

Preview:

The New Mille Lacs Indian Museum



ABOVE: One view of the museum: crafts-demonstration area, part of the building facing Highway 169. BELOW: Detail of tile band that wraps the museum, based on a beaded belt by band elder Batiste Sam.

Ten miles north of Onamia, where Highway 169 opens up to Mille Lacs Lake, a new cedar building shares the site of the restored Ayer trading post on the Mille Lacs Reservation. A tile belt of blue oak leaves designed by band elder Batiste Sam wraps the outside walls, and a copper roof resembling a wing seems to lift the building away from the lake. This is the spacious, new Mille Lacs Indian Museum, featuring interactive exhibits, crafts demonstrations, and special programs. It will open to the public on May 18, 1996.

The museum and a trading post, the gift of Harry and Jeannette Ayer, have been a part of the Minnesota Historical Society's historic sites network since 1959. The Ayers moved to Mille Lacs in about 1918, established a roadside trading post, and launched a fishing resort complete with cabins, a boatworks, a restaurant, and guided fishing expeditions on the lake. Capitalizing on the opportunity to acquire local Ojibwe craftworks and their location near Minnesota's Scenic Highway (now Highway 169), the Ayers prospered by selling American Indian arts and crafts from throughout the United States at their trading post. By the late

Sarah Libertus

Sarah Libertus is the Mille Lacs Indian Museum project manager.





Museum entrance and windows facing the lake, as seen from the trading post

1950s, the museum that the Ayers had begun in the back room of the store to display their personal collection of Indian-made objects had expanded into its own cinder-block building next door.¹

When the Ayers donated the site to the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), numerous

objects remained to document the business they had operated for nearly 40 years. Two of the sixteen fishing cabins survived, as did some tools, many photographs, and the boatworks shed. The original trading post and museum still contained more than 1,500 items the Ayers had collected at Mille Lacs. In August 1960 the MHS

¹ Russell W. Fridley, "Preserving and Interpreting Minnesota's Historic Sites," *Minnesota History* 37 (June 1960):68–69.





Dick Gahbow (standing in boat), a fishing guide at the trading post for many years; postcard, about 1925.

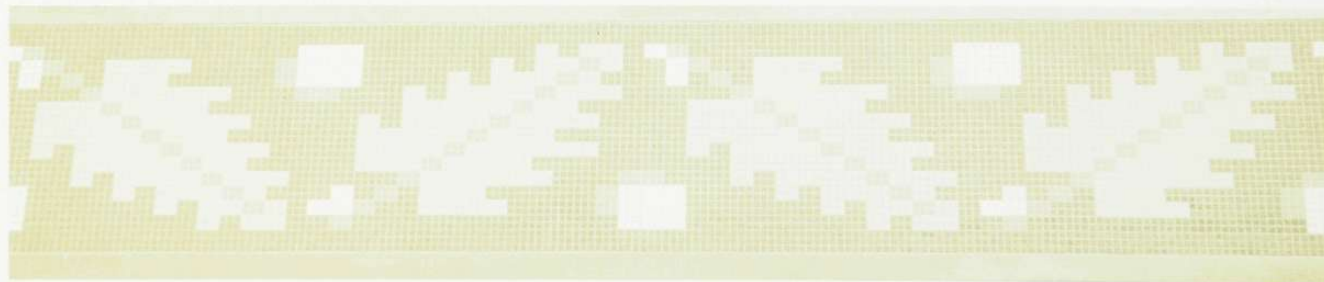
dedicated its new "State Indian Museum." A crowd of 1,500 attended ceremonies held at the local Vineland Indian School, and an estimated 4,000 visited the exhibits on opening day.²

