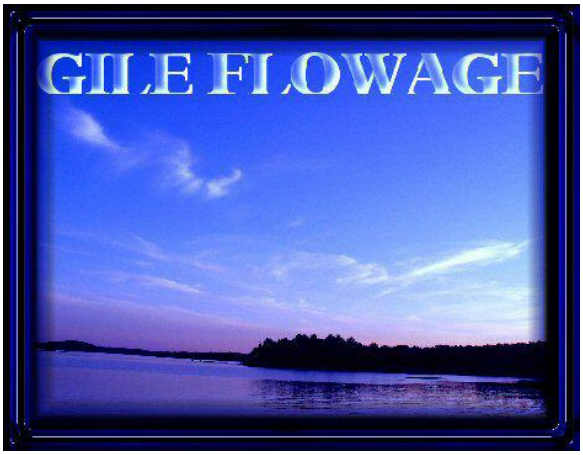


BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GILE FLOWAGE

IRON COUNTY, WISCONSIN

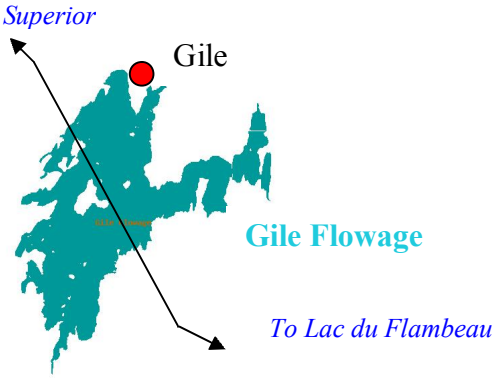
Compiled by the Friends Of The Gile Flowage
in fulfillment of a DNR Lakes Planning Grant:
Gile Flowage Watershed Comprehensive Plan-Phase I

Note: Little written history exists about the Gile Flowage. Based on the scarce amount of information available, it is recommended that oral history research be conducted of local residents with first hand knowledge of the Flowage and its watershed to create a historic record of this unique natural resource.

PRE-EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

To appreciate the significance of the Gile Flowage and its watershed, it is important to consider the historic landscape void of a 3384-acre body of water caused by damming the West Branch of the Montreal River. The West Branch was a rocky, north flowing, non-navigable river that ran unimpeded from its source in Island Lake, to its confluence with the East Branch, and on to Lake Superior.

Before Europeans came to the Penokee Range in search of wealth in iron ore called "red gold", the land behind what would become the Gile Flowage was a first superhighway for Native Americans traveling between their major villages on LaPointe on Madeline Island and Lac du Flambeau. In the 1700's European fur traders would follow their footsteps along what would be called The Flambeau Trail"- considered the most difficult portage in the Old Northwest Territories. Traces of the old trail are now gone on the land, but it can be seen sketched on old survey maps. It clearly is depicted as crossing the area that would become the Gile Flowage from its NE corner near the old Montreal Mine to the SE corner near the site of what was called "Morgando's Campground."

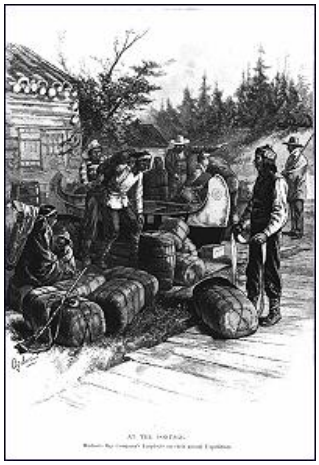


Approximate route of the Flambeau Trail across what is now the Gile Flowage

Although the north flowing Montreal River called in Ojibwa "Kawasiji-wangsepi"-White Falls River or "where-there-is-a-strong-foaming-current-in-the-river" nearly connected the Lake Superior and Mississippi Watershed, its waterfalls and rapids made it not navigable. From the Lake Superior shore, it was a 45-mile, 120-pause portage through swamps, dense forests "inhabited only by owls" as described by François Malhiot a Northwest Fur Company Clerk , and the rugged Penokee Range. All goods bond for Lad du Flambeau (or for LaPointe if the traveler was departing the country) had to be carried in 90-pound packs. Most voyageurs carried a minimum of two packs or 180 pounds of trade goods. It was hard going. Travel over the portage took between 2.5 and 7 days depending on the trail's condition.

