

High Country News

**END OF
THE LINE**

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Special report
on coal

A siege with
Western roots

Tenacious Unicorns
have a ranch

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Empty coal cars stretch along the railroad tracks on the flatlands near the Boardman Power Plant, outside Boardman, Oregon. The shadow of the plant's central chimney, now idle, is visible in the foreground. **Sage Brown / HCN**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898.



EDITOR'S NOTE



Remembering coal

THIS MONTH, WE TAKE A LONG LOOK at the end of an era: the half-century when coal defined the energy economy of the West. Lights burned, rivers were diverted and subdivisions boomed, all thanks to coal. But as Jonathan Thompson explains in this month's "Facts & Figures," the "Big Buildup" is over, and what he calls "the Big Breakdown" is on. The transition will be felt across the West, from workers who need to find new jobs to communities whose longtime residents are leaving to find work.

In this special issue, Jessica Kutz profiles Nicole Horseherder, a Diné environmental activist who has worked for decades to move the Navajo Nation away from extractive energy, freeing it from the often-unfair contracts that left the Navajo and Hopi landscapes depleted, dry and dusty. Horseherder remembers the once-reliable springs and seeps of her childhood, before the Navajo Aquifer's water was used to slurry coal. She wants to see her community's groundwater restored.

Still, many Westerners remember coal fondly. In a photo essay by contributor Sage Brown and staff writer Carl Segerstrom, we meet some of the people who made the coal-fired Boardman Power Plant in eastern Oregon hum for 40 years. Last October, they began decommissioning the plant. Dave Rodgers, the plant manager, recalls going to downtown Portland and seeing the bright lights there, knowing he had something to do with it: "There's nothing better in life than to eat, drink and know that your work is good."

It seems hard to believe now, but small coal-mining towns in Wyoming once sought out miners from Europe, Japan, China and Korea. The majority of the tiny town of Dana, however, was made up of Black American coal miners, recruited by James E. Shepperson, a Black community leader from Washington state. It's a complex tale, brought to life by historian Brigida Blasi.

Elsewhere in this issue are other surprising stories of empowerment. Eric Siegel takes us inside the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch in Colorado. It's a remarkable community: queer, transgender-owned and anti-fascist — an alpaca ranch with colorful Pride banners and an AR-15 on the wall.

One of the reasons I love Eric's story is that it challenges our assumptions about the politics of community in the rural West, where many are forging new — and sometimes uncomfortable — paths to more genuine lives. Unfortunately, that message of tolerance wasn't shared on Jan. 6, when an extremist mob breached the U.S. Capitol. While the rioters hailed from all over the country, they were echoing resentments sparked in the West long ago. Carl Segerstrom talked to terrorism experts who trace the carnage in Washington, D.C., back to its roots in the West. It's necessary and unsettling reading.

Stay safe out there.

Katherine Lanpher, interim editor-in-chief

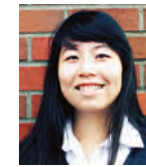
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Life After Coal

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Diné activist Nicole Horseherder's long quest for equity from the rise and fall of the coal economy.

BY JESSICA KUTZ | PHOTOS BY CASSIDY ARAIZA

ON THE COVER

A train loaded with coal travels through West Texas. Since its peak in 2007, coal use by U.S. power plants has dropped by half.
Dan Winters

The smokestacks of the Navajo Generating Station near Page, Arizona, before they came down in December (above). **Cassidy Araiza / HCN**

At the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch, an LGBTQ+ community of gun-loving anti-fascist alpaca ranchers in Colorado's Wet Mountain Valley, Bonnie Nelson displays her sniper rifle, a Springfield AR-15 (right).
Luna Anna Archey / HCN



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An LGBTQ+ community forges its path in a conservative Colorado town.

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Retired coal miner, rancher Mary Barclay, Paonia, Colorado

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LETTERS

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

RICH AND UPLIFTING ISSUE

Such a rich January edition deserves praise. Kudos to the “Rebel Constables,” each one of them, and to Gabriel Schivone for excellent coverage. It did me such good to read this story. And I was on the edge of my chair waiting for election results, fuming over the attempted big-money takeover of the Gunnison County Commission (“Second Citizens”). Thank you, Nick Bowlin. Both are excellent and uplifting pieces, showing that humanity and the good of the commons can prevail.

Linda Maio
Berkeley, California

SECOND-HOME OWNERS

Thank you for the excellent January 2021 issue. Every article was pertinent to one or another of the pressing problems here in the West. I especially liked the article and photos by Nick Bowlin and Luna Anna Archey in your feature story, “Second Citizens.” It’s very evident that we need to find a way to bring longtime residents of rural communities together with the newer, wealthier residents or part-time residents. It is not a good thing to see those

newcomers using their wealth to impose their agendas on the longtime small business people, the hard-working service workers and the ranchers who have made long-term commitments to the community. We see too much of this all over this country, but it comes out in vivid relief in these small towns.

Janet Rahmani
Colorado Springs, Colorado

I started a two-year subscription in response to the sterling reporting you provide. I’ve sporadically read articles from *HCN* for many years, but the tipping point to convert me to a subscriber came after reading Nick Bowlin’s piece on the political efforts of second-home owners in Crested Butte against COVID restrictions. While I have my own point of view, I have a great appreciation and appetite for journalism that presents all sides. I appreciate having my views challenged and being made aware of how all sides are thinking. This has become increasingly difficult to find in today’s media environment of sensationalism, but *HCN* does it very well. I hope my subscription can help continue to support informed jour-

nalism that respects the reader’s ability and desire to learn all sides of an issue.

Richard Margolin
Evergreen, Colorado

Nick Bowlin’s piece “Second Citizens” was an absolute gem. The reporting and emotion invoked were beautiful, and I want to thank Bowlin from my heart for stirring it up. As someone who lived in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, for five years (and moved around a lot) I understand the dynamic intricacies of a seasonal town and what home means to us. I was shocked at how the county responded to the second-home owners, but substantially more disturbed at their sense of entitlement; their production of a “naughty” list by was outright wicked and delusional. I want to thank Bowlin for not imposing bias. The final three paragraphs of the article are something we all should sink into a couch or chair or special place and cogitate about from time to time.

Ryan (Last name withheld by request)
Phoenix, Arizona

My sincere and respectful congratulations for the fine article on the Gunnison election. As an aged near-native of the area who still carefully reads the *Gunnison Country Times*, I can verify your descriptions and revelations, and appreciate your deft manner of educating us all on the local background issues. I found your descriptions to be fair and balanced as well — difficult to manage in such a diverse environment.

I’ve often reflected on the lack of minorities in our local schools and communities decades ago. Now there is a larger non-white minority group, and Black Lives Matters in Crested Butte.

Local bookstore owner Arvin Ramgoolam’s remarks at the end are very true. When your very existence — physically, financially, spiritually and emotionally — is dependent on the actions and support of the other humans you

live with in an isolated community, you experience being part of a tapestry that must consider and support the well-being of all inhabitants. The second-home owners are impoverished by not earning and enjoying membership in this tapestry.

Thanks so much for doing this careful reporting over the past year.

Diane Curlette
Boulder, Colorado

Thank you for the deeply reported article by Nick Bowlin. The Gunnison Valley may be the sharpest illustration of the changes in the mountain West that were worsened by COVID-19. Clearly, it was a mistake, in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus, to try to ban “outsiders” from using their second homes in Gunnison County. However, it was the absence of an effective national policy that encouraged the spread of the infection across state and local boundaries and left local government with few good choices. The friction between locals and wealthy outsiders is now made worse.

Mark Dillen
Denver, Colorado

SALTON SEA

I watched the Salton Sea go from a fun place to boat and fish to a wasteland of dead fish and dreams. The article (“Sea change,” January 2021) is a rerun of a rerun of a rerun about broken promises from a dysfunctional state government. California is never going to spend mega-millions on the Salton Sea; there is no financial incentive to do so. Environmental monies will be spent on the Central Valley’s water issues, or other areas that produce tax income. But, really, who’s complaining? Not the millions of dead fish or other wildlife, or the poor or undocumented families that surround the sea. In the end, the Salton Sea will become a huge environmental hazard, and the poor (who have no voice) will survive the best they can.

Vincent Macy
Chula, Georgia

CORRECTIONS

In our story, “Black cowboys reclaim their history in the West,” (October 2020), we incorrectly referred to the Thyrl Latting Rodeo Spectacular as the Thorough Laddins rodeo. In addition, Jerrae Walker’s father was not part of the Thyrl Latting Rodeo Spectacular, but rode in the same circuit. In our story, “Students and faculty urge deeper look at land-grant legacy” (January 2021), we spelled David Ackerly’s last name incorrectly. We regret the errors.

When citizens will pay more

As state aid shrinks in Wyoming, one community votes to fund a new hospital.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

KARI DEWITT OF PINEDALE, Wyoming, needed a blood transfusion. It was 2014, and her placenta had partially ruptured; she and her unborn son were in critical condition. But Pinedale has no local hospital, only a town clinic, so she couldn't get the help she required there.

DeWitt, a theater producer who leads the Pinedale Fine Arts Council, had to wait 45 minutes for a medi-flight plane to transfer her to a hospital in Idaho Falls, over 100 miles away. Within three minutes of her arrival, she gave birth — and received the blood she needed.

This year, DeWitt successfully campaigned to pass a ballot measure that will bring a hospital to Pinedale, in Sublette County. Now, nobody in her community will face the excruciating uncertainty she experienced when her son was born. "I know we're in the 'Wild West,'" DeWitt said. "But it's not the 1800s."