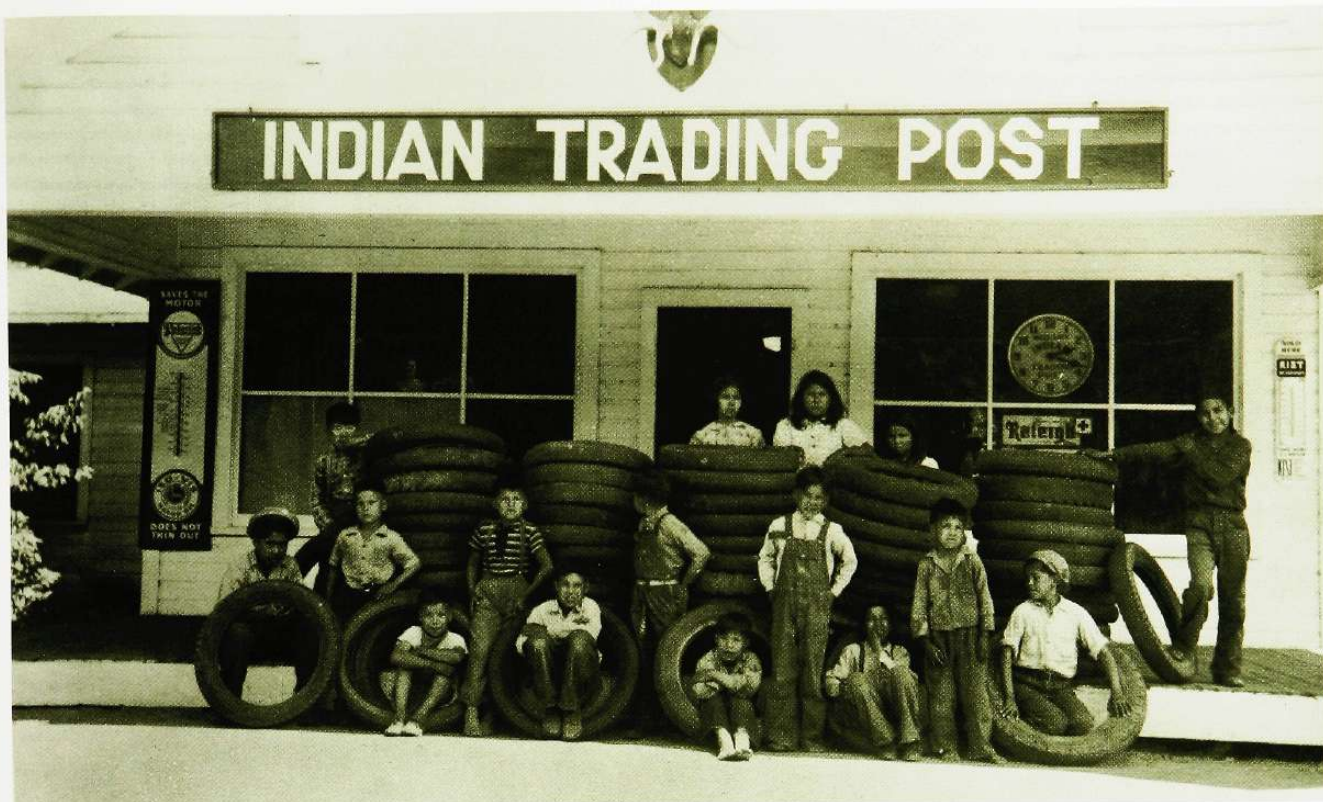
Through the years the museum remained a popular tourist destination and rest stop for motorists traveling on Highway 169. The Ayers had held powwows on Sundays for tourists, and many people fondly remember stopping at the trading post for ice cream or a souvenir. MHS continued the Ayers' tradition of hosting powwows and added a variety of new exhibits. A special part of any visit to the museum has always been the opportunity to watch Mille Lacs crafts-

people demonstrate their skills. These artists have included Maude Kegg, Betty Kegg, Cecilia Dorr, and Batiste Sam, nationally recognized for their distinctive beadwork, Margaret Hill, known for her birch-bark baskets embroidered with dyed *wiigob* (basswood strips), and Chuck Littlecreek, maker of wooden flutes.

Perhaps the most enduring attraction—a favorite of the Ojibwe community and visitors alike—was the Four Seasons Room, installed in 1964. This life-size diorama depicts Ojibwe seasonal activities at the time of first contact with Europeans. Members of the Mille Lacs band posed for the life-cast mannequins added in

² "News of the Society," *Minnesota History* 37 (Sept. 1960):135.





