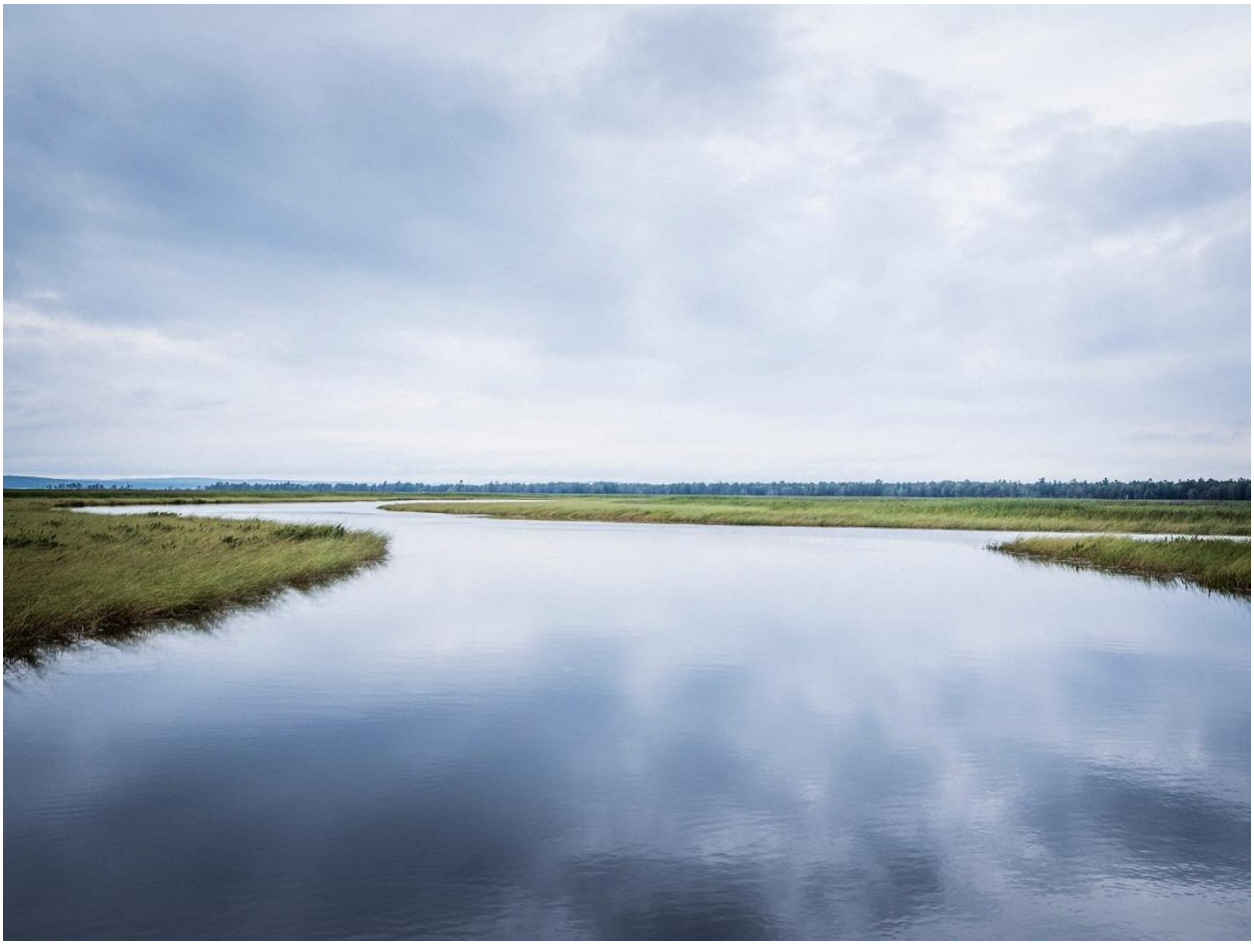
Ashland Daily Press

Documentary about Bad River Tribe nominated for several awards

By Tom Stankard
December 27, 2024



When John Huybrecht saw the documentary “Bad River,” he knew the film highlighting the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians’ struggle to preserve their way of life was worthy of an award.