Traveling south the trail crossed the Continental Divide with the overland portion thankfully ending at Long Lake (north of Mercer, WI) where stashed canoes could be used to more easily paddle the water highways the rest of the way to Lac du Flambeau.

The trail followed the east side of the Montreal River starting at the river's mouth at Lake Superior. The original Flambeau Trail led up a steep hill paralleling the 90-foot Superior Falls. Eight pauses later (3.5 miles) the trail crosses the river one mile upstream. In 1847, Assistant US Geologist J.G. Norwood made these observations of the Montreal River *"At the crossing, the trap (rock) is exposed in the bed of the river, crossing in a low range, bearing NW and SE. The country ascended all the way to day in series of ridges with wet and in some instances swampy valleys intervening".*



Fur Trade Party, ca 1700's

On September 22, 1847, Norwood states "Two miles from the Spruce River brought us to the crossing of the west branch of the Montreal River, where we concluded to camp". The Next day he describes crossing the Montreal River at a location 953 feet above Lake Superior. Here he states the river is about 25 feet wide and 3 feet deep. His journal adds that "*it has been bridged in a rude manner by the engages of the American Fur Trade Company who have, for may years, transported goods over this rout to the small trading posts established among the Indians at Lac du Flambeau and other points in this direction".* From this point he comments on ascending hills of slight elevation to the continental divide. Was this a crossing of the West Branch of the Montreal River somewhere near the present Gile Dam?

The West Branch of the Montreal, the stream whose held back waters creates the Gile Flowage, has been called many names: Balsam River, Middle River, and Rocking Bridge River. Ojibwa Indians and some early travelers called it "Gogogashugun" or River-crossed-by-a-fallen-swaying-tree". Today a green sign on Hwy. 77 at the West Branch of the Montreal River carries its Anglo name on one side and its Ojibwa name on the other.

The Gile Flowage's ties to Native people continue today. The Flowage is within the Ceded Territory of the Chippewa Indians and therefore subject to co-management between tribal

resource management through the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission(GLIFWC) and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Tribal spearing for walleye occurs each spring. Recently, GLIFWC as introduced "manoomin" or wild rice into the northern eastern corner Flowage along adjacent to Highway 51.

BORDER WARS

Why The Gile Flowage Is In Wisconsin

(from "Trade and Travel in Montreal Country" Otis Bersing)

Iron County owes is share of mineral wealth and jurisdiction over the Gile Flowage to an error made by Captain Cram of the US topographic engineers in 1840. The Montreal River has been a major factor in the boundary disputes between Michigan and Wisconsin. IN 1836, eight years before the Wisconsin's statehood, Congress ordered, the boundary between Michigan and Wisconsin was held to be a continuous water line from the headwaters of the Menominee River, to Lac Vieux Desert (then thought to the be sources of the Montreal River), then down the Montreal, to Lake Superior. They commissioned Cram, a government surveyor, to survey and mark the border.

Cram was especially taken with the Montreal River writing in 1841: *"The Montreal…presents.. a great variety of beautiful scenery, and the extreme wilderness of its features possess peculiar charms for the lover of the picturesque".*

After having difficulty finding Lac Vieux Desert, Cram's expedition proceeded across country to find the headwaters of the Montreal River. In triangulating the country, Cram decided that the source of the Montreal was the point where a small tributary known as the Balsam River entered to the east. How he happened to select this point is now known since the main stream of the Montreal rises in what was then know as "Twin Lake".

