Profiles
IN
CONSERVATION

A not-so-easy path through the forest
Life in northern Wisconsin is not always easy.
Just ask Larry Waukau.

When last we spoke, Waukau, a member of the Menominee Tribe in northern Wisconsin, said his pipes had been frozen for nearly two months, and he still had four-foot snow banks in April.

This past winter featured 67 days of below-zero weather. “Green Bay had only 54, and they set a record,” Waukau said.

He was looking forward to spring, whenever that arrived, and to fly fishing, he said.

The 67-year-old, commonly spotted in blue jeans, work boots, and a flannel shirt, had been busy chopping wood to give away to needy people. Growing up poor on the Menominee Reservation had taught him the challenges of living without some of the basic necessities of life, including indoor heating.

“I was one of 13 children,” he said. “We grew up very poor in a tarpaper shack of a house, with barely enough to eat, on the mill pond just outside of Neopit, where the mill is located,” he said.

Waukau recounted a traumatic childhood experience that ultimately served to change his life.

“When I was a freshman in high school, my father passed away. He drowned in the mill pond. He was walking across the pond when he fell through the ice and drowned. It was below zero. I could hear him yelling, but I didn’t know what to do.”

“He was on his first day of work in three years,” added Waukau.

His father had lost his job years earlier, after the former president of Menominee Enterprises Incorporated (MEI), now Menominee Tribal Enterprises (MTE), asked him to bring the receipts to the bank on a Friday afternoon. “My father didn’t have enough gas in his truck to go the 20 something miles away.

The following Monday they reported that he used company gas to fill his personal vehicle.” He was subsequently fired.

The younger Waukau said his traumatic experiences of his father’s firing and later tragic death, as well as his own resulting feelings of helplessness, changed his whole perspective on life.

“Growing up here on the reservation, when I left, I made myself a promise that I was never going to be cold or hungry again, and I never have.”

He also vowed that if he was ever in management, he would do his best to treat employees fairly. “If I was in a position of management, I would give employees due consideration. Why people miss work, why they’re late. The emotional distress when one is terminated. ... I think the sense of compassion in my life has been preeminent.”

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USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.
He swore to himself that he would one day work his way out of poverty, become educated, and do his part to help others in life.

Unfortunately, paying for college posed another challenge. He missed out on some of the educational benefits many other Native Americans enjoyed due to his tribal affiliation as a Menominee, he said. “We, the Menominee Tribe, were ‘terminated.’” The Congressional Act of 1954, implemented in 1961, excluded Menominee people from all benefits due to Native Americans,” he added.

“They wanted to assimilate Native Americans into the American culture. A lot has been written about it,” he added. “I lived the racism. I lived the pluralism. You deal with that,” he said.

He said his ambition in life when he left the reservation was at first to become a teacher or lawyer. But being poor and with few prospects, he struggled for years to finance his higher education.

“I looked for ways to pay for college, and I worked for three years as a resident assistant.” He also unloaded boxcars at one point, milked cows, and worked at the Chrysler plant during the summers, doing double shifts at $3.29 per hour to pay his way through school.

He ended up joining the military to benefit from the G.I. Bill, and he subsequently served in the Vietnam War in the 101st Airborne Division and 173rd Airborne Brigade. The experience left him emotionally scarred.

“I have PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Due to Vietnam, you can become spiritually and mentally broken due to combat and watching people die. Living through this experience changes people totally. The personal struggles I encountered due to my time in the Vietnam War have left me with a personal battle in attempting to overcome the effects of PTSD.”

“The prejudice and bias against individuals that suffered from PTSD has given me an extra emphasis in life to dispel the myth of productivity to society. It’s a personal mission for me to support other veterans in their struggles, both professionally and personally, to share in the goodness of what we have fought for.”

In time, he eventually earned his education and then some. “I have a bachelor’s degree. My master’s degree is in counseling and vocational education, and I’m just shy of my dissertation for my doctorate. I left my doctoral pursuit in 1991,” he said, adding “Other than the last six months, 1991 was the darkest time in my life.”

“What brought me back to Menominee to the reservation in 1991 was that my job was discontinued at the University of Wisconsin. My advisor left and my new advisor didn’t like my dissertation topic. I returned to the reservation with basically nothing.” He and his wife also divorced, after 16 years, that year.

“I have an enormous amount of faith,” he added, “at times, though, the tank runs low.”

“I started the practice of barcoding every log back in 1991-1993. Not only the logs, but the lumber as well by species and grade, green lumber and kiln-dried lumber. All the equipment and merchandise was accountable.”
When he returned to the reservation he began working for MTE, a company that specializes in timber products.

After a while he began to work his way up the ranks and into management at MTE. He used concepts and theories gained through his education to better management practices there.

“Accountability is a very important issue for me. I have a very strong management philosophy,” he said.

Waukau practiced W. Edwards Deming’s philosophy of organization management; it became the foundation of his management style. “I think his approach helped me to become successful in management at MTE. Some managers accepted it wholeheartedly, others took it in stride. When you look at your leadership you want to know their philosophy and their style. They knew it was based on fact and statistical measurement.”

Waukau served at one time as the president of MTE, advancing the new technology at the mill and maintaining MTE’s reputation as nationally-recognized sustained yield organization.

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He said he insisted on barcoding logs at all stages of the process, because it’s imperative to keep track of the product in all its stages and throughout its schedule of movement from place to place.

“That has a chain of custody. You have to have paperwork that verifies the chain of custody.”