More than a dozen Wyoming communities, including Sublette County, raised or renewed local taxes in November 2020. In addition to the new hospital, the taxes will fund water system repairs, road and bridge maintenance, and a new museum. At the same time, Wyoming is facing major budget deficits as the fossil fuel economy — the primary source of state revenue — contracts. Now Wyoming communities have to figure out how to get by with shrinking state support.

Even as Wyoming voters raised local taxes, they elected staunch anti-tax conservatives to the state Legislature. That may seem like a strange juxtaposition, but leaving new taxes up to municipalities and counties rather than the state aligns with the Libertarian-minded ideal of limited government embraced by many in Wyoming, said Rob Godby, an economist at the University of Wyoming.

Meanwhile, state budget cuts are underway.



In response to energy revenue and coronavirus-related shortfalls, Gov. Mark Gordon, R, slashed spending by 10% in July. He's since proposed further measures that reduce state funding by a half-billion dollars, including a \$135 million cut to the Wyoming Department of Health. In addition, direct distributions from the state to local governments have decreased by more than \$50 million since 2015 — a 35% drop. "We are going to have to abandon some of our towns because we will not be able to afford upkeep on our roads and sewers," Gordon told a state appropriations committee in July.

The cutbacks will hit rural communities hardest. Godby likened small-county finances to the board game Battleship: Bigger cities and counties, like the big ships in the game, can withstand several hits and stay afloat, while smaller communities can be sunk by just a couple shots. "We're getting closer and closer to the threshold where cities and towns can't function," he said.

SUBLETTE COUNTY RESIDENTS have been talking about the need for a local hospital for more than a century. In 1915, a newspaper headline announced that one was going to be built in Marbleton. It wasn't. In 1961, Pinedale and Big Piney feuded over which town would get a hospital — but neither did.

The latest effort, the 2020 ballot measure, passed by a healthy 20% margin. Unlike other recent failed attempts, the current plan got more support because it included the local senior care center and had financial backing from the county, said Emily Ray, the communications coordinator for the Sublette County Rural Health Care District. This fall, when nearby hospitals filled up with COVID-19 patients,

The Sublette County Rural Health Care District purchased 7 acres of town ballfields adjacent to the current Pinedale Medical Clinic. The fields will be the site of the future hospital. **Ryan Dorgan / HCN**

Sublette County was forced to reckon with its dependence on other communities' medical facilities.

The "yes" vote raises property taxes by \$1 for every \$10,000 in value and relies on local and federal funding: a \$20 million commitment from the county and an anticipated \$24-\$25 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The district plans to build a new wing onto the existing Pinedale clinic; officials expect construction to wrap up in late 2022 or early 2023. The expansion will add eight hospital rooms, clinical and surgical facilities, and 46 beds for long-term care — nearly doubling the existing capacity in Sublette, Sweetwater and Teton counties.

The new facility will be a "critical access hospital," a federal designation created to financially support rural hospitals. This will allow it to receive higher payment rates from insurers, including Medicare and Medicaid, than the clinics could charge. That will help the health district, which has been operating with thin financial margins. Having a local hospital will also reduce expensive ambulance rides out of the county by more than 20%, according to clinic data.

For DeWitt, the approval of the new hospital was a sign that the community recognized the need for better health care and takes pride in its ability to care for its residents. It's also a reminder that some things are worth paying for: "I'm not sure there's anything besides a hospital that can raise taxes here," DeWitt said. "But at a basic level, you know you need a hospital." ☀



An occupation sympathizer from Caldwell, Idaho, looks out over Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge during the 2016 occupation. **Shawn Records**

ANALYSIS

A siege with Western roots and consequences

History points to a volatile future.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

ON JAN. 6, FIVE YEARS AND FOUR DAYS after armed militiamen took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, a remote federal wildlife preserve in eastern Oregon, for 41 days, supporters of President Donald Trump stormed and briefly occupied the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.

It's not hard to trace the links between Malheur and Washington: Familiar insignia, instigators and ideologies fueled both anti-government actions. Extremist leaders and movement regulars from the Western U.S., including former Washington State Rep. Matt Shea, who supported the efforts from afar in Spokane, and recent U.S. Senate candidate Jo Rae Perkins, R-Ore., who joined the crowd that laid siege to the Capitol, helped fuel the melee. Backing their message, if

not their tactics, was a bevy of Western legislators, who lent the movement legitimacy by supporting Trump's baseless election-fraud claims.

Meanwhile, one of the most visible figures in the anti-federal government movement in the Western U.S., Cliven Bundy, expressed dismay on Facebook that President Trump didn't stick to his guns after Trump issued a half-hearted message calling for a peaceful end to the Capitol's occupation.

The anti-government occupations bookending the rise and fall of Trump's presidency show the mainstreaming of right-wing extremism in the United States. They also portend future conflicts here in the West. As President Joseph Biden takes charge of the federal government and its vast Western landholdings, he is entering an already-delicate situation, where armed extremist groups stand ready to rise up against the federal government.

THE WESTERN U.S. ISN'T THE ONLY PLACE

where anti-government sentiment festers, but here the wounds are open, frequently endured and historically recent. Violence and the threat of violence in the region occur within the context of a nation founded on the genocide of Indigenous people. Leaders of anti-federal movements include factions that are specifically anti-Indigenous. In defending his right to graze cattle on federal land in Nevada — a claim he successfully defended at Bunkerville in 2014, when federal authorities withdrew after being outgunned by militiamen — Bundy argued that his claim to the land was more legitimate than the Southern Paiutes' because "they lost the war."

This white-plus-might-makes-right sentiment is a pervasive feature of Western mythology and cowboy culture. Over the last half-century, anti-government leaders have rallied to that image as control over the West's natural resources became more contested. The original Sagebrush Rebellion of the mid-to-late-1970s — which inspired the modern Bundy-led standoffs but were not nearly as paramilitary — came in response to federal public-land laws like the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Wilderness Act and Endangered Species Act, which increasingly restricted how natural resources could be used.

Those restrictions were seen as unconscionable overreach by rural Westerners who were accustomed to using public-land resources as they wished. "The hardest thing to do in American politics is to withdraw a

right," said Daniel McCool, a political science professor at the University of Utah. Even though those "rights" were privileges in the legal sense, the perception that they were rights, and that they were being taken away, fueled the original Sagebrush Rebels, McCool said. "The roots of the Sagebrush Rebellion were when they no longer got what they wanted," he said. "There's a direct line from there to the Bundy groups active today."

Entitlement isn't the only feature today's anti-government protesters — who snapped selfies, grabbed trophies and strolled casually through the Capitol after overcoming police barricades — have in common with the original Sagebrush Rebels. They also share an alliance with the Republican Party and a lack of accountability for breaking the law. None of the original rebels were prosecuted, and their movement faded with the election of Ronald Reagan, who publicly backed their anti-regulatory ideology. Reagan showed his support by installing Interior Secretary James Watt, who weakened many of the federal regulations they chafed against.

FAR-RIGHT TERRORISM is the most prevalent form of terrorism in the U.S., according to the FBI. Reporting by *Reveal News* and *Type Investigations* found that right-wing extremism during the Trump administration has become more common and far more deadly. In the West, right-wing extremism and the militia movement have shifted their focus from the federal government to other targets, like anti-fascist activists and state and local governments, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

The explanation for this shift in target is simple: Anti-federal extremists found common cause with Trump's presidency as he promised to "drain the swamp," catered to racist ideologies and flirted with QAnon conspiracy theorists. He and his administration acted directly in the interest of Western factions within the right-wing extremist movement, including the Bundys. In 2018, Trump pardoned Dwight and Steven Hammond, whose imprisonment for felony arson on public lands helped spark the Oregon standoff in 2016. No attempts were made during his administration to enforce federal law by rounding up Cliven Bundy's cattle, which continue to illegally graze on federal public lands in Nevada. And the Bureau of Land Management recently restored the Hammonds' public-land grazing rights in Oregon, despite their record of endangering federal employees and committing arson.

Those actions — and the inability of federal prosecutors to secure convictions for leaders of the Bunkerville and Malheur occupations, who clearly threatened federal agents and held

federal land at gunpoint — emboldened anti-government extremists. After the acquittals, the movement felt vindicated and victorious. “It’s a very heady thing to be involved in,” said Betsy Gaines Quammen, the author of *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God and Public Lands in the West*. “It was pivotal in empowering this movement and laid the groundwork for what we saw (on Jan. 6 in the Capitol),” she said.

While the Trump era has empowered anti-government extremists in new and dangerous ways, it has offered some relief to the public-land employees in the West who often bear the brunt of extremist ideologies. Data collected by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), a group that supports public-land reforms and agency employees, found that threats against federal employees and facilities dropped precipitously following Trump’s election. In 2017, the BLM recorded a 25% reduction in such incidents, the lowest number since 1995. The Bundys didn’t see the federal government under the Trump administration as the enemy, said Jeff Ruch, the former executive director and current Pacific director of PEER. “The administration acted in concert with the violent movement’s demands,” he said.

WITH THE TARGET NO LONGER on the federal government’s back, anti-government extremists in the West have aimed their tactics at left-wing protesters and at state and local governments. Throughout the Trump administration, the president’s supporters went to Portland, Oregon, ready to brawl with locals and anti-fascists, who countered their demonstrations and often obliged their violent impulses. Members of the Three Percenters vowed to support Oregon state legislators who fled the state to avoid a vote on climate change legislation in 2019, including Sen. Brian Boquist, who said that if the state police wanted to arrest him for fleeing his legislative duties, they should “send bachelors and come heavily armed.”

