the people believe that the land acquisition of Mr. Ayer may not have been legal, and certainly not moral." He went on to recommend that the society return the lands to the tribe to "start the new museum project on an ideal footing by assisting the band in the best way possible."[39]

Eventually, in 1993, after years of consultation with the Band and the Minnesota Historical Society, a land transfer agreement was finalized. The Mille Lacs Band signed a quitclaim deed, which allowed MHS to use the 3.7-acre tract of land it needed to build the new museum. In exchange, MHS agreed to "give the [Mille Lacs] Band the exclusive right to reacquire the same land and any improvements on it at no cost upon the expiration of the fifty-year period from the date of the initial transfer."[40] MHS also agreed to transfer back to the Band the additional 101 acres of prime lakefront property that it had acquired from Harry Ayer in 1959.

The agreement to allow the Mille Lacs Band to acquire the land and the museum within fifty years served as a turning point for the project. Plans for the new museum and for the exhibitions to be featured in the new site were clearly influenced by the idea that the Band would be the site's eventual owner.

With the land question settled, planning for the new museum accelerated. Architect Thomas Hodne was hired to design a new building. And MHS began consulting with Band members to determine which narratives, objects, and images would be featured in the museum exhibitions. The advisory board, comprised of Mille Lacs Band members Batiste Sam, Sandi Blake, Brenda Boyd, Kenny Weyaus, Eve Kuschel, and Betty Kegg, met with MHS Exhibits Department staff on a monthly basis to discuss exhibition planning. While exhibition story lines were being developed, staff members were also trying to secure funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and they were eventually awarded an NEH grant in 1994.

During the three-year exhibition-development process, two broad goals influenced the development plans for the Mille Lacs Indian Museum. The larger Minnesota Historical Society American Indian Advisory Board defined these two goals. First, the board wanted to convey that "Indian people and their stories are not just part of the ancient past but are part of the present as well."[41] The Mille Lacs team hoped to meet this goal by offering exhibits that covered contemporary life extensively. A majority of the floor space

in the new museum would take the Mille Lacs story to the present day, so their representations would not lock the people in a historic past.

Second, the advisory board wanted the exhibitions to challenge deeply entrenched stereotypes of American Indian life.[42] They believed that the exhibitions could dispel stereotypes by giving primacy to the Mille Lacs Band perspectives on historical events. The exhibition team relied heavily on quotes from interviews conducted with Band members to reinforce the point that Indian people have their own versions of history. On the subjects selected for representation, their voices would predominate throughout.

These goals seem commonplace today, as most tribal museums and mainstream museums that collaborate with Indigenous communities emphasize contemporary survival as the overarching theme in their galleries. However, during this period, the advisory board's move reflected a significant shift in the representation of Native Americans in museums. The emergence of this narrative strategy is critical, as James Clifford argues: "For indigenous people, long marginalized or made to disappear, physically and ideologically, to say 'We exist' in performances and publications is a powerful political act."[43]

## A NEW INTERPRETATIVE STRATEGY: MOVING AWAY FROM OBJECT-BASED PRESENTATIONS

During the monthly consultations between the Band members and MHS, both groups realized that the Ayer Collection could not serve as the basis for the exhibits, though it is certainly an outstanding collection. What drove the content decisions for the new museum were not objects but concepts. The advisory board put forward ideas that focused on contemporary life. From day one, as Kate Roberts, co-curator, recalled, the Band's sovereign status was central to the new museum. From this basis, Band members identified contemporary issues to be covered, including education, treaty rights, powwows, economic development projects, language-retention programs, and casinos. In an interview with Roberts, I asked her about the decision not to develop an object-based exhibition based on the Ayer Collection. She replied:

> You know, that almost happened by default. Initially, I thought it would be the showcase, because I had been told what a fabulous collection it is—and it is. But it is also extremely limited in time span and in type of material. I mean, if we were doing a fabulous exhibit on Ojibwe crafts, that collection would be wonderful, but we weren't. . . . Much of the Ayer Collection didn't end up in the exhibit, and we ended up having to acquire a lot of contemporary objects and a lot of things outside of the Ayer Collection that we felt were necessary to make our points. . . . It ended up not being an object-driven exhibit, which kind of surprised me. Going in, I would have thought—given that we had the collection already—that those objects would drive the exhibit. But as it turned out, the topics that we ended up covering are not necessarily topics tied to objects. You think of topics like sovereignty—that's a concept; it's not object based.[44]



The decision to focus on contemporary themes that are not object based created particular challenges for the exhibit development team. Developing concept-based displays was much more complex and nuanced, as Roberts explained:

> I mentioned the fact that there weren't objects to support some of these topics, but also just the nature of the topics themselves. This idea of sovereignty which was so key to the committee's understanding of who they were and what they wanted to get across to people. I think that came up in our very first conversation—"We are a sovereign people." I didn't know what that meant and didn't have any idea of what that meant. And then, when I found out what it meant, I thought, "That is not an exhibit; that's a book. How do you make that into an exhibit?" So, that was probably my biggest challenge: taking conceptual matter, taking what the Band prides itself on—its independence, its sovereign status—taking that spirit and somehow trying to make it into an exhibit. And that was difficult.[45]

The concepts and themes that eventually made it to the exhibition floor at the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum clearly reflect the directives of the advisory board to focus on the Band's survival and on contemporary issues central to its members' lives today. I would argue that it is necessary for exhibit developers, if they hope to convey the continuance of Native cultural traditions, to abandon the idea of allowing objects to lead content (especially since a majority of the objects in museum collections are historic pieces) and instead allow for concepts to drive decisions about exhibition content. Not only do all of the exhibitions at the new museum thoughtfully convey the people's historic struggles to remain at Mille Lacs, but they also honor tribal survivance.

A notable absence in many of the exhibitions, however, is a direct analysis of colonialism and its ongoing effects. The exhibits clearly emphasize topics

that are less controversial and are presented in ways that are not confrontational. The narrative first and foremost privileges the voices and perspectives of Mille Lacs Band members, and their voices are prominent throughout. The curatorial team was clearly aware of the larger scholarly literature in Native American history of the 1980s and 1990s, new museum theory and practice, and Mille Lacs Band tribal history and culture. The exhibitions reflect a rigorous approach based on these sources. They also present a stunning synthesis of these multiple lines of evidence and thought, offering a powerful statement of Indigenous self-representation.