ABOVE: Children gathered in front of the Ayers' trading post, about 1940. RIGHT: Jim Hanks, Sr., and Joe Eagle working at the boatworks, 1931.

1972, and band members still guide visitors through the exhibit. Encouraging personal interaction between visitors and museum guides, the Four Seasons Room also conveys historical details of Ojibwe life not shown in other types of exhibits and represents the integral role the Mille Lacs community played in creating the museum.

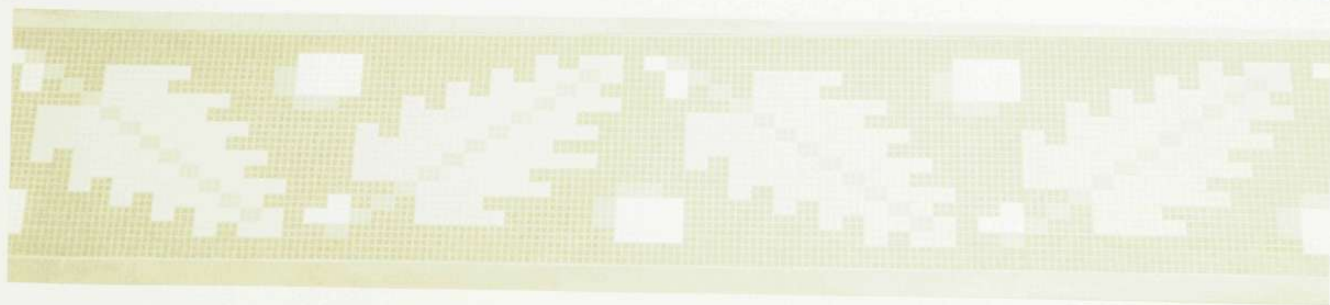
Unfortunately, the cinder-block building that housed the Four Seasons Room, the exhibits, and much of the Ayers' extensive collection could not withstand Minnesota's extreme weather. With no foundation, the cement began to deteriorate, the trading post walls rotted, and the pine floor warped. Because of these conditions, the collection was moved to MHS's climate-controlled storage in the Twin



RIGHT: *Now e gesis o quay* (Batiste Sam), *Nah wah cumig goo quay* (Maude Kegg), and Frank Sam posing for the mannequins to be installed in the Four Seasons Room.

BELOW: *Nah wah cumig goo quay* (Kegg) making wiigob, used in birch-bark baskets and mats, from basswood bark, 1947. A celebrated artist who received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1990, Kegg was a long-time employee of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum. The mannequin she posed for is in the fall section of the Four Seasons Room. She passed away in January 1996 at the age of 93.





Cities during the early 1980s. In cooperation with the Mille Lacs band, MHS began to plan a new museum.

The local Mille Lacs Ojibwe community has always been integral to the Ayer trading post and museum. The new museum, too, represents a partnership between the Minnesota Historical Society and the Mille Lacs band. Working together, members of both groups selected a location, an architectural firm, and the content of the exhibits. An advisory committee made up of band members long associated with the museum and others responsible for building the band's historical archives worked with MHS staff to begin the planning process. The committee met with project architects Frederick Bentz/Milo Thompson/Robert Rietow, Inc. and design architect Thomas Hodne Architects, Inc. To keep the larger Mille Lacs community informed, committee members presented the project at various gatherings, including the annual powwow, the State of the Band Address, and elders' meetings. As a result, the historical

society's and the band's expectations successfully merged in a museum designed to conserve precious artifacts and incorporate the beauty of its setting to tell the band's history.

The working partnership also extended to the exhibits and programs. Exhibit content and design developed in meetings between the MHS exhibit team and the Mille Lacs advisory committee. For example, the committee wanted the Four Seasons Room reinstalled in the new museum. MHS staff carefully documented the objects and placement of mannequins and structures before removing, packing, and storing them. They cleaned and repaired the mannequins, including clothing and hair, and all of the objects. The Four Seasons Room is now the centerpiece of the new building.