Recently, right-wing extremists have found a new cause: the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent public health measures, such as business closures and mask mandates. Western extremist groups like the Three Percenters and Ammon Bundy’s newly formed People’s Rights organization have been “seizing on the pandemic and trying to build political power, mainstream their beliefs and build public trust,” said Amy Herzfeld-Copple, the deputy director of the Western States Center. Ammon Bundy, who has played a prominent role in protests against public health orders, was arrested twice this summer for disrupting the Idaho Legislature.

A couple of weeks before the insurrection

in Washington, D.C., demonstrators in Salem, Oregon, made a sort of watered-down test run. On Dec. 21, protesters demonstrating against public health restrictions broke down doors at the state Capitol and attacked journalists covering their rally. Since then, reports have emerged that they gained access to the building with aid from Republican state Rep. Mike Nearman, a claim that draws comparison to accusations that federal police officials aided the crowds that entered the U.S. Senate and House.

While no one knows whether Trump’s departure from office will be a source of continued unrest, history indicates that future threats likely lie in the West and its federal public lands. Biden’s pledges to act on climate change and restore Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, two national monuments that were shrunk by Trump, could spark conflict. “By simply doing their job, the Interior Department will create more potential flashpoints,” said Aaron Weiss, the deputy director for the Center for Western Priorities. “Being good stewards means rounding Bundy cattle up. They can’t continue to coddle these extremists.”

Now, the West and rest of the country are left wondering where these tensions will flare up

next. History tells us that any attempts at an ambitious federal public-land policy will be met with right-wing resistance.

And yet there are hopeful signs in the region, including the site of the last Bundy occupation in Burns, Oregon. Collaboration and community conversations around land management, both before and since the 2016 occupation, blunted local support for the extremists who descended on the small eastern Oregon town. According to Peter Walker, a University of Oregon geographer who chronicled the occupation and aftermath in his book *Sagebrush Collaboration: How Harney County Defeated the Takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge*, one local rancher told him: “Collaboration is what inoculated us from the Bundy virus.”

The community embraced a far more democratic and peaceful approach than the “revolution” promised by the Bundy-led militants, Walker told *Oregon Quarterly*. “Harney County (has) returned to the much less glamorous, time-consuming, sometimes tedious but often effective work of sitting across the table with people of different viewpoints to find mutually beneficial, practical solutions to shared problems.” ✨

This white-plus-might-makes-right sentiment is a pervasive feature of Western mythology and cowboy culture.



Rioters break into the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C. **Win McNamee / Getty Images**



Clark Tenakhongva, vice-chairman of the Hopi Tribe, photographed near Hotevilla-Bacavi, Arizona, in January.
Jolene Yazzie / HCN

REPORTAGE

Bears Ears is just the beginning

Indigenous voices are long overdue in management of public land.

BY JESSICA DOUGLAS AND GRAHAM LEE BREWER

LONG BEFORE FORMER President Barack Obama established Bears Ears National Monument — and former President Donald Trump nearly destroyed it — these geographically stunning southern Utah canyons were the setting of countless battles over who belongs to this land and whose history is worth saving.

In the first weeks, if not days, of his administration, President Joe Biden is expected to restore the boundaries of two national monuments in Utah, Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante.

But tribal leaders say that returning millions of acres should be only the beginning of Biden's commitment to protect more public lands — and that tribal nations should be leading the charge. It's more than just the threat of degradation, they say; Indigenous voices are long overdue in public-land management.

While Biden's nomination of U.S. Rep. Deb Haaland as secretary of the Interior has given Indian Country reasons for hope, tribal leaders and advocates say she should be only one of many Indigenous people working with

or inside the new administration. Biden has pledged to work toward protecting 30% of the country's land and oceans by 2030. Tribal nations and communities have always asserted that their ties to and knowledge of the land should be consulted when land-management decisions are made. That's a notion likely familiar to Biden.

The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, a group of tribal governments, worked with the Obama administration to create the original boundaries of Bears Ears. The partnership demonstrated an unprecedented reliance on tribal consultation for the federal government. For many Indigenous leaders, it became a blueprint for how to involve tribes in the stewardship of lands that were originally stolen from them but are also important to the country as a whole.

But many locals, most notably those who descend from Mormon settlers with a long distrust of government intrusion, saw the expansion of federal protections over millions of acres of Utah's iconic landscape as government overreach. Painted on business windows, stapled to cattle fences,

and printed on bumper stickers, lawn signs and billboards, messages advocating either for or against the monument dotted every pocket of southeastern Utah.

For Indigenous peoples, both inside and outside of Utah, the conflicts were only the most recent in a long history of colonial theft and cultural genocide. Five tribes were involved in the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, which were consulted in the monument's establishment, and three of them — the Hopi Tribe, the Pueblo of Zuni and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe — had been forcibly removed to reservations outside Bears Ears' original boundaries. And for many of the Indigenous people who call Utah home, racism — both overt and systemic — remains a daily trauma, whether it appears in a racial slur hurled at a Little League game or when the public is allowed to trample the ruins of ancient dwellings.

By the time Trump reduced the monuments in 2017, the battle over protected lands had long since spilled over into local Utah politics. In 2014, San Juan County Commissioner Phil Lyman led a group of ATV riders through a

canyon where off-road vehicles are prohibited due to the presence of numerous important archaeological sites. Lyman, now a Utah state representative, was convicted and eventually spent 10 days in jail and ordered to pay \$96,000 in restitution. He was pardoned by President Trump in December.

When Willie Grayeyes, a Navajo community organizer and prominent advocate for Bears Ears, ran for the San Juan County Commission in 2018, his attempt to make the commission majority Navajo for the first time in history was met by political opposition tinged with racism.

U.S. Rep. John Curtis, R-Utah, acknowledged that racism still exists, but said he worries that restoring the boundaries of Bears Ears would only exacerbate it. “In a time when we’re trying to heal, in a time when we’re trying to bring people together, when we’re trying to find things that unite us, this stirs up some really deep resentment,” he said in a December interview. “Particularly when the federal government forces something on somebody — that doesn’t go well no matter where you live, right, no matter what you are.”

Curtis, whose district covers Bears Ears, has always opposed the designation of the national monument. His position has put him sharply at odds with tribal leaders before, but he said that recently he has made efforts to conference with them, including those involved in the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. Curtis said he believes that allowing presidents to change monument boundaries at the stroke of a pen leaves relationships

between the federal government and tribes on shaky ground.

“I think we have to remember, just like these Native Americans have traditions and history associated to the land — and sure, many of them predate the others — but many of these other people have these life commitments to this land and a way of life. And when there’s a presidential declaration, it tends to discount those, whether it’s Native Americans or pioneers.”

For the members of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, that history is exactly what is at stake, and it reaches back much further than contact with settlers. Bears Ears continues to be an important place of worship for his people and has been since time immemorial, said Clark Tenakhongva, vice chairman of the Hopi Tribe and one of the coalition leaders.

“To other people that view it as just a bunch of rocks and rock art and small dwellings that are placed there — they don’t know the in-depth reasons of why the structures were built,” Tenakhongva said. He often uses the concept of the kiva — a circular, underground Puebloan meeting room — as a metaphor to explain the gravity of these cultural sites. “I try to focus on the relationship. Like a church and the kiva: What is the resemblance? It’s a place of worship. It’s a place of prayer, and it’s a place where community gathers. This is a place where a lot of decisions of culture, hope and recognition of life (are made).”

After tribes forcefully rebuffed Curtis’ efforts to redraw and manage Bears Ears in 2018, Curtis expressed his willingness

to communicate with the tribal nations. Tenakhongva wrote him a letter offering to explain the importance of Bears Ears and its cultural sites, and the two met in Washington, D.C., where Tenakhongva invited Curtis to “come out to Hopi and see what Hopi is all about.”

Curtis was invited to observe one of the most sacred summertime ceremonies of the Hopi Tribe. “It really took him to a different state of respect,” Tenakhongva said. “From there, (Curtis) said, ‘I am so grateful that you allowed me to be part of this. I know I’m not a Hopi. I know I’m an Anglo. I know I practiced different religions, but this is something that I will deeply take and sincerely respect and never forget.’”

They have even hiked together into Bears Ears to see some of the important cultural sites still intact. Tenakhongva explained their importance to the Hopi people and why they are in need of protection. “We both are family men, and those are things that we related to — meaning our family first, our people, the protection of the land and the importance of culture and religion and practicing of religion,” he said.

When President Trump reduced the monument’s boundaries in 2017, many of these cultural sites, including the kivas, were left unprotected, vulnerable to looting and desecration. While areas outside the current reduced boundaries of both Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante are still protected by tribal and state laws, their removal from national monument status opened them back up to mining claims and oil and gas leasing.

Because archaeologists only had access for a couple of years to the more than 1 million acres that Trump removed from Bears Ears, many of the important cultural and historical sites have yet to be adequately documented. Now, archaeologists are using decades-old records, some handwritten and others mere sketches, in the race to re-map and ideally stabilize

archaeological sites before they deteriorate any further. Many are also working to repair trails to keep the public from trampling fragile ruins.

“When Trump reduced the monument and basically cut out a lot of culturally significant areas, that created a lot of risk,” said Hopi archaeologist Lyle Balenquah. “So they weren’t viewed as important. They were cutting out part of the narrative.”

“It’s been difficult working in this administration; we’ve been forced by the federal government to approach (Bears Ears) piecemeal-like,” said Carleton Bowekaty, the lieutenant governor of the Pueblo of Zuni. He called the monument reductions a slap in the face to tribes. “We fought hard for it.”