While the museum's identity as a hybrid tribal museum is present, what makes it to the exhibition floor in many respects looks and feels similar to other tribal museums developed during this period. I observe, for example, similarities to the Museum at Warm Springs on the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon. Members of the MHS staff visited that museum, along with several other tribal museums in the Pacific Northwest, during the development process in 1994. Kate Roberts later mentioned that the Museum at Warm Springs provided great inspiration and was their "closest ally or model." Even though the Mille Lacs Indian Museum's subjectivity as an MHS historic site is ever present, the exhibit team pursued their methodology with a tribal museum model in mind. Reflecting on this methodology and the hybrid nature of the museum, Roberts stated:

> The other challenge, I think, was being part of MHS. . . . Was it or was it not a tribal museum? Well, it became clear to me the more I went up there that I needed to view it in my own mind as a tribal museum if I was going to have any sort of satisfaction or if I was going to be able to work with [Band members]. I had to see it as my facilitating their telling their story. I'm not convinced that everyone at MHS ever felt that way. . . . So, that was a challenge, I think, from the start until the finish. [It] was being part of this large institution, but also very much needing to act independently and sort of walking that fine line between being the person who was facilitating the tribe's wishes and needing to come back and answer to the folks here who were concerned about what we were going to say to legislators or what we were going to say to funders.[46]

### "LEARN ABOUT OUR PAST": THE STORY OF THE MILLE LACS BAND OF OJIBWE—EXHIBIT WALK-THROUGH

In the preceding sections, I have outlined the historical background of the Mille Lacs Band, traced the genealogy of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum first



as a trading post and later as an MHS-controlled museum, analyzed the seventeen-year process to redesign the museum, and examined the development of the new exhibition interpretative strategy used at Mille Lacs. Now I will discuss the exhibitions that opened at the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum in 1996 by providing a walk-through of the galleries.

The new Mille Lacs Indian Museum contains rich textual material, beautiful images, and cultural objects that convey a powerful story. One of the major strengths of the museum is the curators' awareness of the audience and their ability to convey important messages persuasively to the visitor. In their overall design and interpretative strategy, the Mille Lacs Indian Museum exhibitions include text panels that are conversational and engaging. They use storytelling in the first-person voice. And the exhibits incorporate photographs, interactives, and innovative media—all of which are emblematic of the broader exhibition program that the Minnesota Historical Society followed in the 1990s.

While the content of the exhibition is obviously different from that of other MHS exhibits, the overall tone, design, and feel of the gallery space reflect the Minnesota Historical Society's exhibition techniques during this period. Visitors are not overwhelmed when they enter the museum, and ideas are presented in a "visitor friendly" manner. Interesting lead-in questions and statements, beautiful designs, and striking images are prominently displayed. The design goes a long way toward supporting the curatorial directives for this exhibit, and it presents the Mille Lacs Band's history and culture in a manner that visitors can engage. Perhaps most significantly, the curators do not attempt to provide a multivocal exhibition narrative: the Mille Lacs Ojibwe interpretative voice is privileged throughout. The words of art historians, historians, traders, collectors, and curators are submerged, and the community's voice is most prominent.

The exhibition-development team, along with the tribal members who served on the committee, did extensive research on the Band. They closely examined existing literature and scholarship on the community, and they conducted oral history interviews with tribal members. The depth and breadth of the information included in the museum are impressive and reflect the long and rigorous collaborative exhibition-development process. Most significantly, the Mille Lacs people themselves speak in an authoritative first-person voice throughout the exhibit. As one of the curators explained: "The voices of the Mille Lacs Band are heard throughout the exhibit: reminiscences taken from oral histories and interviews on life at Mille Lacs today are incorporated in print form. In addition, interactive media stations

present Band members describing their work, demonstrating their music, and speaking their language."[47]

The Ojibwe language is used, along with English, throughout the galleries "as a reminder to all visitors that it is a living language used and taught in many communities."[48] The use of first-person testimony provides a more personal feel to the exhibit. It clearly reflects an aboriginal curatorial prerogative that Michael Ames has defined as "more holistic or inclusive" than non-Native curatorial perspectives.[49]

By describing the contemporary and historical experiences of the Mille Lacs Band, the new museum movingly conveys the take-home message that "the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe has retained its culture, traditions, and its home for over two centuries, often against great odds."[50] As visitors walk through this 7,000-square-foot exhibition space, they encounter the meaning behind this message through the displays.

The museum's introductory section grounds the exhibit experience on core Ojibwe tribal values, conveyed through the teachings of Mille Lacs elders. Included are five cases focusing on families, elders, spirituality, identity, and language. On one side of the panel is an English version of the text; on the other side, the Ojibwe version. The following text panel introduces visitors to the museum. It is presented in the first-person plural—not a distant third-person curatorial voice—and exemplifies the structure of all the museum's text panels. It states:

### Our Strength and Our Hope

"Our strength comes from the traditions we learn from our elders. Our hope comes from our young, who possess the power of a million new ideas." Wewinabi (Arthur Gahbow), 1988

Mille Lacs became our home over two hundred years ago. We worked hard to make a place for ourselves here, and we've worked hard to keep it.

Take a look around our community. Our history is alive. The events of the past are evident in the way we live, work, and govern ourselves. Our lives are shaped by the traditions and ideals of those who have gone before us.

Gagwe gikendadaa gaapi izhiwebak.
Inaabidaa nii gaan ke yaa
Learn about our past. Look to our future.[51]



Life-size images of both contemporary and historic Mille Lacs Band members visually bring home the point that today's tribal members are part of continuing traditions and an ongoing cultural life.

The introductory section of the museum also includes a time line of Mille Lacs Band history. This section is certainly more reminiscent of earlier museum presentations that conveyed historical events in a linear format. During the planning process in 1994, members of the Minnesota Historical Society's exhibition team were reluctant to present the story in this manner, recognizing how ineffective these methods have been in presenting American Indian history or historical events in general. Nonetheless, the team deferred to the wishes of the Mille Lacs Band members and their desire to have their history all lined up and to have some dates on things.[52] The curators, however, strategically avoided a book-text-on-a-wall presentation. Instead, they presented images of individual leaders and Band members along with maps and engaging texts.

Even though a majority of the panels in the museum are in the first person, the historic time-line section of the museum uses a more distant, third-person, curatorial-voice narration. Here, the items present historical information: accounts of tribal delegations to Washington, D.C., in the nineteenth century; treaty texts from the nineteenth century; an image of Ojibwe chief Migizi in Washington; early reservation school photos; and an article on the hardships of reservation life in the 1940s from the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, with a headline reading, "Onamia Indians Starving, Nun Says."[53]

The next section that visitors encounter is "Our Living Culture," which explores Ojibwe music, dance, and language. The opening text panel for this section speaks to the centrality of their culture in their lives and encourages tribal members: "Listen carefully. Watch closely. Ask about what you don't understand. The more we know about our culture, the stronger it will become."[54] The text panel is clearly directed to tribal members. It acknowledges that they have experienced cultural loss over the last two centuries, and it encourages members who are in the process of learning their culture to continue asking and learning. The panel's level of intimacy engages one of the museum's intended audiences: the Band members themselves. The advisory board aimed to offer this site as a place for tribal members to come in and learn more about their own culture, and this goal is clearly expressed in the space.