The Bay Theater manager was not the only one who liked it. “Bad River” was the No. 1 movie at the theater for about four months. He had never seen anything like it.

“Right from the beginning, I knew it was going to be a big deal. Even on nights when we were slow, it was selling out. I’m honored to be able to help the community get to see it,” Huybrecht said.

Its popularity spread far and wide as audiences across the country learned about the tribe, its history and current struggle with Enbridge over the Line 5 pipeline.

Critics liked it so much “Bad River” is nominated for four awards: Critics Choice for Best Political Documentary, Critics Choice for Best Narration, Critics Choice for Best Historical Documentary and the Environmental Media Association’s Best Documentary Film.

No one was more surprised of the nominations than producer/director Mary Mazzio.

“When award season comes around, you see the big studios spending lots of money too jockey. We don’t have hundreds of thousands to spend on a campaign. My head spun off its axis when we found out. This is a wonderful validation of the quality of the film,” she said.

Critics are a “tough bunch of people” to please, Mazzio said, and it took a talented team behind the scenes to earn this kind of recognition, she stressed. “Bad River” was produced by Mazzio alongside Allison Abner (writer for “Narcos” and “West Wing”), Alec Sokolow (writer for “Toy Story”) and Grant Hill (owner of the Atlanta Hawks).

Mazzio’s films usually follow people doing inspirational things, and she found Bad River’s history and current situation “an extraordinary David and Goliath story.”

Who better to tell the story than tribal members, Mazzio figured. Patty Loew, professor emerita at Northwestern University, was among the members Mazzio interviewed. She spoke about the tribe’s resilient past, going back to the negotiations between Kechewaishke, or Chief Buffalo, and President Millard Fillmore to preserve Ojibwe land. Loew said the tribe has since fought for recognition of its right to hunt and fish in ceded territory, to preserve their land and to ensure a good life for future generations.

The film covers the history of Ojibwe conflicts, including the U.S. government removing kids from their families and sending them to Indian boarding schools, the Walleye Wars when European-Americans violently protested Ojibwe fishing rights, and the tribe’s stand against the open-pit Gogebic Taconite mining operation that threatened local waters. The battle with Enbridge is the latest chapter of that story.

When telling their story, the makers wanted those historical elements included, but to not take away from the emotion they brought out.

“It’s telling the story of resilience that elders are not shy of projecting,” she said. “Every edit, sound bit and asset, the nomination validates the choices we collectively made.”

Mazzio remembers some advice she learned when making the film. She was told “Bad River” is a story about land, and to tell it correctly, “you have to include elements in history.”

A good example, she said, is the Dawes Severalty Act that divided tribal lands into individual plots. When including it in the film, Mazzio didn’t “want to put the audience to sleep” with too many facts, but still wanted to include basic elements of Native American history.

Making the movie hit a hurdle when the Writer’s Guild of America strike started. The “painful waiting period” in production, as Mazzio called it, forced everyone to delay recording voice overs for narrating the script.

The pain was worth it, and “Bad River” hit the theaters in early 2024. Huybrecht texted Mazzio month after month that “Bad River” was selling more tickets in Ashland than “Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire,” “Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire” and “Dune: Part Two.”

“I didn’t know how to respond,” Mazzio said. “What was exciting was so many people not only took time to watch it, but there were lots of repeat customers.”

Having so many children and their families see local culture on the big screen and helping be a part of that excited Huybrecht.

“It was incredible to see it,” he said.

Just as incredible was the “nothing but positive reactions” from the audience, he said.

Based on its success, Huybrecht thinks this is just the beginning of what “Bad River” can win.

“I think it will be nominated for Oscars. It might have a chance,” he said.