The Biden transition team has been in conversation with the Zuni’s legal team since December, Bowekaty said, in stark contrast to the relationship between the tribe and the federal government under the Trump administration, which routinely failed to work with tribal nations as respected sovereign governments. Bowekaty remains hopeful that Biden will put the same energy into rebuilding the tribal coalitions that were formed by President Obama. “Now, under this administration, we can address the bigger picture and make sure that there’s no further desecration. There’s no further looting. There’s no further negative effects from people visiting without being educated.”

For many, like Clark Tenakhongva, even if Biden restores both national monuments in Utah, that’s just the beginning of the conversation. “Then what happens after that?” Tenakhongva said. Like other tribal leaders, he wants some reassurance that land protections can no longer be so easily diminished. “I would like to have a permanent, formal legislation that — no matter what other president comes in 20 years from now, 40 years from now — wouldn’t undo what work we have sacrificed our lives basically for.” ❁

“This is a place where a lot of decisions of culture, hope, and recognition of life (are made).”

‘A reconciliation’

After decades of battling misinformation, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes finally regain the lands of the National Bison Range.

BY ANNA V. SMITH



Bison graze in a field at the National Bison Range in September of last year. There are between 350 and 500 bison on the range, which spans nearly 19,000 acres in western Montana. **Pete Caster**

WHEN SHANE MORIGEAU was growing up on the Flathead Indian Reservation, he knew that the land inside the fenced National Bison Range was different from the tribal lands elsewhere on the reservation, at the base of Montana’s Mission Mountains or the shores of Flathead Lake. He remembers being a kid in his dad’s truck, driving past while his father explained that the lands inside the fence weren’t tribal lands anymore. As tribal elders tell it, it was common knowledge that the fence was as much to keep them out as it was to keep bison in. “It happened long ago,” Morigeau said, but “it still resonates across generations.

In December, a bipartisan bill that would transfer the lands and management of the National Bison Range to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes looked as if it might die in Congress with the end of the session. Instead, it was attached to a must-pass package of

COVID-19 relief and government spending bills, and, unexpectedly, it passed. After a century of work, it felt sudden, said Morigeau, a tribal member and attorney for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and a Montana state legislator. “It happened so fast, it just really hasn’t sunk in.”

Finally, after 113 years, the 18,800 acres of grassland, woodland and wildlife that comprise the National Bison Range, along with its resident bison herd, will be returned to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Today, the transfer has broad support from the community, conservation groups and politicians alike. But the long journey included three rounds of failed agreements between the U.S. and the tribe, numerous lawsuits, a federal investigation, and a massive public education campaign to quash racist rumors and stereotypes. It comes at a time of a broader conversation on the return of land

stewardship to tribal nations, with an Indigenous woman — Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) — poised to oversee public-lands management as Interior secretary for the first time in history.

“It’s a reconciliation,” said Chairwoman Shelly Fyant. “We are such a place-based people. To have this land back, to be in control of it, is a fresh, new hope.”

THE NATIONAL BISON RANGE started as a small herd of free-roaming bison on the Flathead Indian Reservation managed by tribal members in the 1870s, while the bison around them were hunted to near-extinction. During the allotment era, when tribal lands the U.S. deemed “surplus” were sold, the federal government divvied up the reservation in 1904, giving some 404,047 acres to settlers, 60,843 to the state of Montana, and 1,757 acres to the U.S. “for other purposes.” Settlers flooded in, and today tribal members are a minority on their own reservation. The U.S. retained tribal lands for the range, carved out of prime habitat in the middle of the reservation. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt put the range under federal management without consultation with the tribe. Tribal members were not even allowed to work there.

In 1971, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes took the U.S. to court for taking its lands in the early 1900s. They won, but though the taking was declared illegal, the lands weren’t returned.

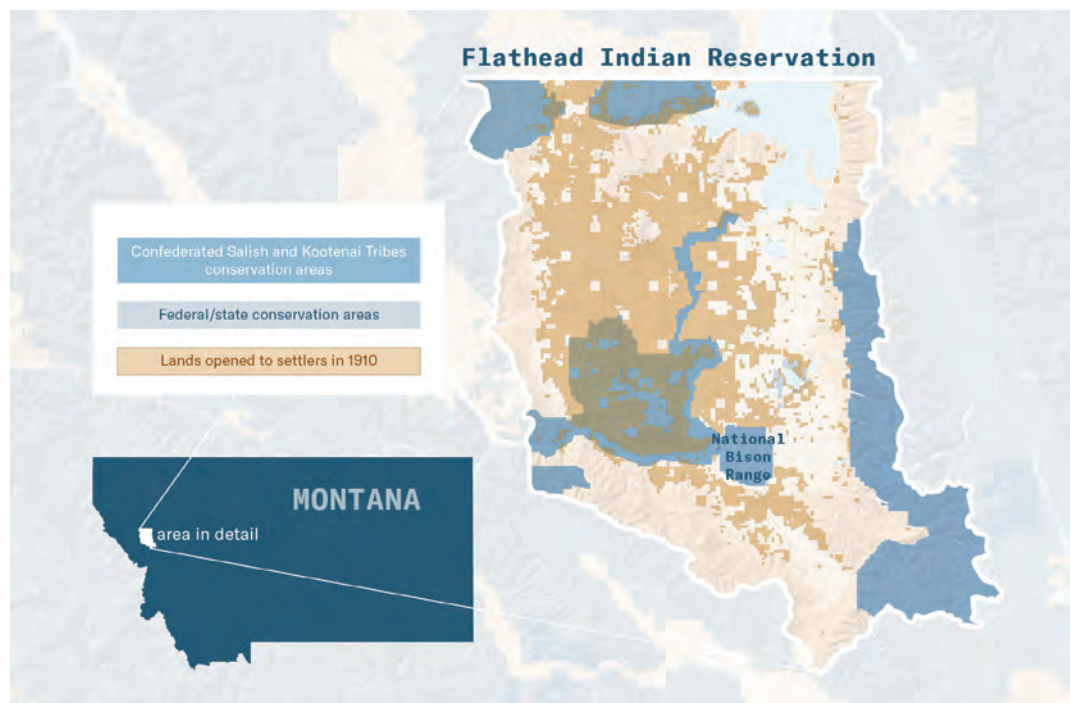
Tribal efforts to co-manage the National Bison Range with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife began in the early 1990s, but they were met with opposition, despite the tribe’s established conservation record. (In 1982, for example, the tribe became the first tribe to designate a wilderness area when it created the 92,000-acre Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness.) The tribes and the wildlife agency agreed to co-manage the range in 2004, but the arrangement crumbled within two years after a small number of vocal federal employees and locals allied with an anti-Indigenous group, alleging mistreatment by the tribe. It was a theme that would continue for nearly two decades.

ANTI-INDIGENOUS RACISM wasn’t new to the Flathead Indian Reservation. As human rights advocates have noted, anti-Indigenous groups have sprung up here since the 1970s, precisely because of the large population of non-Native settlers unwilling to abide by tribal laws. Groups like All Citizens Equal and Citizens for Equal Rights Alliance regurgitate racist stereotypes while seeking to reduce tribes’ political power and refusing to recognize their sovereignty.

Scores of people — some associated with those groups — wrote to Fish and Wildlife in opposition, pushing cruel stereotypes of Indigenous people as “lazy” and on “federal welfare.” Delbert Palmer, a leader of multiple anti-Indigenous groups, wrote to the Department of Interior in 2006 that “tribes are not sovereign nations.” The national nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which supports current and former public employees, also opposed the tribe’s management on behalf of Fish and Wildlife employees concerned about working for the tribes. Some, including Delbert Palmer’s son, Skip Palmer, then a board member of All Citizens Equal, had direct ties to anti-Indigenous groups. As an organization ordinarily devoted to government whistleblowers and environmental ethics, PEER gave anti-Indigenous sentiments a new sheen of respectability, as well as a pro bono platform.

In dozens of press releases over more than a decade, PEER accused the tribes of harming the bison, harassing non-Native federal employees and “privatizing” public land, framing the tribes’ plans as a “takeover.” On top of multiple lawsuits, PEER filed a formal complaint with the Office of Inspector General, which turned up virtually nothing. In the early 2000s, the Montana Human Rights Network contacted PEER to point out how its harmful rhetoric echoed anti-Indigenous views.

In response to questions from *High Country News* Tim Whitehouse, PEER’s executive director since 2019, said in a statement that PEER didn’t oppose the recent legislation; rather, it opposed previous negotiations because they “lacked transparency.” “Under my watch, PEER will never represent individuals or groups associated with anti-Indigenous views. Systemic racism against Indigenous peoples is real and its impacts have been devastating. PEER should never and will never use language that echoes



anti-Indigenous sentiments or use language that divides communities.”

Opposition from non-Natives is common when it comes to returning land to tribal management, said Krystal Two Bulls, Northern Cheyenne and Oglala Lakota, director of NDN Collective’s LandBack campaign. Two Bulls, who is from Lame Deer, Montana, sees the return of the National Bison Range as emblematic of the long endeavor to shift the stewardship of public lands — many of which were taken illegally — back to tribes. Similar conversations are happening over Bears Ears National Monument in Utah and Gwich’in lands in the Arctic. It’s a generational battle, but Two Bulls said, “More than any other campaign that I’ve worked on or any other organizing space that I’ve been in, Land Back is one of the ones that holds the most hope.”