"Our Living Culture" opens with a moccasin game exhibit comprised of objects from older games and images of Mille Lacs people still playing the game today. Blending historic and contemporary objects and images is

a technique commonly used by museum curators to convey cultural continuance, and the strategy persists throughout the museum. Included in this section is a film of a moccasin game shot by Monroe Killy in the 1940s outside the trading post. The film includes the songs that accompany the game, which makes this section even more compelling. But although Killy made the film, the exhibit keeps the focus on the Band members. Monroe Killy's name is listed in photo captions, but his story and his experiences with the Mille Lacs Band are not told here. In this museum, the collectors, photographers, traders, historians, anthropologists, and government officials who interacted with the Mille Lacs Band are not given prominence in interpretation. Their voices are secondary to those of the Band members themselves.

The centerpiece of this exhibit section is the powwow dance circle, complete with life-size mannequins in dance attire. This section borrows a great deal from the Milwaukee Public Museum's popular powwow display, which was part of a larger exhibition, *A Tribute to Survival*. This exhibition, which opened in 1993, focused on the urban Indian community in Milwaukee.[55] In "Our Living Culture," each mannequin is in a different dance pose, and each style of Native dance is represented in the circle: women's traditional dance, women's fancy shawl, and women's jingle dress (a style originating with the Ojibwe people); and men's traditional dance, men's fancy dance, and men's grass dance. The photography and film footage featured in this section were taken at the Mille Lacs Band's annual powwow in July 1994.

Along the outer circle of the powwow area is an exhibit on Ojibwe music. The musical instruments of the Mille Lacs Band on display include drums and flutes—both traditional and contemporary. The section includes videos and listening stations, which are designed to help visitors understand the uniqueness of the music.

A sign that reads, "Why are these bags called bandolier bags?" greets visitors as they enter the section of the exhibition showcasing the Ayer Collection. This is the only section in the new museum that focuses specifically on Harry and Jeanette Ayer and their relationship to the Mille Lacs Band during their years on the reservation. (A display in the "Trading Post" exhibit near the museum focuses on the Ayers and will be discussed later.) This section was designed to be a changing exhibition of objects from the Ayer Collection. The first display that opened in 1996 featured bandolier bags, a highly regarded Ojibwe art form. The older bandolier bags collected by Harry Ayer in the first half of the twentieth century are featured alongside those made by artists from the Mille Lacs community in the 1980s and 1990s. Placing



the historic and the contemporary together once again reinforces the message that the Mille Lacs community is a living culture with ongoing cultural traditions. Bandolier bags made by master artists Batiste Sam and Maude Kegg—both of whom worked at the museum site and served as advisors to the project—are included in this section.

Across from the Ayer Collection is a section focusing on military veterans. This section generated a great deal of controversy during the MHS's exhibit vetting meetings. Veterans are held in high esteem in tribes throughout the country, and from the very beginning, members of the Mille Lacs community advocated for a section focusing on veterans in their community. As exhibit researcher Shana Crosson explained: "We kept hearing from day one that this was crucial—to have something in the [exhibit featuring] veterans. . . It absolutely had to be in there."[56] During the development stage for the exhibitions, MHS leaders voiced their concerns over the use of this somewhat dated—and, in their minds, unsophisticated—presentation. As Nina Archabal explained:

> I looked at that and my first reaction to that was this is what a very naive historical organization might do. Sophisticated historical organizations like this one do not do major sections on veterans. It just didn't feel right. And again, I was told this is important, and we need to let this happen. It needs to go forward. And it was very interesting. I will sort of fast-forward for a moment. Rick West, who is a very good friend and the head of the National Museum of the American Indian, came to the opening of the museum. After we had all the celebrations and the dinner and the speeches were over and most of the people had gone, he and I walked around the museum together just to have a look. And we got to the section on the veterans. He stopped, and he said to me, "Of all the honors my father ever had, he was most proud of being a veteran." And I thought to myself, "Thank God!" I once again departed with my—what I would call—sort of my Western way, and said, "Okay, being a veteran is important; we will do a section on veterans." What a lesson that was that night! Of all the things he could have said about the museum, what he said was, "My father was most proud of being a veteran."[57]

Curators Kate Roberts and Joycelyn Shingobe Wedll were, in fact, eventually successful in arguing for including this story, even though they faced opposition from Nina Archabal and Deputy Director Ian Stewart. Archabal

and Stewart's decision to acquiesce to the wishes of the Mille Lacs Band demonstrates the changing identity of this site and the desire to have it be an interpretative space that privileges the Band's voice. Just as the land settlement represented a watershed moment in the development of the new building, so, too, the decision to have a space focusing on veterans—in spite of the attitude at MHS that "sophisticated historical organizations like this one do not do major sections on veterans"—demonstrates the interpretative shift that occurred during the planning process. This would be the Mille Lacs Band's story, and their perspectives would be privileged throughout.

Within the "Veterans" section, a wall displays the names of the Mille Lacs Band members who served in the U.S. military throughout the twentieth century. One case highlights the experiences of veteran Darren Moose, who served in the U.S. Army during the Persian Gulf War. Moose loaned several of his personal possessions for the exhibit, including an army uniform, badges, a knife, currency from the faraway lands where he was stationed, photographs, and a bayonet and shield. Again, the theme of cultural continuity is vividly captured in this section. Honoring veterans is a core Ojibwe value, and this section names and recognizes the individuals, both past and present, who served their community.

Through a tall archway, one enters the section of the museum that focuses on sovereignty, called "Nation within a Nation." It addresses a central issue related to contemporary Mille Lacs Indian identity: the Band's sovereign status. This remains one of my all-time favorite exhibitions in a tribal museum, as it embodies the significance of Indigenous curation and exhibition methods. While several tribal museums touch upon this topic in their galleries today, "Nation within a Nation" represents one of the first exhibits devoted to tribal sovereignty ever developed, whether in a tribal or a mainstream museum. The section's main objective is to extensively describe the unique relationship that the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe has with the U.S. government and the people's rights as members of a sovereign nation.

As visitors enter this section, a powerful introductory panel presents the concept of tribal sovereignty. I believe this is one of the finest text panels that I have encountered at a tribal museum that both introduces the meaning of tribal sovereignty as a political term and evokes the feeling of what it means for tribal nations to assert this identity. Chickasaw scholar Amanda Cobb Greetham states that "sovereignty manifests an emotional quality, not wholly of the legal realm, that is integrally tied to culture."[58] The following brief text panel conveys both the feeling and tone of this statement, and I quote it in its entirety:

The sovereignty display at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org / Mille Lacs Indian Museum.