“MTE is a premier organization,” he added. “We put together three times as much timber as the Nicolet National Forest and we’re one third the size of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. This is because of the sustained yield practices which have been in place since 1891.”

“There are only four to five places [Native American-run timber operations] that are commercial-size. MTE is one of two places in the country that is not a mom-and-pop sawmill and employs more than 50 people.”

He said they have 15 major tree species at MTE, but there are 28 species that could be cut from the forest. Today, MTE serves 14 paper mills and has about 150 customers throughout the United States.

“Our wood is Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified. I pushed for the certification, because I wanted to assure the Menominee people and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) that the very best practices were being implemented here and could be measured and verified through an outside source. This isn’t cheap. It’s like $30,000-40,000 a year. People said you’re wasting your money, but I wanted to show them the facts that an outside source could verify the accountability in all areas of forest management.”

Waukau also worked with the U.S. Forest Service, Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry, on a strategic planning effort.

“Instead of hiring a consultant, we set up a process in which we formed teams of external experts and MTE staff from human resources, marketing, and operations,” he said.

Over the past 20 years a number of projects were implemented as a result of the plan, including a small diameter mill. Soon, MTE will have a combined heat and power plant, funded in part by the Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Energy. All of these projects came out of the strategic plan that Waukau issued.

He also served as an Upward Bound director for 16 years and worked with over 1,200 students, more than 90 percent of whom were minority students. “I’ve witnessed the success of hundreds of those people and to see them now, in their forties, that they would not have accomplished what they did without Upward Bound.”

Waukau also worked diligently with the president of the College of the Menominee Nation to get the institution of higher learning established. “It shows my commitment not only to education but also the social opportunities for employment.”

Working in management did not come without its conflicts, though. “I managed the organization for 14 years and have been twice fired,” he said.

“In total this is my 32nd year on the board. I was re-elected in December.”

Looking back on his life course, Waukau said he has much to be proud of. “My greatest accomplishment in
life was to be the very best father that I could be to my three daughters, as well as my contribution to the Menominee,” he said.

He said one of the highlights of his life was to have his daughter come back home after an internship in D.C., saying that a friend of hers told her his name was engraved on the wall at the museum.

Visitors will find Waukau’s name on a wall of the American Indian Museum, part of the Smithsonian. “I was nominated for that by my very dear friend Ada Deer,” he said. “She was my mentor and my role model for many years. She first tapped me on the shoulder in college and asked me to help her with the restoration of the Menominee Tribe to federal status.”

Today, aside from his occasional exhilarating run, Waukau tends to live life at a slower pace and has more time to enjoy his interests, including fly fishing. He loves it so much that he’s writing a book of poems about it. From age 12, he even tied his own flies—until just recently.

“I quit tying flies about five years ago because of my diminishing eyesight,” he said.

What Waukau loves most about fly fishing: “In a spiritual sense of the word, one is in tune with nature.”

“I particularly like fishing at night,” he added. “The big large browns and large brook trout are primarily nocturnal. It’s also when no one else is on the stream.”

By Glenn Rosenholm
THE TARPAPER SHACK*

I saw the tarpaper shack half-hidden there, 
gashes in the tarpaper revealed pine boards beneath 
under a cloudy sky, heavy, gray, overhung 
with branches of silver and green. 
Long since abandoned, 
with its stovepipe rusty and tilted skyward 
as if peering for smoke to again consume it with purpose, 
the shack itself was a welcome sight.

That which had once sheltered was now sheltered itself 
by the growth of outstretched limbs groping to reach and comfort; 
like an orphan it stood, misplaced by time and reclaimed 
by the forest, and it appeared to have found proper 
company among the solid beech and hemlock 
like guardians they stood 
as moisture in the air protested with a rumbling 
and specks appeared on my vest like a warning.

Through the smell of kerosene and stale woodsmoke 
I approached the shack, 
and upon the broken boards of the one-step entrance 
I caught myself reaching in to knock and apologize, 
and ask "But may I come in?" 
And the rickety screendoor hesitated with rusty hinges 
and boards of red rot, 
making me pause while the rain came trickling down, touching 
every upturned hair on my back, eroding my confidence.

I entered through the doorway and let go the spool-knob doorhandle, 
and envied the trust of the shack’s previous inhabitants 
where no locks held anyone out. 
I felt a twinge of guilt for the welcome 
that must have always been there 
for the passage of loggers, ax, traps, myself.

Within that shelter the rain-echoes 
and the dusty stillness inside damored like an intrusion; 
the stillness beckoned to hear me speak 
and I mumbled my happiness inside, 
peering out through the stovepipe hole 
where flashes like fingers were shaking at me for the violation.

And I settled down on a chewed bank of straw 
whose eyes must be watching, 
anticipating and alert; my eyes began searching 
through the dim light: this forgotten shack 
held the secrets of moonshine, 
jugs hung from the rafters, and tattered magazines, yellowed and grease 
stained from times dreams were made, 
the old prices of laughter lingering.

And my imagination hurried the time along in the shack, 
sheltered comfortably, extending itself to me 
until unnoticed calm returned, and reality tugged at my 
contemplations demanding I leave this decaying bit of nostalgia; 
like life struggling, the shack became a cathedral 
of times and things evading death 
half-hidden beneath a canopy of green.

And yet that shack stood there in the trees 
like an old maid in a crowd 
as I hurried away downstream wanting to look back, 
clutching my rod, 
holding tightly onto my creel, 
a frayed yellow magazine lodged inside my shirt.

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