CHAIRWOMAN FYANT REMEMBERS riding on horseback on the range as a teenager, gleefully racing ahead when she wasn’t supposed to, and, later on, enjoying baseball and picnics when she worked at Two Eagle River School. Every tribal member has a unique relationship with the National Bison Range. And yet, the Salish word for it is *Ntoʔχʷenč*, meaning “the fenced-in place.” The physical barrier grew into a powerful metaphor about how tribal members could relate to the lands taken from them, Fyant said. But now, the tribes can put their energy into Indigenizing the range, welcoming the public to learn about tribal stories and priorities. Speaking of the return of the lands and Haaland’s potential as Interior secretary, Fyant summed it up simply: “It’s about damn time.” ☀

THE LATEST

Mining sacred lands

Backstory

Chi’chil Bildagoteel, or Oak Flat, a culturally significant site for the San Carlos Apache Tribe and other Indigenous peoples, was protected from copper mining in 1955 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. But Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., added a rider to a 2014 military spending bill allowing mining company Resolution Copper to trade scattered private lands for it, using a sped-up environmental assessment process (“How a huge Arizona mining deal was passed — and could be revoked,” 2/2/16).

Followup

After completing its project analysis in December — a year early — the U.S. Forest Service planned to begin the swap in January. The agency denied rushing the process, although the *Guardian* reported that the Trump administration pressured it to. If built, Resolution’s underground copper mine — one of the nation’s largest and deepest — would eventually collapse into a crater some 2 miles wide and 1,000 feet deep, destroying important religious and ceremonial sites. Now, facing legal action by the nonprofit Apache Stronghold for violating Indigenous treaty rights, the Forest Service has agreed to temporarily pause the transfer. —Maya L. Kapoor

Queers, alpacas and guns

An LGBTQ+ community forges its path in a conservative Colorado town.

BY ERIC SIEGEL | PHOTOS BY LUNA ANNA ARCHEY / HCN

A YEAR AGO, transgender rancher Penny Logue found the dome. Fed up with a hostile landlord in the city and fearful for their safety amid record-high deaths in the transgender community nationwide, Logue and her business partner, Bonnie Nelson, sought refuge in the rural, open rangelands.

The geodesic dome perched on sprawling acreage in the remote Wet Mountain Valley on the eastern flank of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range, near the rural ranching hamlet of Westcliffe, Colorado. They were intrigued. “Domes are funky and cool and a bit against the status quo — and they help the planet,” Logue told me. So they bought it.

“They are weird but useful,” she said, “which is the essence of queer.”

If the dome caught their attention, the dramatic Wet Mountain Valley convinced them to stay. “We fell in love,” said Logue. “You emerge out of the mountains into the valley and the Sangre de Cristo range just breaks in front of you.” She and Nelson were unexpectedly taken with Westcliffe too — its quaint storefronts and theater, the wide sidewalks, signs for “Shakespeare in the Park.”

By March, with the pandemic raging and a divisive presidential election roiling, they had relocated to the valley from northern Colorado and created the Tenacious Unicorn Ranch, a community of gun-loving, transgender,

anti-fascist alpaca ranchers. While they already knew the financial, physical and emotional challenges of operating a successful ranch, they had no idea that the Wet Mountain Valley had become a cauldron of right-wing conservatism — home to militias, vigilantes, Three Percenters — anathema to the ranch’s gender-inclusive, anti-racist, ecological politics.

But rather than retreat, the unique LGBTQ+ community, around a dozen strong, asserted its right to exist. They armed up and began speaking out, quickly developing a reputation that galvanized other local rural progressives. In the process, they’ve shown how queer communities can flourish. “We belong here,” Logue told me this past November. “Queers are reclaiming country spaces.”

CUSTER COUNTY, COLORADO, where the newly formed Tenacious Unicorn Ranch is located, is named after George Armstrong Custer. It was founded in March 1877 — nine months after Custer’s defeat at the Battle of Little Bighorn — and its overwhelmingly white, rural and conservative population hovers at around 5,000. While Colorado as a whole has shifted left in recent years, Custer County has been tacking right: In every presidential election since 2008, when John McCain carried the county by 63%, the percentage of Republican votes has steadily increased. Trump won

with nearly 70% in 2020.

But the county defies easy categorization. Locals describe Westcliffe, the county seat, as politically “purple.” The town is a mecca of sorts, a gateway to thousands of acres of protected wilderness, and its pristine dark skies attract photographers and stargazers from around the world. (It is a certified International Dark Sky Community, one of only a handful worldwide.) A number of counter-cultural communities have found a foothold there over the years, from Mission: Wolf, an off-the-grid wolf sanctuary founded in the 1980s, to the Mountain Publishing Company, the conservative media organization that publishes the weekly *Sangre de Cristo Sentinel* (“The Voice of Conservative Colorado!”). *The Sentinel*’s articles and columns — one called “Patriot Alert!” — editorialize on gun culture, patriotism and the history of “the Old West.”

When I visited the ranch around Thanksgiving, the late-afternoon light was reverberant, volleying off the Wet Mountains and Sangre de Cristos, casting a luminous glow across the landscape. J, a Texan who moved to the ranch in June — after losing her job and housing in the pandemic — waved to me from a long stairwell outside the dome’s entrance. Dressed in all-black denim, she was masked and distanced in a black cowboy hat and stylish black boots, armed with her favorite firearm, a Ruger-57. Nine enthusiastic dogs — five Great Pyrenees and Australian shepherd puppies, all named after *Star Trek* characters (Worf, Seven of Nine, Geordi, Lore and Data) — howled, tails wagging like windshield wipers. Nearly a hundred hissing alpaca trundled across the pasture.

The ranch exists at a philosophical intersection that is immediately evident inside the dome, where a wall displays prized firearms — Bonnie’s sniper, a Springfield AR-15, two 12-gauge shotguns and a 22-rifle — and flags for The Iron Front, the anti-Nazi symbol used by 1930s paramilitary



Justine pauses for a portrait while caring for the sheep. “I started the watering because it was needed, but then I realized I was doing it because it got me out of bed,” she said.

groups, which now symbolizes anti-fascism and intersectional Pride. Pride flags with colorful stripes — pink, rose, yellow, green, pewter, black, white — bedeck the wall, celebrating asexuality, agender identity, lesbianism and nonbinary gender identities.

Since Logue founded the ranch in 2018, its frontier libertarian ethos has attracted social justice activists and gun-rights advocates, all seeking sanctuary. “We’re a haven. We offer work, we offer shelter, we offer peace,” says Logue, gesturing toward the expansive open space surrounding us. “There are a lot of people who visit for upwards of a week and just enjoy their time away from society,” Nelson added.

“And cry,” Logue said. “When that ranch gate shuts behind you, the cis world stays out there.”

On that November afternoon at the barn, Justine — a 21-year-old who moved to the ranch in July — filled water basins for the alpaca and sheep and fed the ducks and chickens. “I started the watering because it was needed, but then I realized I was doing it because it got me out of bed,” she said. “As long as the alpaca are healthy and fed, we can keep growing and help more people.”

Logue and her cohort seek to challenge the patriotic myths — about Manifest Destiny, liberty and freedom — that their Wet Mountain Valley neighbors double-down on in *The Sentinel*. “The American frontier or ‘the American West’ wasn’t conquered with rugged individualism,” she said. “It was conquered by communities sticking together. ... Nobody did that by themselves.” Their social mission — akin to that of mutual-aid networks and similar to anti-fascist groups like Redneck Revolt as well as leftist pro-gun groups like the John Brown Gun Club or the Socialist Rifle Association — stems from their political commitments. “It isn’t through harsh words and violence that you defeat fascism,” Logue told me. “It’s through building community, but only if you can stay alive long enough to do it. That means you have to be armed — because fascists are armed, always.”

This is something they’ve learned firsthand. “There are militias in the Wet Mountain Valley,” Logue said. “They’ve showed up armed and threatening.” That spurred the ranchers to arm up. “Moving here demanded gun ownership,” she continued. The ranchers watched from their front porch with a high-powered scope and sniper rifle — the Springfield AR-15 on the living room wall — staking out visitors loitering at the end of their driveway. The visits ceased. It’s rumored locally that militias unofficially “patrol” their surroundings to establish dominance. “In order to be treated as a human, you have to show you can defend yourself more than they can hurt you,” Logue said. “Then you can reach equality.”

But achieving that has been elusive. This past summer, with COVID-19 cases rising, residents disagreed about local officials’ handling of the pandemic. The town’s political conflicts erupted on July Fourth, when armed demonstrators — led by the Custer Citizens for Liberty, a right-wing patriot group that *The Sentinel* frequently endorsed — paraded

through downtown Westcliffe, protesting the Custer County Board of Health’s decision to cancel the annual Independence Day Parade. The ranchers had planned to avoid the protest downtown but got caught in the crowds during morning errands. “We saw them flying the Three Percenter flags front and center, and everybody was armed. It was a fascist parade,” Logue told me. “So, we came back and started antifa accounts on Instagram. We called them out on being Nazis by tweeting about them, then on Facebook.”

What happened next surprised them. “There was a real upsurge from the leftist community in the Valley,” said Logue. The outcry created an unexpected opening, as they unknowingly tapped into long-simmering sentiments. Meanwhile, they found another niche: Many residents began employing them in local handiwork and physical labor. The ranchers also provide recycling services at the county landfill. That has exponentially increased their visibility: “It’s really hard for people to paint you as ‘weird’ or whatever, if you’re just helping people,” Logue said.

If the political headwinds they face seem daunting, they’ve also made them adapt. “We’re queer. We get second-guessed all the time,” Logue said. “We’re always having to innovate and think ahead.” When they couldn’t get certain Department of Agriculture livestock loans, for example — alpacas are technically classified as pets — they acquired a few sheep. “There’s something inherently queer about how many alpaca we have. People don’t know what to do with us,” said Kathryn, one of Logue’s partners, who goes by her first name only. “Sure, we’ll bring out some sheep,

I guess that makes us ‘normal’ or whatever, but that’s the closest we’ll get to assimilation.”