If Captain Cram would have correctly located the line at the head of Twin Lake, the Wisconsin-Michigan border would have been 8 miles south of its present location. Cram's error caused a 600 sq. mile triangular piece of land, including Hurley and the eastern shore of what would become the Gile Flowage, and practically every rich iron ore mine in the Hurley-Montreal iron mining district to be located in Wisconsin rather than Michigan.

Realizing the tax revenue and resource loss the error created, the Michigan legislature tried to annex the "lost territory" beginning in 1907. In 1923, the State of Michigan sued, claiming that the West Branch of the Montreal was the main stream of the Montreal River and it should be the starting point for the state boundary line. This again would have placed the City of Hurley in Michigan and the east side of what is now Gile Flowage in the Wolverine State.

The US Supreme Court finally confirmed Wisconsin's title to the disputed territory, putting what would become the Gile Flowage in Wisconsin.

TALE OF TWO CITIES

The West Branch of the Montreal River separates the City of Montreal into two sibling communities: Montreal on the northwest side and Gile on the northeast side of the Flowage. The community of Gile has been part of the City of Montreal, a "city of the fourth class" (indicating its size-not importance)—but don't tell Gile that!

A sibling rivalry exists between the two communities has it origins in the different natural resources bases that developed each town. While Montreal was founded on iron ore mining, Gile grew up on white pine that fed the Montreal River Lumber Company mill. Montreal and Gile had separate schools.

"Be-Guiled"
What's in a name? The Gile (rhymes with "tile") Flowage was named for the community of Gile located at the northern end of the Flowage.

Even though, the two siblings were united into on City in 1924. But disagreements were inevitable. In 1925, a disagreement as to where to build the new school could only be solved by building two schools: one in Gile and one in Montreal.

To this day, the City of Montreal is the only community of its size with two post office: one for Montreal, the other for Gile!

1885- THE FIRST DAM
MONTREAL RIVER LUMBER COMPANY

1885…It was a boom year for the area. Rich hematite ore had just been found by the Oglebay-Norton Company and the Montreal Mining Company was formed across the river and would become one of the world's deepest, richest iron ore mine. The first white child was born in Hurley. The railroad connection between Hurley and the Lake Superior seaport in Ashland was complete.

This year Dan McCrossen stared the Montreal River Lumber Company along the banks of the West Branch of the Montreal River in Gile, damming the river to control water for flushing the logs to the mill. Logging the virgin forests with their wealth of white pine that could be floated down river to a waiting sawmill was the next industrial boom behind iron mining. By 1886, an estimated 2000 "wood choppers" working for McCrossen's company were at work on the Range. By 1890, the huge mill was in full swing across from the Montreal Mine. By the 1920's, the seemingly inexhaustible wellspring of timber ran dry. In many towns, only trees too crooked to be used except for firewood" remained. Lumber mills around Iron County ceased operations and were dismantled. Such as the fate of the great Montreal River Lumber Company.

While no existing documents were found to explain what happened to the West Branch River dam used by the company, it is assumed that at the mill's closure it was also dismantled or was left to wash out come spring flooding. Once again the swift waters the West Branch of the Montreal River flowed unrestrained, offering opportunities for great trout fishing.

FLOODED FORTIES

Little written information exists about what the area that would become the Gile Flowage looked like prior to its flooding in 1936. Informal oral histories indicate a number of farms existed in this area, including the Nygard Farm. Potatoes were among the crops grown there. During low water periods, foundations of old buildings may be seen protruding above the water in front of the Gile Dam and evidences of roads can be seen in shallow areas that once crossed the flooded area.

Oral histories should be collected from local residents who are still living who can document what existed here before creation of the Gile Flowage.

BIRTH OF THE FLOWAGE, August 1936

As rural communities became electrified and the demand along the Iron Range for power for mining and other industries grew, companies looked for opportunities to generate cheap power

The Wisconsin Public Service approved the construction of a dam and reservoir on West. Branch of Montreal River (sometimes called the Gile River) to augment flow to the downstream hydro facility. The Gile Dam was one of six dams proposed for the Montreal River. Two dams were proposed above the Gile Dam, one dam on the East Branch of the Montreal, and two more dams below Gile dam before the Saxon Falls Dam. Only the dam at Gile was constructed, because it was the most cost effective.