> **Nation within a Nation**
>
> "Our sovereignty resides in you, the people of the Mille Lacs Band."
> Wewinabi (Arthur Gahbow), 1988
>
> Sovereignty means freedom from outside control. Enforcing sovereign rights has been the goal of the Mille Lacs Band for generations.
>
> What rights does a sovereign nation have? Look around the reservation and you'll see the things guaranteed by our rights. Schools. Courts. Clinics. A police force. A tribal government. A network of community programs and services.
>
> Oma eni go kwa kaa ne zi yang chi mi ni
> sii akiing. Mi o'ow gi da na kii wi ni naan
> We are a nation within a nation. This is our community.[59]

Though never stated explicitly anywhere in the text in this exhibit, those involved in the development process were hoping that, by providing this information, the public would have a better understanding of events covered in the local media about the Mille Lacs Band exercising their rights as a sovereign nation. During the museum-planning process, the Mille Lacs Band filed

a lawsuit against the state of Minnesota that asserted their hunting, fishing, and gathering rights on lands ceded in an 1837 treaty. The Ojibwe claimed that they retained these rights under the treaty, and the case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. After several years of appeals, on 24 March 1999, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Mille Lacs Band.[60] The topic is never engaged directly, however. The overall tone of the new exhibitions is to minimize controversy and to avoid confrontational topics, and during the planning process, many on the museum's advisory board endorsed this approach.

Powerful visual images of the Mille Lacs Band's sovereign status fill one of the main walls in the "Nation within a Nation" section. Visitors see many expressions of sovereignty: a police car door from the Band's own police force with the tribal seal; a large photograph of the water tower with the tribal seal clearly visible; a car license plate with "Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe" on it; a slot machine from the Band's casino; a Grand Casino Mille Lacs jacket; and images of the Band's schools and clinics. Near this section, a panel gives the visitor detailed information about the Mille Lacs Band's government structure. A panel on the other side of the exhibit presents images of Band leaders, both past and present, along with quotes from them.

Certainly, this section attempts to complete a historical record of tribal history that has not been documented before. It is a powerful reminder to all visitors that the Band's history does not end with the "closing of the frontier" in the late nineteenth century and the establishment of reservations. The section presents the names and faces of leaders who have made a significant contribution to their own community well into the twentieth century. Here again, one gets the impression that this section—the lives and words of Band leaders—is more for community members than for outsiders.

The center island of the exhibit seeks to clarify some of the difficult concepts around what it means to be a sovereign nation. At the center of this exhibit is a drum with the tribal seal on it. Around the drum are flip-books that pose questions related to sovereignty and then offer explanations to outsiders of often unknown or misunderstood concepts on the legal status of tribal nations. Following are some of the questions:

Do treaties give Indians special rights?
Why are Indian treaties still in the news?
What's tribal sovereignty?
Why are Indian tribes recognized as sovereign nations?
Does sovereignty have anything to do with casinos?



What's self-governance?
How do tribal governments relate to the federal government?
What does "dual citizenship" mean?
What does it mean to be "enrolled in an Indian tribe"?[61]

The sovereignty section of the museum, more so than any other, has a significant amount of literature for the visitor to digest. People are asked to reflect on the complex legal relationship that the Mille Lacs Band has with the federal government, its sovereign status, and its tribal government. This section also directly challenges many commonly held stereotypes about Native people by explaining the Band's sovereign status to the public.

The next section that visitors encounter is called "Making a Living." It provides an overview of the many ways that Mille Lacs Band members have "stayed afloat financially" through changing historical and economic circumstances.[62] Text panels with images of Band members, both historic and contemporary, greet the visitor upon entering this section. The main goal of the section is to describe the labor history of the community and the various ways community members have survived and maintained community cohesion. In the first part of the exhibition, historic images of Band members engaged in more traditional ways of making a living are positioned alongside those of contemporary Band members engaged in new employment activities. This section provides significant coverage of the twentieth-century labor history of the Mille Lacs Band, and it presents various sources of employment on the reservation during the twentieth century, some of which were Band owned and operated.

The section begins with the Mille Lacs Indian Trading Post, a major employer on the reservation from the 1920s through the 1950s. Mille Lacs members began selling their crafts in response to the growing number of tourists visiting the area following completion of Minnesota Scenic Highway 169. "Hanging baskets" along the road, as the Band members themselves recalled, provided community members with a new way to make a living, and tourists got a chance to experience a cross-cultural encounter at Harry and Jeanette Ayer's trading post. Across the country, the development of tourist art on reservations became a method for Native people to carve out ways of making a living during extremely difficult economic times. A quote from then and current tribal chair Marge Anderson provides further context for this new labor practice: "In the summertime, we'd sew baskets and have stands along the highway. We sewed baskets, you know, to survive."[63]

In its survey of early twentieth-century labor history, the exhibit also in-

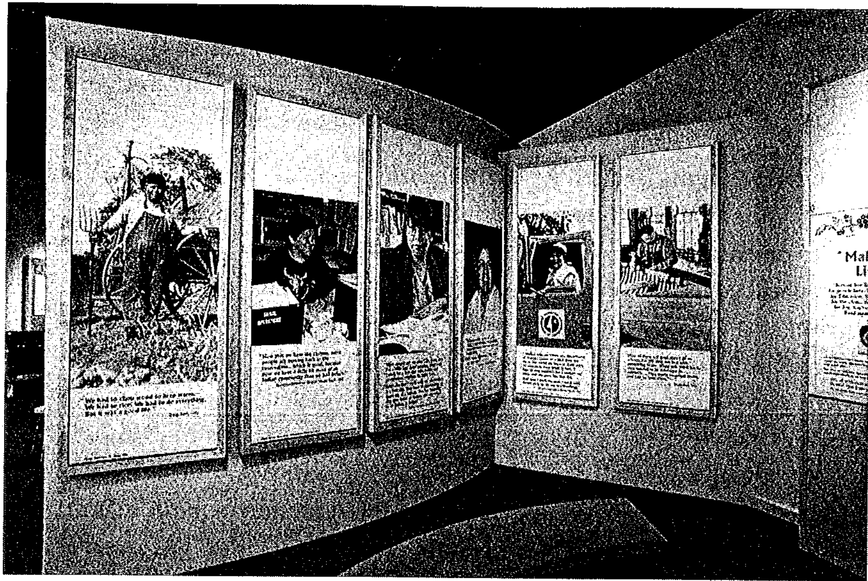


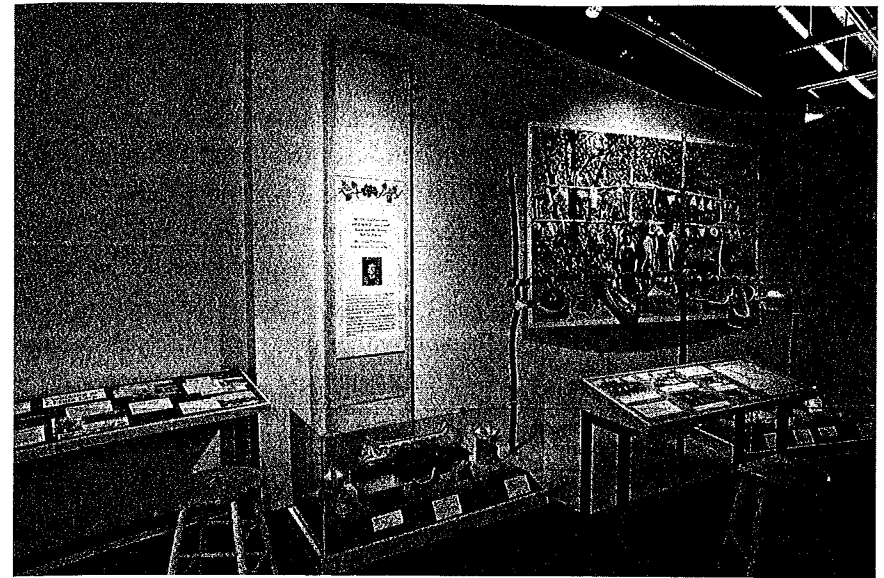
Photo wall in the "Making a Living" section of the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum, 1996. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org / Mille Lacs Indian Museum.