This underscores a larger point: Exceeding established categories, and reinventing something better in their wake, is a hallmark of “camp culture” — what critic Susan Sontag famously described in her 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” as the “love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’ ... the spirit of extravagance.” The perceived surplus or frivolity is the point. Hence the large number of alpaca (nearly 200, as of January): It’s a sensibility, a vision — a distinctly ecological one. “We

deliberately chose alpaca because their poop is particularly good for establishing deep soil,” Logue said. “We do natural farming and ranching, so we don’t rob the land of its inherent goodness. We make it better.” The Tenacious Unicorns and their brand of camp culture are leading the way, reinventing rural America, which is to say, making it more than just a cis-white stronghold.

“You know,” Logue said, “there’s plenty of space in those communities for queer voices.”

WEBEXTRA: [More photos at hcn.org](https://www.hcn.org)



Bonnie Nelson sits where she once watched unwelcome visitors loitering at the ranch’s gate with her Springfield AR-15 in hand (top right).

Penny Logue reclines on a pile of hay as she coaxes the friendliest members of the ranch’s alpaca herd closer to her (right).

HCN in the 2000s

A CHANGING OF THE GUARD

In 2002, after nearly two decades at the helm, Publisher and Editor Ed and Betsy Marston decided to step down. Longtime staffer Paul Larmer became publisher, and Greg Hanscom took over as editor. Together with Art Director Cindy Wehling, they turned the black-and-white tabloid into a full-color magazine that celebrated the beauty and exposed the ugliness of the West.

This included deep reporting on the region's extractive industries. The 2000s brought an unprecedented oil and gas boom, spurred by \$100/barrel oil prices and new hydro-fracking technology that enabled producers to tap new reservoirs of hydrocarbons. George W. Bush's industry-friendly appointees opened the doors to new development on public lands.

Labor camps sprang up overnight in Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico, turning boomtowns like Gillette, Wyoming, into hotbeds for quick money, drugs and sometimes violence. Combing through state and federal records, Senior Editor Ray Ring found that between 2000 and 2006, thousands of oil and gas workers were seriously injured on the job, and 89 died, victims of dangerous work conditions and an underregulated industry. *HCN* published the names of all of them.

A WARMER, AND WIDER, WEST

Even as energy boomed, evidence mounted that fossil-fuel-driven climate change was already impacting the West, bringing a diminishing snowpack, increased wildfires, forest die-offs and drought. *HCN* Contributing Editor Michelle Nijhuis wrote the groundbreaking climate series, "Hot Times," years in advance of mainstream



Despite sophisticated computers on some rigs, it is ultimately up to the drill operator to take the pulse of the rig and to watch the backs of his fellow roughnecks. **JT Thomas**

media coverage and received the 2006 Sullivan Award for Excellence in Science Journalism.

The magazine also began to expand its coverage of social issues, exploring immigration and the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands and writing about drug addiction and gang violence in rural and urban communities. In 2006, *HCN* published its first piece of fiction, "The Tamarisk Hunter," set in the desert Southwest in 2030. The author, Paolo Bacigalupi, who then served as *HCN*'s digital editor, has gone on to become an internationally acclaimed science fiction writer.

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Thanks to readers and donors across the country, we're more than halfway to our ambitious goal of \$10 million dollars to grow our reach and impact, and to ensure that *HCN* flourishes in the future. We need your support to reach this summit! To learn more and contribute: hcn.org/50-years



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 In honor of Ed Marston present at the creation.
 Maybe even the Creation.
 In honor of Stephanie Mohr
 In honor of my love of the West: a very special place.
 In honor of Jim Nelson
 In honor of Otis & Lulu Adams

Scandals, stress and a ray gun



Thompson in the studio helping record *HCN* Staff Editor Cally Carswell's podcast. **Courtesy of Jonathan Thompson**

I came to *HCN* during a time of barely controlled chaos. We were on a two-week publication schedule and were still as much “newspaper” as “magazine,” trying to stay on top of all of the current news, particularly as it related to public lands. And boy, was there a lot of news: The George W. Bush/Dick Cheney administration was on a public-land-pillaging rampage, while its associates and underlings were constantly entangled in scandals. (Remember when Jack Abramoff’s lobbying fraud and the Minerals Management Service’s sex-and-drug parties with oil executives were still considered scandalous? Those were the days).

Often that meant assigning stories on Friday that would go to print two weeks later, but only after a “layered” editing process that

involved no fewer than five editors marking up the pages with sticky notes. Sometimes we literally ripped a story off the flats hours before it was to go to the printer because it just wasn’t ready. The resulting stress took years off our lives, but it also kept the office lively, since we used humor and laughter (and toy ray-guns) to blow off steam.

It was a time of transition for our region. Long dismissed as “fly-over country,” the Interior West became the heart of national politics in 2008 when Denver landed the Democratic National Convention. The same issues we’d covered for years in obscurity were suddenly all over the front page of *The New York Times*. The housing crash, which was centered in Western cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas, and the natural gas boom and bust kept our

stories in national view.

Meanwhile, we were trying to transform the publication, bringing more narrative into our features, and broadening our scope to include more environmental justice, social and cultural issues. Just a few months after I arrived, we ran a cover story by Angela Garcia on the heroin epidemic in Chimayo, New Mexico, and shortly thereafter I spearheaded an entire issue devoted to immigration. A few years later, Ray Ring wrote a heartbreaking essay on suicide. Readers almost always loved the pieces, even as they criticized us for running them because they didn’t adhere to our “mission.”

We took some crazy risks with stories during those years. But *HCN* has always been willing to take risks when needed as it evolves with the West. And I hope — and believe — it always will.

—Jonathan Thompson,
 editor-in-chief, 2007-2010

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HCN COMMUNITY

New faces

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS WELCOMED
 new interns in January: Wufei Yu from Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Surya Milner from Bozeman, Montana.

As a young boy from Beijing, Yu wanted to write about sports: "I started to not just contend with the game itself, and the news itself — which is all about scores, who scored how many goals — but the personal memoirs of athletes," he said.

After moving to New York to attend Columbia University's journalism school in 2018, Yu continued writing about sports, with a bent toward outdoor adventure. He soon ditched the city for the deserts of New Mexico, working as a fellow for *Outside Magazine*. Now, at *HCN*, Yu will write for the South Desk, where he intends to highlight Asian-American perspectives. "This is something that's missing in the collective memory of Western Americans," he said.

As a teen, Surya Milner developed a deep connection with the Montana landscape, often swinging a mattock to work on trails as a volunteer for the Montana Conservation Corps in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness and the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

At Bowdoin College in Maine, she reported for her college newspaper and local outlets, writing about a three-time rodeo queen in Livingston, Montana; a short-lived mixed-race fishing community on Malaga Island, Maine; and her

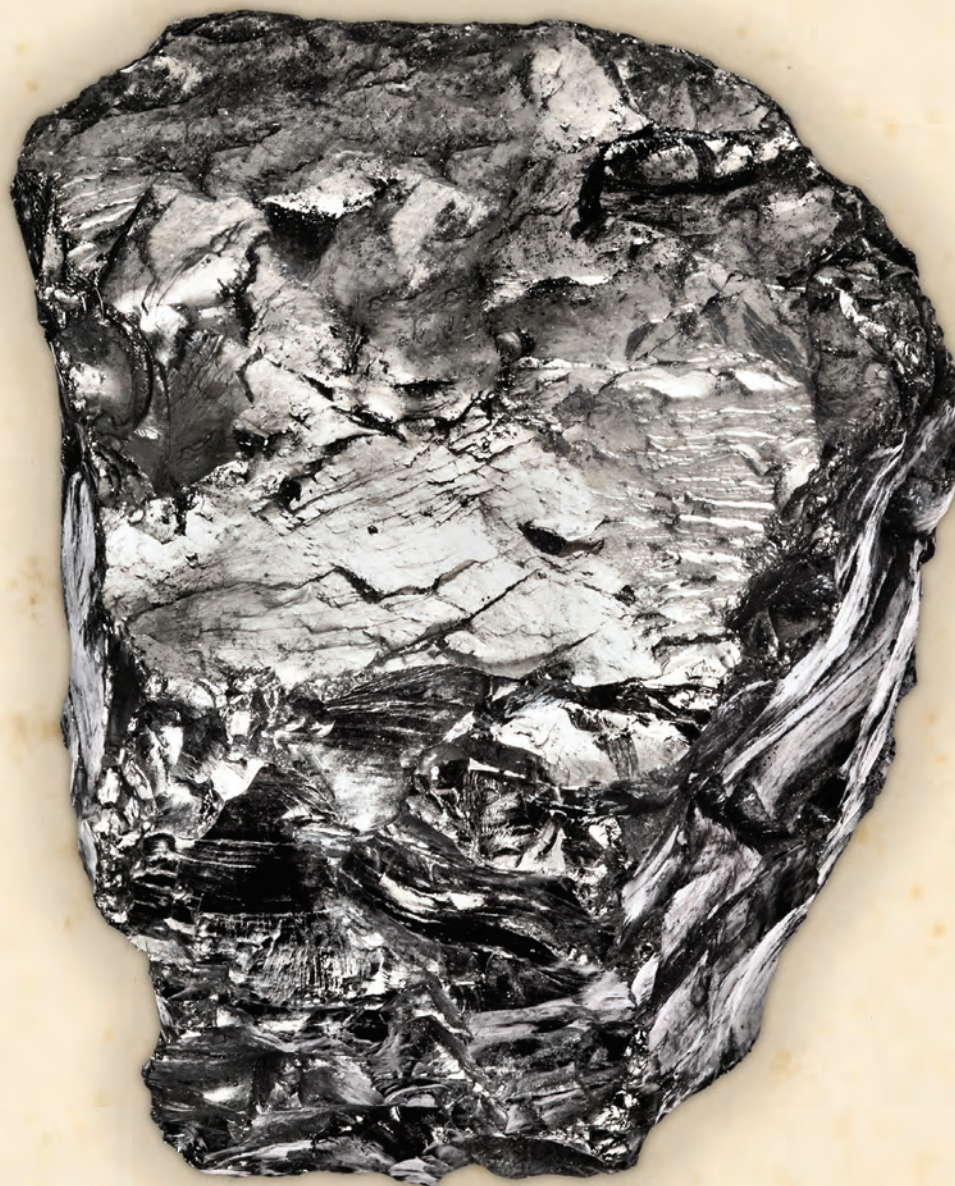


Surya Milner (top). Wufei Yu at Great Sand Dunes National Park, Colorado (above).