The Dam was built on the former site of the Montreal River Log Company dam dating back to the 1800's. It had either been removed or washed out. Construction on the dam was completed in December 1940 and the Flowage started filling with the spring snowmelt in 1941. Lake Superior District Power Company was first owner, but merged in later years into Northern States Power which eventually became Xcel Energy.

From historic news article ca. 1947, no date or author:

The dam was *"completed in January after several delays. Up until then, it remained ajar. "Already the first thaws have sent water surging through it to be captured in the dams at lake Superior and Saxon, As soon as these smaller areas are filled with water, the Gile Dam will be closed.*

To get the project ready, all winter 25 men brushed the area to be flooded in the Towns of Carey and Pence. The brushing in the Town of Carey could be seen from Hwy. 51 Another job prior to creating the new Flowage was the necessary task of relocating 1.4 miles of County Trunk C. This work was done by the Iron County Highway Department under contract with the Lake Superior District Power Company. Walther Williams, then Iron

County Highway Commissioner, revealed that about 700 feet of concrete Hwy. 51 is in danger of being flooded and that this summer the power company will let out a contract to raise about 1200 fee of this principal highway just north of the Nygard Farm. About one-half mile of what is know as the Knight Road in the Town of Carey has to be raised to prevent flooding.

The new lake will come within one quarter mile of Lake Ledvina (then a water source for thirsty Hurley) and Hurley and speculation and guessing as to whether it will raise the level of Hurley's water source is a popular subject. However the power company engineers have vouched for the fact that it will not bring the Lake Ledvina level up.

"With the advent of Spring and the thaws that accompany it, it is expected that the Gile dam in the city of Montreal will soon be closed to hold back the rushing waters of the Gile River. When the dam is closed in the near future it will mark the birth of a new "lake.

The new flowage will cover parts of Pence, Carey, and the City of Montreal in the Gile Location. The starting point for this body of water, about four miles in area, is just a stone's throw of Hurley. With such a large body of water within the city limits, as good deal of speculation is rife concerning fishing prospects. The Northland Sports Club of Hurley is centering all of its activities on seeing that the Gile Flowage is stocked with an ample supply of fish.

Tests have been made of the water already and more tests will be made when the area is flooded to determine how much and what species of fish the flowage will support.
In the meantime, the rush of flood waters is awaited. But I will not be long 'ere a lake is born".

GILE FLOWAGE DAM

Without the dam, there would be no Gile Flowage. To understand the history of the Flowage, it is important to know significance of the dam which creates it.

The Gile Flowage is one of twenty hydro facilities in WI currently owned by Xcel Energy. There other hydro facility is in MN. Dams range in hydro capacity from 168 kilowatts (Hayward hydro facility) up to 57 mg watts (Jim Falls). Hydro serves 7% of electrical system and 15-18% of customer needs Xcel subsidiaries include: Chippewa/Flambeau Improvement Corp 4 dams(including Turtle-Flambeau Flowage), Chippewa Flowage, Moose L. reservoir, Rest Lake Dam (Manitowish Waters).

The Gile Flowage Dam is 30 feet high by 1100 ft. long. Discharge is controlled by two "sluice" gates 6'x5' high used for low flow and a larger gate 12'x16' to let river water pass through during high river flows due to rain and spring runoff.

There are three operators that maintain the dam. They are also responsible for maintaining two other dams on the system the Saxon Falls and Superior Falls; and the White River dam in Ashland County.

No hydro power is generated at the Gile Dam. Unlike most other dams, it is not FERC (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) licensed. The purpose of the Gile Dam is only to store water for release to the downstream hydro facilities at Saxon and Superior Falls to keep them economical to operate. Water is stored for times when the river (east and west branches of the Montreal) is low, so they can generate power and keeps the other dams profitable. It is a balancing act and Xcel tries to manage the Gile water levels to allow 2 other hydros to run.