cludes the history of Mille Lacs Band members who worked in the Civilian Conservation Corps–Indian Division (CCC-ID) during the 1930s. Visitors see images of tribal CCC-ID workers "building roads, repairing houses, and making other improvements throughout Minnesota."[64]

The exhibit goes on to discuss early Band-owned and -operated enterprises, such as its vocational center, which opened in the 1960s, and the Mille Lacs Industries Ladies Garment Division. During this period, the Mille Lacs Reservation Business established several other enterprises, including a machine shop and a marina/tourism complex, both of which are represented.

This section clearly advances the history of the Mille Lacs Band in the twentieth century beyond what is available in the written historical record. By gathering and documenting information on the twentieth-century economic history of the reservation, the museum gives an understanding of Mille Lacs history during a time that is poorly represented in Native American history. As curator Kate Roberts claimed: "I think we probably advanced the historical record a little bit through the exhibit. We were able to put some things down and get some things straightened out in terms of the Band's history that hadn't been published before. Some of the research that we did was pulled together and for the first time presented up in the galleries there."[65]





Roadside stand display in the "Making a Living" section of the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum, 1996. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org / Mille Lacs Indian Museum.

The Mille Lacs Indian Museum certainly goes a long way in advancing the idea that Indigenous people persisted and kept their communities intact throughout the twentieth century. Even though the curators never specifically mention the stereotypes they hoped to dispel, the astute visitor will recognize the many methods they use to challenge common interpretations of Native people that predominate in American popular culture. Some of the exhibit sections, although not visually arresting or stunning, are there specifically to combat painful stereotypes of Native American people that have existed for centuries.

"Making a Living," for example, challenges the pervasive stereotype that Native people are dependent on the federal government and welfare programs for their survival. It is no surprise that a community advisory board comprised of Ojibwe individuals who live and work on a reservation in rural Minnesota would choose to highlight such a significant part of their experience. Many community members have undoubtedly faced hostilities directed at them by non-Indians because of the non-Natives' limited understanding of the Band's history and sovereign status. This section speaks to how Band members have survived in spite of policies designed to make them dependent on the very government that destroyed their traditional econo-

mies. Understanding these historical processes is critical to understanding this fundamental aspect of the Mille Lacs Band experience. Round Valley Native historian William J. Bauer asserts the centrality of this topic to understanding his own tribal history: "Work and labor were fundamental to the way in which Round Valley Indians formed their communities and survived as indigenous people in [the] nineteenth and twentieth century."[66]

"Making a Living" also includes the voices of Mille Lacs Band members who have moved away from the reservation to urban areas to find employment. This is the only section of the exhibition that presents urban Mille Lacs Band members' experiences. Intentional or not, the media section captures the development of a pantribal consciousness in cities by presenting the experiences of tribal members working in urban areas.

For example, Don Pewaush, a Band member and former Minneapolis public school teacher, provides a beautiful and moving discussion of his work with urban Native youth. In the video, he describes the challenges he faces with the youth in providing them with the skills needed to survive in both worlds: "We know that we are all working to save our culture, and at the same time we're trying to get our children to be educated. They have to learn to live in two worlds . . . and it's hard; and it's tough work. . . . Yes, there's a lot of racism yet going on today. We have to deal with our children with that, and work with them, and get them through hard times."[67] He also views his work as beneficial to all tribal communities: "We have so many bright young minds out there that come from different reservations, all our reservations."[68]

Pewaush relays a very moving story about the first time a Native American drum group performed an honoring song at a graduation ceremony—something that had never been done before in the Minneapolis public schools:

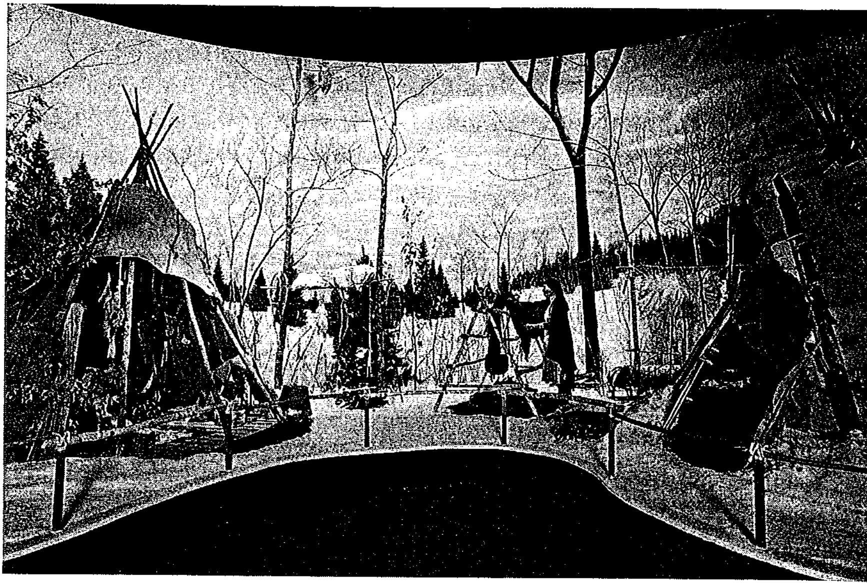
> We are now doing an honor song at the graduation ceremonies. When we first went out and did this, I was terrified on the inside. But I knew I couldn't show it on the outside. Because the young men that were there, singing for the very first time, [it] was their very first public appearance. And as I looked out into the crowd, I seen very few dark faces—hardly any people of color at all. And it scared me; because I didn't know what kind of a reaction there was going to be. And we came on right after the national anthem. And we sang an honor song in honor of all [the] students graduating. But it was more aimed toward our Native American children. And as we sang that song, I noticed they were getting up. There [are] approximately 350 to 400 students that graduate every year, and that first year there must have been about sixteen Native Americans that graduated. And as we were singing that song, I [saw] them starting to stand up and coming toward the drum. When we got done with the song, just about every one of those Native American children were standing around the drum. And some of them were beaming with pride that they made it, and some of them were silently crying. And I said to myself, "This is what it's all about—to educate our children and get them to feeling good about themselves and moving on."[69]



Through the presentation of the stories of urban Band members, we gain an understanding of the pantribal experience—a major theme in twentieth-century Native history—and the migration of Mille Lacs Band members to the city. Throughout the century, Native Americans moved to cities to find work during hard economic times before the development of casinos and the changing reservation economy. All of the urban Band members' stories emphasize their connections to home and their involvement in the pantribal Indian community in urban areas such as Minneapolis–Saint Paul and elsewhere.