own identity as a biracial South Asian American woman. Milner will work on the North Desk. "I hope my writing is a drop in the bucket of big or small changes to elevate certain people into a discussion that they've historically been left out of," she said, "or at least brings beauty and pleasure to whoever is reading it."

We are delighted to announce that Jessica Douglas is our latest **Virginia Spencer Davis Fellow**, which honors a longtime California reader and conservationist. Jessica, a native of Oregon and member of the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians, just finished her internship and will continue reporting for our Indigenous Affairs Desk from Portland. Welcome, Yu and Milner, and congratulations, Jessica!

HCN SAYS GOODBYE TO TWO REMARKABLE GENTLEWOMEN, readers and lifelong movers and shakers. Kate Missett of Cheyenne, Wyoming, 1949-2020, who served on *HCN's* board back in the early Wyoming days, was a dog-loving journalist and gifted wordsmith. And Mariel Margery Johnson of Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1948-2020, was a weaver, gardener, booklover and traveler, who left *HCN* a generous gift. Mariel and Kate, you are dearly loved, and you will be missed.



The Big Breakdown

A half-century ago, the Big Buildup transformed the West; now, it's all coming to an end.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

FOR NEARLY FIVE DECADES, the Navajo Generating Station's smokestacks towered over the sandstone and scrub of the Navajo Nation in northern Arizona, churning out greenhouse gases and other pollutants and serving as symbols of coal's unquestioned dominance of the nation's energy mix. But the plant shut down in December 2019, and the towers were demolished a year later. Now they symbolize something else entirely: The Big Breakdown of coal power and the ongoing transformation of

the West's economic and energy landscape.

In the late 1950s, several utilities across the Southwest teamed up to create a cabal called WEST, or Western Energy Supply and Transmission Associates, to construct six massive coal-fired power plants and their accompanying mines across the Colorado Plateau. The plants would then ship power hundreds of miles across high-voltage lines to the region's burgeoning cities. It was the first and most ambitious phase of what scholar and

author Charles Wilkinson would later dub "The Big Buildup."

Four of the six proposed plants — Four Corners, Mojave, San Juan and Navajo — sprouted on or near the Navajo Nation in the 1960s and early '70s. Huntington was built in central Utah, but the sixth plant never made it past the drawing board.

The Buildup's real beneficiaries lay west and south of the Colorado Plateau, in the cities, where an abundance of cheap power lit the neon

of Las Vegas and ran air conditioners in LA. The Navajo Generating Station powered the pumps that pushed Colorado River water into central Arizona, sending Phoenix's suburbs sprawling into the desert and enriching the Southwest's growth machine — all those real estate developers, mass-production homebuilders, the automotive industry, the corporate shareholders, the ratepayers and the executives.

For a half-century, the coal plants churned, pumping electricity onto the grid, cash into state and tribal coffers, and pollution into the water, land and air, unruffled by recessions or environmental protests and lawsuits, impervious to the booms and busts that plagued oil, gas and hardrock mining. Just as the coal leviathan maintained a steady stream of "baseload" power to the grid, so too did it provide an economic foundation for coal-dependent communities, together with a baseload level of smog.

Now that foundation is crumbling.

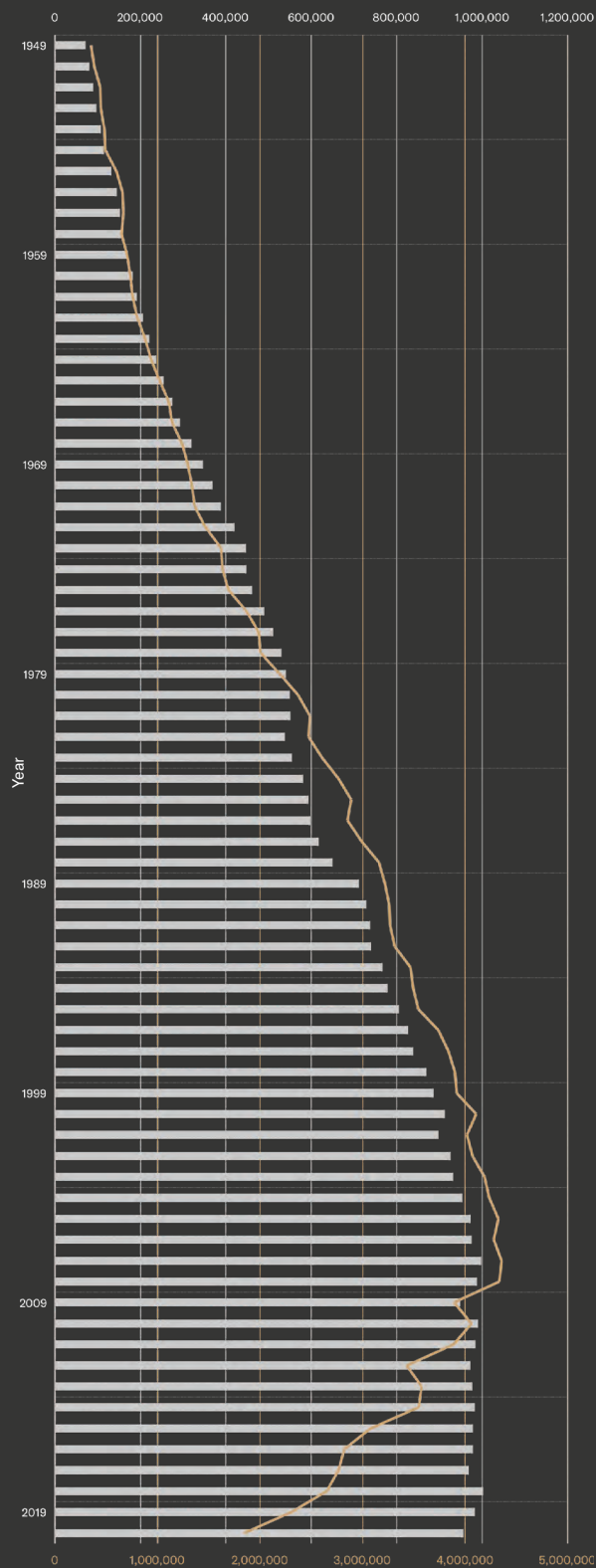
Coal as a power-generating fuel reached its apex in 2007. Soon thereafter, the price of natural gas came crashing down and that, along with renewable-energy tax credits and the decreasing price of solar and wind energy, wiped away coal's cost advantage. States mandated that at least some of the electricity they consumed had to come from clean sources, California ordered the state's utilities to break their coal habit for good, and the Obama administration implemented a variety of regulations that increased the cost of operating coal plants.

Today, the products of the Big Buildup are coming down as surely as the Navajo Generating Station's smokestacks. Mojave shut down in 2005; Reid-Gardner in southern Nevada went dark in 2019, as did the Navajo Generating Station and the Kayenta Mine that fed it. San Juan Generating Station in northwestern New Mexico will close next year, and the nearby Four Corners Power Plant is unlikely to run beyond 2031. Domestic coal consumption is down 65% since its 2007 peak, and some 45,000 coal miners have lost their jobs during the last decade. The Big Breakdown is reverberating across the West despite President Donald Trump's market-meddling and regulation-eviscerating efforts to save the coal industry.

The transition won't be easy: Coal-dependent economies are suffering mightily, from the Hopi Tribe and the Navajo Nation to towns like Farmington, New Mexico, and Gillette, Wyoming. Yet the Big Breakdown also opens up space for hope and opportunity, for a rethinking and refashioning of energy systems and economies. And already the air over the Southwest is a little bit cleaner than it's been since the 1960s. ✨

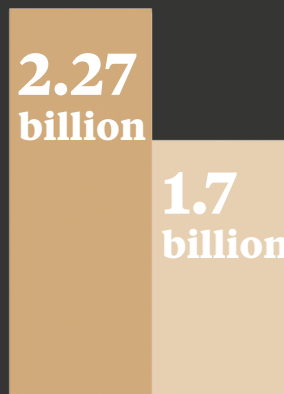
Photo by Dan Winters

Thousands of tons of coal consumed for electricity



Millions of kWh of electricity generated/consumed

THE BIG BREAKDOWN, BY THE NUMBERS



2009 2019

Tons of carbon dioxide emitted by U.S. power plants

2019

The first year since 1885 that total U.S. annual energy consumption from renewable sources exceeded coal consumption.