The downstream dams include the Saxon Falls and Superior Falls , both built in 1912. The electrical generation capacity of the system that starts with water flushed through the Gile Dam is 3.3 mg watts or 22,000 mg watts per year or enough power for 2600 homes.

WATER LEVELS

One of the features that make the Gile Flowage unique and sometimes a frustration to adjacent property owners and boaters, is its changing water levels.

The normal level for the Gile Flowage when is full (called "full pond") is elevation 1490 feet. This level dates back to 1936 when the Public Service Commission issued orders for maintaining pond levels. The minimum flow is 10 cubic ft./sec out of the dam and a block was installed in the small sluice gate to keep that flow steady. Currently discharging 30 cfs. Natural inflow into the Gile is 10 cfs.

Like many flowages, the Gile's water levels fluctuate seasonally to meet the demand for water to operate hydro facilities downstream. Since 1984 NSP/Xcel has decreased the draw down to an average of 7 feet per season. During the summer the average is 6 feet and the winter draw down averages 7 1/2 to 8 feet. In 2003, the draw down was 71/2-8 feet due to summer drought. The maximum draw down allowable is 15' or to the 1475' elevation.

There is always a draw down starting around May 1 to control the winter runoff and a gradual draw down until the fall rains. The winter draw down starts approx. Dec. 1.

Operators will close down the dam to allow only the minimum 10 cubic ft./sec. discharge. There are flood benefits because it allows the Flowage to capture more water, however if there is too much water the dam will be opened to let excess pass out.

Without the ability to conduct draw downs, the downstream hydros would not be economically feasible and therefore there would be no need to own or operate the Gile Dam.

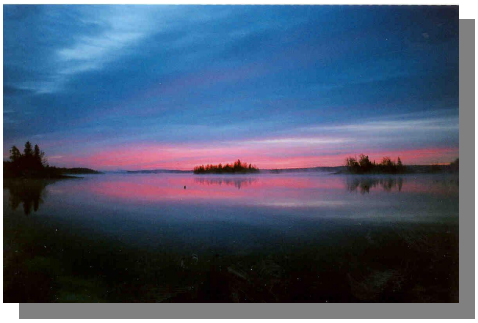
GILE FLOWAGE ISLANDS

At 3,384 acres, the Gile Flowage ranks 30th among Wisconsin's largest inland lakes. What makes the Gile unique is that it is the largest Laurientian Shield lake in Wisconsin. Most of the shoreline is ancient exposed bedrock and the Flowage is dotted with bedrock islands reminiscent of the Boundary Waters and Quetico canoe-country region of northern Minnesota.

Little is know about the history of these islands, except for a few colorful local names they have been given. Some of the islands are in public ownership through Iron County. Others are owned by Xcel Energy. There are a few rare private parcels on these islands.

HISTORIC ISSUES OF RIPARIAN OWNERSHIP

Xcel Energy, to maintain its power generation capability, owns approximately 1200 acres on the Gile Flowage of non-submerged land. Power company ownership extends up the shoreline to the high water level mark or 1495' elevation. Therefore, property owners along the Gile Flowage are not true riparian or shoreland property owners.



The past and present policy of Northern States Power Company and now Xcel Energy has been to leave the Gile Flowage's shoreline in its natural condition. Indeed, the pristine quality of the Gile Flowage is due in very large part to the power company's ownership and lack of development of its property.

Currently there are no plans to develop shoreline properties, despite the escalating value of shoreland property throughout northern Wisconsin. The Gile Flowage shoreline, owned by Xcel Energy, remains open to the public to use for non-consumptive uses. Foot traffic is allowed, but motorized vehicles such as ATV's are forbidden.