Next to the "Making a Living" section is the "Four Seasons Room," which contains life-size dioramas depicting life at Mille Lacs before the full onslaught of colonization. The "Four Seasons Room" is a reinstallation of the original exhibit that was installed in the 1960s and is the centerpiece of the new museum. From the very beginning of the planning process, the advisory board recommended that it be reinstalled in the new site. The "Four Seasons Room" has always been the most popular exhibition, and audience evaluations at the new museum completed in 1996 confirm that the revised version is as rich and compelling as the first.[70]

This beautiful visual space depicts Ojibwe subsistence activities in each of the four seasons: "hunting and spearfishing in the winter; processing maple sugar in the spring; gardening and berry picking in the summer; and harvesting wild rice in the fall."[71] Even though the use of dioramas to depict tribal life has fallen out of favor in the museum world, the community believed that this section must be reinstalled in the new museum. Many critics have argued that this form of representation reinforces commonly held beliefs that Native cultures were static and unchanging and that they have since disappeared along with the "frontier." Surprisingly, though, many tribal museums, including the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute, and the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, continue to develop these types of installations.



Life-sized figures of Band members in the "Four Seasons Room" at the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum, 1996. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org / Mille Lacs Indian Museum.

The curatorial team was keenly aware of the drawbacks of this form of presentation, but they decided to reinstall the dioramas in the new museum because of the deep connection to the people who developed the original exhibit. The dioramas includes life-size figures of Band members who posed for the first installation of the exhibition in the 1960s. Two of the figures in the room, now deceased, are well-known Ojibwe artists—Batiste Sam and Maude Kegg. Joycelyn Shingobe Wedll's grandmother, Jennie Mitchell, was also one of the figures cast. The figure of her is so lifelike that Wedll describes being near that space as "kind of eerie."[72] The exhibit's connection to the contemporary community is deep. It is, as Nina Archabal described it, "an icon space."

The dioramas in the new "Four Seasons Room" were painstakingly restored. Beautiful painted murals depicting seasonal landscapes surround the room, and the original built structures in each of the seasonal spaces have been refurbished and updated. One can enter this room only with a guide, and no other area in the new museum has this requirement. The reason for having a Band member accompany individuals through the space is precisely to offset the potential misconception that the dioramas fix Ojibwe culture in



a romanticized, static past. Certainly, the new exhibitions surrounding the "Four Seasons Room" emphasize contemporary Ojibwe culture; they reinforce visitors' awareness of the Mille Lacs Band as part of a living tradition. The audience evaluations completed by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1996 indicate that the "Four Seasons Room" remains the most popular section in the new museum.[73]

## REPRESENTING THE AYER STORY: THE RESTORED "TRADING POST" EXHIBIT

As mentioned earlier, the interpretation of Harry and Jeanette Ayer's relationship with the Mille Lacs Band receives scant interpretative space in the redesigned Mille Lacs Indian Museum that opened in 1996. Their story is, however, presented in the "Trading Post" exhibit on site, and this is the only space that clearly reflects more of an outsider's perspective of events at Mille Lacs. The displays in the restored 1930s trading post adjacent to the new museum provide an overview of the Ayers' experiences on the reservation along with specific information on tourism and daily life at the store. All the interpretation in this area is in a more distant third-person voice.

My major concern with the "Trading Post" display is that the curators did not connect the activities of non-Native collectors, such as the Ayers, to the larger colonial project. During the early twentieth century, non-Native collectors like the Ayers contributed to the exploitation of Native people and systematically removed objects from Native communities. Instead of addressing this colonial enterprise and its consequences for the Mille Lacs Band, the exhibit "rehistoricizes" the Ayers and their collecting practices. In other words, the exhibit reframes the Ayers as being "intellectual products of their times."[74] The interpretation in the "Trading Post of Harry and Jeanette Ayer" clearly reflects this type of representation, evident in the following panel:

> What did the Trading Post mean to the members of the Mille Lacs Band? Did the Ayers exploit them, or did it offer a good living? That depends on who you talk to. Some people say the Ayers underpaid Band members for their craftwork, that they were involved in shady land deals, that they had no business being there in the first place. Others say the Ayers were good employers at a time when jobs were hard to come by. Mille Lacs Band members weren't just paid to dress up and dance at the Trading Post. They worked as sales clerks and fishing guides. They

tended to gardens, built the boats, and cleaned the cabins. Exploitation or good business? You decide.[75]

In his 1984 report, George Horse Capture cautioned MHS that, if it decided to tell the Ayer story, it would need to present an Indian perspective in its interpretation, "which would not give much honor to the trader." He further recommended that MHS should "accept the truth or don't attempt to tell the story at all."[76] From the content of the exhibit, it does not appear that MHS followed his advice. It failed to make an important statement on how traders and collectors, such as the Ayers, were linked to the larger colonial process and what their activities entailed for the Mille Lacs Band. Though not all Band members were critical of the Ayers, why did so many continue to hold a negative view of their presence on the reservation decades after the Ayers were gone, as Horse Capture mentions? Given the innovative interpretative strategies that the curators followed in other parts of the museum that presented historical events from a Mille Lacs perspective, it is disappointing that the exhibit fails to provide a more rigorous review of the colonial entanglements that the site embodies. The Minnesota Historical Society's identity is most clearly present in this section of the new site, and one wonders if the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe—in a tribally operated and controlled museum—would even bother to tell Harry and Jeanette Ayer's story at all.

## THE MUSEUM'S RECEPTION: OPENING DAY AND BEYOND

The significance of the museum is far-reaching, and it has received a great deal of recognition in the museum world. The new site opened on 18 May 1996, and it has been well received by the community, museum professionals, and the public. The museum garnered a great deal of media attention as well, both in print and on television, and the institution was reviewed favorably in both media. In an article on the opening of the new site, journalist Nick Coleman, who followed the museum's three-year exhibition development, described it as "a monument to the triumph of a people."[77]

What is most striking about all of the media coverage is how favorable it has been to the museum. Not one journalist offered a critique of the displays themselves or challenged the presentations in any way. Admittedly, while many reviews have been descriptive and written for marketing purposes, others were designed to provide a more comprehensive view, and those were overwhelmingly positive.