The Mille Lacs community also made it clear to MHS that the new museum should chronicle the many ways in which the band has retained its culture, traditions, and its home—often against great odds—through the past two centuries. Several new exhibits, including *Our Living Culture*, *Making a Living*, and *Nation Within a Nation*, focus on contemporary history, picking up the story where the Four Seasons Room leaves off. The new exhibits depict the people of Mille Lacs as a vital, thriving community with strong ties to their past and great hope for their future.

Since planning began a decade ago, there have been many changes for the partners. The Minnesota Historical Society opened its new History Center in St. Paul, and the Mille Lacs band opened two casinos that have provided funds for constructing two new schools, a health clinic, and two community centers. The band also upgraded housing, roads, and water systems and has plans for more expansion and economic diversification. The new museum has benefited from these new resources. In its exhibits, voices from interviews with clinic, school, and tribal government employees tell how band members carry on their culture in their daily life. *Our Living Culture* showcases a dazzling array of contemporary powwow outfits made for the exhibit by band members known



Exhibit planning, with members of the Mille Lacs Advisory Committee and MHS staff (from left): Eve Kuschel, Joyce Wedll and Sandi Blake (standing), and Kendra Dillard.



for their skill. And one of the Ojibwe language teachers at the band's Nay Ah Shing High School developed an Ojibwe-language component for the exhibit. Her voice on the computer teaches Ojibwe words like *zagime* and *makadem-ashkikiwaaboo*. (You have to visit the exhibit to find out what they mean!)

Funding for the new museum and restored trading post has been a partnership between public and private sources. In 1987 the Minnesota state legislature appropriated \$4 million for the project. Federal government support came from the Economic Development Agency to promote tourism and create new jobs, the U.S. Department of Transportation (ISTEA program), and from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Gifts and grants from the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, The Laura Jane Musser Fund, The McKnight Foundation, Margaret W. Marvin, and Mr. and Mrs. Bernard M. Granum provided another \$600,000. The band

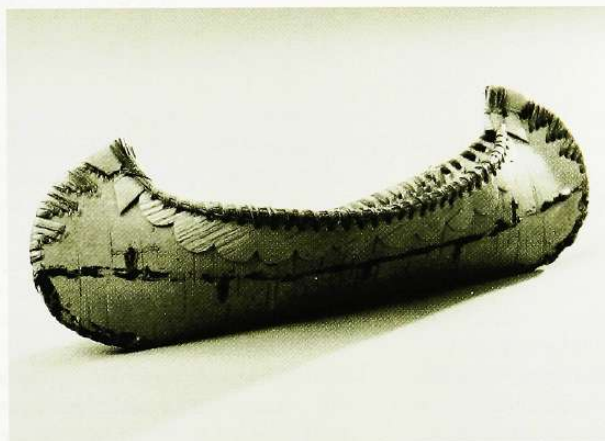
also made in-kind contributions such as utilities, overflow parking space, and countless hours of staff time.

The new museum highlights the contemporary story of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe while building on the strengths of the original museum: the Four Seasons Room, a crafts-

demonstration area, and, behind the scenes, storage and exhibition areas designed to preserve the irreplaceable Ayer collections, which will return to the building. There, the objects will play a part in the preservation and growth of the Ojibwe culture at Mille Lacs.

The Mille Lacs Indian Museum will reopen its doors with a weekend of contemporary and traditional American Indian music, arts, and crafts. Visitors will be able to celebrate with

the MHS and the Mille Lacs band the results of an important partnership between a state and a sovereign nation, an institution and a community, and a historical society and a people.



Miniature canoe, originally made for sale at the trading post or along the highway. Part of the Harry and Jeannette Ayer collection, this canoe is one of many period objects on exhibit at the new museum.

All images and objects are in the MHS collections. The photos on p. 32 and 33 are by Sarah Libertus, p. 36, left, by Monroe Killy, p. 36-37 by Eugene D. Becker, and p. 39 by Peter Latner.





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