Xcel officials have expressed a growing concern over "encroachments" on the Gile's shoreline it owns. The company cites Wisconsin statues: Chap. 30 (30.131) of Natural Resource Codes which they state does not allow Xcel to allow non-riparian owners to place encroachments (ie. piers)on there property. According to the company, part of this problem is because it has not been enforcing its property rights. In 2004, the company began efforts to find out where their property is, survey it, and find existing encroachments. Xcel has offered to work with encroachers to return the shoreline to its natural condition and start protecting its property right.

GILE FLOWAGE PLACE NAMES

There are a number of colorful names for places along the Gile Flowage that should be researched further to document their origin and significance. Among these are:

Big Island: so named as it is the largest island within the Flowage

Sucker Hole Boat Landing: located on the Flowage's southern end, off Spring Camp Rd.

Eagle Island: named for a perennial eagle's nest located there

Undersized Bay (also called Tower Bay): so named for small muskies and later the radio towers near its shore

Six Pack Rock: upstream from Sucker Hole Boat Landing. Named for a person illegally fishing before season who missed being apprehended by a conservation warden leaving behind only a 6-pack of beer.

Wedding Island: so named for famous wedding on its shore in 1984

Little Pete Road: A side road off of Spring Camp Rd. Once known as Oyala's Road.

Pence 4H Park: So named because the Pence Packers 4H Club cleared the area and made a park there near a boat landing on Spring Camp Rd.. The park is gone, but it is still called the Pence 4H Boat Landing

Ball Bearing Hill: Off Spring Camp near Birch Creek. So named for the rocks that would not pack down to create a road. Spring Camp Rd. was diverted to avoid this area.

Black Creek Bay: located in the Town of Pence off Spring Camp Road. Created where Black Creek flows into the Flowage.

Birch Creek: located in the Town of Pence off Spring Camp Road. This creek flows into the Flowage

Farmers Creek: located in the Town of Pence flowing into the Flowage. Could be named for the farmers from Pence who used the creek to water their livestock

Deer Spirit Island: named for deer antlers found on perched on this island's southern shore despite rough waves that should have washed them away

Indian Rocks: A picturesque rock shoreline at the southern end of the Flowage

Tailings Piles: Left over mine rock that is a prominent feature of the landscape of the City of Montreal at the northern western corner of the flowage

Morgan's Campground: Famous 30+ unit campground on flowage's east side near the crossing point of the historic Flambeau Trail

Finlander Clearing: Located on the east side of the Flowage in the Town of Carey

Linnenpool (spelling?) Creek: a little creek that enters the Flowage from Hwy. 51. A spawning area for walleyes and northerns

Fifield Creek: a small creek that flows into the eastern part of the Flowage. Origin of name not clear, but could be named for Sam Fifield- the founder of the Ashland Daily Press (still in existence) who also served as a banker, owner of the Chequamegon Hotel in Ashland, founder of the Ashland City Bank and Ashland's first Masonic Temple, state assemblyman, senator, lieutenant governor of Wisconsin, and Ashland postmaster. While

the connection to such an Ashland-based dignitary may seem strange, recall that Iron County was part of Ashland County until 1893.

Family Park: located in the bay east of County Trunk C

OmaSoca Park: town park shared by the Towns of Oma and South Carey (So-Ca) that has a boat landing, picnic area. Now closed

Gravel Dike: once called the "junk shop" dike, the gravel road the crosses the Flowage between Hwy. 51 and County C. It's proper name is Knight Road.

Knight Road: Probably not named for the crusaders, but for John H. Knight who was named agent to the Lake Superior Chippewa in 1869. Like many early northwoods entrepreneurs, he was involved in many business ventures in Ashland including organizing the Superior Lumber Company, the Ashland National Bank, the First National Bank, the Ashland Brownstone Company, the street railway, and the blast furnance. He campaigned for state senate, but was never elected.

First Rock, Second Rock, and Third Rock: three famous rock points when heading south from Gile by boat

Spring Camp Road: named for the springs located along the road

West Branch Road: named for the branch of the Montreal River that creates the flowage

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