Visitors have responded favorably to the new museum as well. Based on



the audience evaluations conducted at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum in 1996, the visitors to the site had a positive reaction overall to the museum exhibitions. At the height of the tourist season, MHS employees surveyed 150 visitors, and all of those interviewed responded favorably to the exhibitions, with the "Four Seasons Room" tour being the most popular. Even though the reviews of the museum were positive, the museum staff was concerned that only a small percentage of visitors interviewed (15.3 percent) were able to articulate the exhibit's main message regarding the cultural persistence of the Mille Lacs Band over the last two centuries.[78]

In an attempt to offset any possibility that the "Four Seasons Room" was undermining the message of twentieth-century survival, the curators developed a new exhibition that linked the themes in the "Four Seasons Room" to other sections in the museum. The staff became concerned that the public's attraction to precontact Ojibwe life depicted in that space was undermining the museum's main message of contemporary survival. They felt that the visitors also needed to "understand the nature of contemporary life within the community."[79] One really needs to consider, though, whether the public's reaction reflects a shortcoming of the exhibitions or, perhaps more likely, the non-Native fascination and preoccupation with Native peoples in the historic past.

On the positive side, many visitors did recognize and appreciate the contemporary themes presented in the museum. Following is a sample of some visitor responses to the question of what surprised them the most at the new museum:

> I enjoyed the descriptions of the modern life of the Ojibwe people, especially their governing system.
>
> I was happily surprised at the incorporation of the present day Ojibwe Indians in the exhibit.
>
> Very in depth. Remarkable.
>
> Excellent dioramas and the personal touch—knowing these are about real, often living people and places.
>
> Wonderful exhibit. Much respect was used in putting it together. It is an honest representation of native life.[80]

Even more poignantly, a tribal member expressed feelings of pride to one of the survey takers: "Beautiful, authentic—brings back many good memories

—makes me very proud of our people." Individuals involved with the advisory committee shared this sense of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum as a source of pride for Band members. When asked to describe the significance of the site, Kenneth Weyaus Sr. responded: "There's no words to describe the pride. No words."[81]

The museum also received attention from leading museum professionals in the country, including Richard West, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. As I explain in this chapter's opening, West acknowledged that the community-collaborative process pursued by MHS helped him chart the course for his work at the NMAI. West had nominated the Mille Lacs Indian Museum to receive an American Association for State and Local History award. In his nomination letter, he offered the museum high praise for the prominence of the Mille Lacs perspective and voice in the exhibitions. "The presence of the Mille Lacs interpretive voice is explicit throughout" and is both "authentic and authoritative," he wrote, "a convincing demonstration of the proposition . . . that good history is not compromised by this kind of inclusiveness but, indeed, can be made sounder, more enriching, deeper."[82]

West went on to praise the exhibitions for successfully incorporating the best of new exhibition techniques, including multimedia and interactive technology, and for their excellence in design. The content of the exhibitions and the coverage they give to the full historical experience of the Mille Lacs people are, he believed, "very successful in making the critical point that Native peoples are as much a part of the present and should not be relegated to some static and often romanticized past."[83]

In 2003, while conducting ethnographic research in the Mille Lacs area, anthropologist Jennifer Stampe decided to return to the survey process and administer a new survey drawing upon the same methodology used in 1996. Stampe wanted to "reevaluate the central finding" and determine if a majority of the visitors did, indeed, miss the take-home message about contemporary life at Mille Lacs.[84] By conducting short interviews with some of the visitors after completing the survey, she found that most visitors had a much more nuanced understanding of Ojibwe history and culture than had been reported in the 1996 survey.

Her new survey brought into full relief the limitations of using quantitative methods alone when trying to assess audience reactions to exhibitions at tourist sites. She encourages the use of interviews and participant observation to properly contextualize their experiences as museum visitors. The information garnered from the 2003 survey, she argues, "cautions against interpreting 'thin' survey responses as uncomplicated evidence of shallow or uncritical responses to tourist sites."[85] It is important, however, to remember that all of the people surveyed in 1996 claimed to have enjoyed their experience at Mille Lacs. While quantitative audience research might be limited—and Stampe's 2003 survey may have complicated our understanding of the messages that visitors take away with them—for me, the most important aspect of the survey data is that visitors found their experiences positive and informative. Every one of those interviewed in 1996 found something compelling about the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum.



## AFTER THE OPENING, 1996 AND BEYOND: THE "ONGOING LIFE" AT THE MILLE LACS INDIAN MUSEUM

While the new Mille Lacs Indian Museum was positively received following its opening in 1996, the postopening life of the museum has not been without disappointments and challenges. During my follow-up site visits to the Minnesota Historical Society in 2001, I interviewed Rachel Tooker, then director of the Historic Sites Department and former Mille Lacs Indian Museum manager, about the status of the museum during a time of transition. Kate Miller, a non-Native woman, had been recently appointed site manager after the departure of two previous site managers, Joycelyn Shingobe Wedll and Sandi Blake, both of whom were members of the Mille Lacs Band. The departure of Wedll and Blake, along with the death of longtime employee and highly respected elder Batiste Sam in 1998, left many at MHS feeling that they had lost their strongest connections to the community. One of the primary reasons given by Rachel Tooker for Wedll and Blake's resignation is that MHS just could not match the Mille Lacs Band in terms of pay in a postcasino world. During our discussion, Tooker emphasized the need to "stabilize the management of the museum," and she spoke about the lack of community involvement at the site. She mentioned the "haltering and faltering" programming efforts, the improvement of which she believed was the crucial next step for the future of the museum. As she explained:

> I think the stories that we developed in the exhibit, what is really successful about that, is that people tend to view the museum as a tribal museum and not a mainstream organization museum. I view that as a real success that we went that far with it that our identity in many ways got lost. That's pretty rare for a mainstream organization to have that happen. But I think now, the carrying through of the programs and

the ongoing life, we have a long way to go in working ourselves into the heart of the Mille Lacs Band. And so, that is what I think is still our challenge, and we haven't solved it. There is still a deep divide, and we will have to work on it. . . . First, we need to stabilize the management there, which has been a real hard thing for us.[86]

As Tooker's words highlight, the postopening issues concern the programming (art classes and workshops, Anishinabe cultural courses for youth and families, community gatherings, public events and performances, lectures, and traveling exhibits, to name a few): Is there going to be an ongoing life at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum? And how extensively will the community be involved? MHS director Nina Archabal shared her concerns with me about the unfinished business and ongoing challenges of the museum. She had hoped that the programming efforts would build upon the momentum that the exhibitions started, but they had clearly stalled: "I have some disappointment, to tell you the truth, about the museum. Not about its content, certainly not the way in which it is regarded by the leaders and people whom I know up there. But the fact that we have not been able to get the kind of leadership we need from the community to make the museum really sing and perform at the level that I think it could."[87]

Certainly, the Minnesota state budget crisis during this period, the departure of key Mille Lacs Band members from leadership positions, and the cuts to the Historic Sites Department, which directly oversees management of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, all contributed to the "halting and faltering" programming efforts. But, as I consider some of the concerns raised by Tooker and Archabal regarding the ongoing life of the museum, my thoughts return to the deep history of the site. The place is embedded in colonial relationships.

I am reminded, for example, of Thomas Vennum's words in his 1979 report on the Mille Lacs Indian Museum. He mentions that by "accident and bequeathal," MHS became the owners of the Ayer Collection, which he claims is very valuable and also "contains . . . some very sensitive artifacts pertaining to the Ojibwa religion, the *mitewiwin*."[88] In rereading Vennum's comment, I couldn't help thinking how Band members must have felt upon Ayer's retirement in 1959 when this collection of their material culture—some of which is sacred—was given to the Minnesota Historical Society and not to those from whom it originated. Perhaps that is a possible source of the community's ambivalence about this site.

It is true that the exhibitions embody new museum theory and practice



and that the Mille Lacs Band's voice is prominent throughout. Even so, an absent-present is here. A historical ambivalence persists that is deeply rooted in the landscape. On one hand, the Mille Lacs Band members were involved with the site. They "made a living" at the trading post and later the museum; they held dance performances; they sold their arts and crafts to tourists at the Ayers' trading post; they posed for the mannequins in the "Four Seasons Room"; and, more recently, they collaborated on a new educational site for their community and the general public. On the other hand, underlying all this, the relationship was colonial. The legacy of the transfer from Harry and Jeanette Ayer to MHS is something that is not easily forgotten or reconciled.

As we know, the Ayers' initial presence at the site and their taking of the land and material culture during their tenure on the reservation is inextricably tied to the colonization process. While more nuanced views of tourism in Indigenous communities are currently being proposed that emphasize Native agency and the ability of communities to adapt to new ways of making a living, we must not forget that this is not a benign process—this production of arts and crafts for the tourist industry on reservations across the country during the early twentieth century. As anthropologist Ann Tweedie reminds us, even when Native people parted voluntarily with objects during this period, "it was often overwhelming economic and social pressures that forced the alienation."[89]

Nina Archabal alluded to the idea of distrust that is part of the deep history of the site and that cannot be easily dismissed, and this distrust remains at times unresolved. She said, "I think unfortunately [that] just as casino gambling doesn't take away hundreds of years of social deprivation and suffering, I would say that ten or fifteen years of good work on the part of the staff members here and good heart does not take away years and years and decades and decades of distrust."[90]

This unresolved issue does not take away from what has been accomplished. It simply indicates that asserting Native voice and decolonizing are processes: they involve many steps and stages. When I worked on this project in 1994 and then again in 1996 when I could view the final product, I really felt that this was one of the finest presentations of Native American history and culture produced in a museum. It reflected the best in new interpretative strategies; it showed keen engagement with the scholarship in Native American studies and Ojibwe history; and it embodied the collaborative exhibition development that swept the field in the 1980s and 1990s. I understood the long and arduous process to bring this project to fruition, and I greatly respected the thoroughness of the endeavor.

But when I returned to the site years later, I found my assessment changing as my own perspective developed. Over the last several years, I have engaged critically with how museums can serve as sites of decolonization and "sites of conscience." While I remain very impressed with the quality of the exhibitions at Mille Lacs, questions arose for me about the interpretative program there. The Mille Lacs Indian Museum is effective on so many levels, yet how successful has it been in offering an analysis of colonialism and its ongoing effects in the community? When that question arises for me, I also wonder, is it even appropriate for me to question the absence of a hard-hitting analysis of colonialism within the exhibition, given that the Mille Lacs Band elders on the advisory board determined the museum's content?

In the decade since this museum opened, at least one Native community has chosen to use their tribal museum as a place to tackle colonialism and its impact on their lives. Addressing historical unresolved grief is one of the primary goals of the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, a tribal museum in Michigan, which I will discuss in a later chapter. Its use of exhibits and programming for decolonizing purposes has served a critical function in promoting healing and understanding across generations in the Saginaw Chippewa community. But this raises the further question, should all tribally authored exhibitions be engaged in the decolonizing project?

While I have yet to fully resolve these questions within my own mind, I do believe that addressing historical unresolved grief should be the primary function of a decolonizing museum practice in a tribal museum. Something does shift in the interpretation when members of the community control a project from the outset.

In June 2010, the current site manager of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, Travis Zimmerman, shared with me his views of the state of the museum today. A gracious and outgoing person, he conveyed the many plans in the works to bring renewed vitality to the museum following years of changing management and leadership. Museum attendance is down by half—from roughly twenty thousand visitors per year following the museum's opening in 1996 to just ten thousand or so in 2009. One major reason is that the museum is open far less than originally planned. Due to a state budget crisis, the Minnesota Historical Society cut the hours dramatically at Mille Lacs to twenty-five hours per week during the height of the summer season from Memorial Day to Labor Day Weekend.[91] While the numbers may be down at Mille Lacs, the museum still draws a diverse group of visitors hailing from fifty-seven different countries.



When I asked Zimmerman about the subjectivity of the museum, he referred to the museum's status as a hybrid. While it fits most of the criteria of a tribal museum, especially given the first-person voice in the exhibitions, the difference is that it is not tribally owned and operated. He noted that the Mille Lacs Indian Museum has been "adopted as the red-headed stepchild by other tribal museums" because of its unique status as a historic site of MHS that privileges the voice and perspective of the Mille Lacs Band—and that it will eventually revert to Band control.

Currently, plans are under way to make the site more viable and to have the ongoing life that Rachel Tooker (former Mille Lacs manager and MHS Historic Sites Department director) spoke of in 2001. Developing a library for use by students from the Mille Lacs Band school, Nay Ah Shing, and nearby Onamia public schools; starting an All Nations café serving Native American food; hosting book signings and movie nights; digitizing the many hours of interviews with tribal elders in its collection in collaboration with the Mille Lacs Band archives staff for joint use between the two entities; and revising or expanding sections of the exhibit: these are just a few of the plans in the works under Travis Zimmerman's leadership.

Zimmerman also discussed the importance of changing the exhibitions, given that a significant number of tribal members have already seen the galleries. He hopes that changing the exhibits or adding new sections will encourage them to continue visiting. As he observed, "If the exhibits do not change, what would make them want to continue to come back?" At the time of our interview, a new media installation to complement and expand upon the "Veterans" exhibit was in development, which would make it the first new installation since the museum's opening in 1996.[92]

While the ongoing life of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum is a work in progress, I would like to return to the words of Richard West, whose high praise of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum project opens this chapter. I have just highlighted some of the challenges for the ongoing vitality of the museum and its programming efforts. I want to make clear, however, that I deeply value the Mille Lacs Indian Museum project as reflecting what Richard West described: a place that helped him chart the course for another collaborative project between Native people and a mainstream museum, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

The Mille Lacs Indian Museum is a place that presents Indigenous history to the public exceptionally well. It also serves as a site where Mille Lacs Band members can gain knowledge about their history and culture as they edu-

cate others. Whereas its subjectivity as a hybrid tribal museum has created challenges for some of its postopening programming efforts, the collaborative exhibitions created there helped set the stage for what would follow in the larger museum world. I refer, of course, to the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, which opened on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 2004—the subject of the next chapter.