157 million tons

Amount of coal mined from Western mines in the third quarter of 2007.

79 million tons

Amount of coal mined from Western mines in the third quarter of 2020.

116 million tons

Amount of coal pulled from Wyoming mines during the third quarter of 2007.

56 million tons

Amount of coal mined in Wyoming during the third quarter of 2020.

9.3 million tons

Amount of coal mined in Arizona during the third quarter of 2007.

0

Amount of coal mined in Arizona during all of 2020.

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Mine Safety and Health Administration, Energy Information Administration, Navajo Generating Station-Kayenta Mine Complex Draft Environmental Impact Statement (2016), St. Louis Dispatch. Infographic design: Luna Anna Archey / HCN



REPORTAGE

New wind projects power local budgets in Wyoming

When the pandemic hit the fossil fuel industry, towns expected big deficits. Instead, some got major windfalls.

BY JANE C. HU

WHEN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC hit, Robin Lockman feared the worst for her town of Cheyenne, Wyoming. As the city's treasurer, she estimated that it might lose up to 25% of its budget as tax revenues stalled and the prices of oil, gas and coal tanked, eliminating money the city typically receives from the state as royalties from the extractive energy industry

So the city did the hard work of laying off 18 employees and cutting funds for travel and training. And then a surprising thing happened: The huge deficit never arrived. In

fact, over the summer, the city brought in more tax revenue than the year before.

Between July and September, Cheyenne saw a 20.5% increase in tax revenue compared to 2019. In September alone, the increase was a staggering 83%, or \$1.4 million. "I was in shock when I saw it," said Lockman. She feared the good news was a mistake, so she called the Wyoming Department of Revenue to confirm the numbers. "The tax reported was legitimate, and was due to the Roundhouse Wind Project," said Lockman, referring to an energy

development west of the city.

Throughout Wyoming, counties typically depend on industries like coal, oil and gas drilling, mining or tourism and recreation to bring in the taxes necessary to pay for education, community programs and infrastructure. Overall economic activity is down — state-wide, sales and use taxes have shrunk 6% over the last year — but revenues from mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction are down nearly twice that. Meanwhile, profits from wind energy developments, like the Roundhouse

The High Plains and McFadden Ridge Wind Energy Project near Rock River, Wyoming, in Carbon County. Tax revenues from wind energy projects could keep Wyoming counties in the black as oil, gas and coal prices fall.
Nick Cote

Wind Project, are booming. Now, residents and officials are asking whether wind energy can help the state survive the economic storm of the pandemic — and become a reliable revenue stream for the future as fossil fuel income dries up.

Over the last decade, investors

have laid the groundwork for wind farms across Wyoming, which ranks among the nation's top 10 states for wind capacity, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. The Power Company of Wyoming, a private company run by the Anschutz Corporation, is developing a facility on Carbon County's 320,000-acre Overland Trail Ranch, just outside Rawlins. Framed by I-80 to the north and Sage Creek Road to the west, the property is one of Wyoming's classic wide-open spaces: miles of rolling grassland dotted with scrubby sagebrush. On land long used for cattle and sheep ranching, in a county named for rich coal deposits, construction crews have built roads and turbine pads for the Chokecherry and Sierra Madre Wind Energy Project, which will comprise nearly 1,000 wind turbines by 2026. Sixty miles east, Rocky Mountain Power, a subsidiary of the state's largest utility, has begun erecting 270-foot tall turbines at the Ekola Flats Wind Energy Project.

The projects will create local jobs as workers operate and maintain the facilities. "Once the Chokecherry and Sierra Madre Wind Energy Project is complete, we estimate 114 permanent jobs will be created," said Kara Choquette, the communications director for the Power Company of Wyoming. The Two Rivers and Lucky Star wind projects, smaller developments near the border between Carbon and Albany counties, are expected to generate another 24 long-term operations and maintenance jobs.

Right now, that new construction is generating much-needed sales taxes on materials. Between April and June, Carbon County's taxable sales increased by 108%. "Everyone else around here's hair is on fire, but we're sitting in a pretty good position, thanks to wind energy," said Dave Throgmorton, director of the Carbon County Higher Education Center, which is funded by the county and provides college-level and vocational training classes.

BUT THAT INCREASED tax flow is not guaranteed to continue.

Lockman, Cheyenne's treasurer, thinks the boom her city saw in the third quarter of 2020 might be a one-time influx from a period of heavy construction. "Personally, I feel it's probably a temporary type of situation, but I'm hoping it will be longer-term," she said.

Residents have also raised concerns that wind energy jobs aren't going to locals. Many wind projects have been completed by teams that travel to the state for a few weeks at a time, living in camps at the edge of town, Throgmorton said. "Everyone was hoping locals would be involved in wind turbines, but turns out that's all done by specialty teams from outside," he said. For example, the permit applications for the Two Rivers and Lucky Star wind projects explicitly mention "man camps" and estimate that roughly 80% of workers will be "non-local." About half of the 100 people working on the Chokecherry and Sierra Madre project between April and November were from Wyoming, said Choquette.

The wind industry faces other sources of resistance in Wyoming. Groups across wind-rich counties have opposed projects, saying turbines disrupt dark-sky areas, impede views or decrease property values. In addition, legislators have proposed raising taxes on wind generation and removing tax incentives. While those changes could generate more tax revenue, they could also drive wind projects elsewhere. According to a 2019 analysis by Wyoming's Center for Energy Economics and Public Policy, Wyoming already taxes wind developments at roughly twice the rate of neighboring Colorado.

Though legislators have not made any recent changes to wind taxes, recurring proposals scare off companies, said Terry Weickum, a former Carbon County Commission chairman and a newly elected member of the Rawlins City Council. "No one wants to do business in an unstable environment," said Weickum. "It'd be like if you

bought a car for \$100, and then you found out this \$100 car needs a \$2,000 motor."

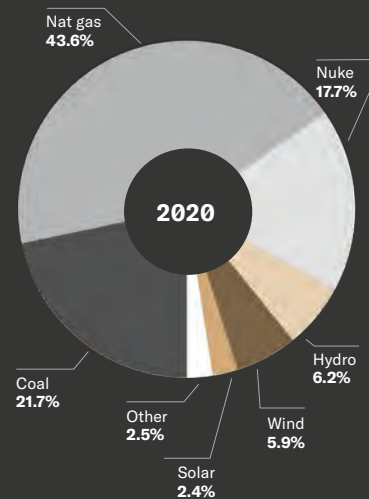
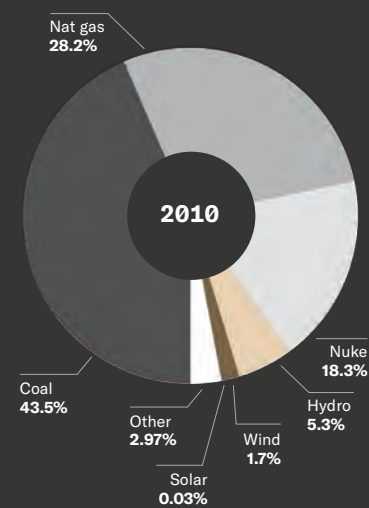
Some see it as a sign that the state is giving up on its sunseting oil, gas and mining industries. Throgmorton said many of his students imagine following in their parents' footsteps and working at the Sinclair Oil Refinery. "But that's more fantasy than real now," he said. Still, many Wyomingites hope that renewable energies like wind will help sustain the state's energy economy in the long-term. "Honestly, I hated (wind energy) when it first came along, but I realized I didn't know anything about it," said Weickum. "People who have made their living in oil, gas and coal — they feel like if you like wind, you're cheating on your wife, you're cheating on oil, gas and coal. But we need every piece of it."

Even if the wind industry doesn't continue generating hefty tax revenues, its contributions could help keep counties solvent. Companies pay sales tax on equipment purchased for maintenance, like replacement turbine blades, property taxes on the assessed value of projects, and taxes on the energy generated. According to Connie Wilbert, director of the Sierra Club's Wyoming chapter, those proceeds can be many millions of dollars a year. "For these small towns in Wyoming, budgets aren't that big, so if you had a steady, reliable \$5 million a year, that's a big deal."

People in communities benefitting from the financial windfall of new projects are grateful for those extra dollars this year. Throgmorton calls the wind industry "the goose that's laying the golden egg," and said he's relieved to be able to focus on his campus's development. And Lockman, the Cheyenne treasurer, said that even if the big tax increases from this year don't continue, they have been a boon during the pandemic months that will allow the city some leeway in 2021. "Thank goodness for wind energy," she said, "because if not for it, we'd be in a lot different shape." ☀

THE BIG BREAKDOWN

Percentage of total electricity generated by fuel, 3rd quarter



\$144 million

Amount pledged by Arizona Public Service to provide a just transition to communities where the company will shut down its coal-fired power plants.

2.7 gigawatts

Amount of coal-fired generating capacity projected to be retired in 2021.

31.6 million tons

Total amount of coal exports from the United States, second quarter 2012.

15.3 million tons

Coal exports, second quarter 2020.



Kyle Davis - Mechanic and Machinist

“I felt like what we were doing was a good thing. It was valuable and then all sudden it was like: Well, it’s not valuable anymore. Coal’s been good. It’s been good to me. I think it’s been good to the Northwest. I hate to kick it too hard under the curb.

And (as for) solar panels, that’s not getting done here, not like it should be. Hopefully that’ll change. I’ve got friends who work up in that industry, and that was a stellar job opportunity, if things don’t pan out with moving to another plant. That’s not my first choice, but if they actually build panels in the United States, that’s another business to get into.

This has been great for my family to be here (Boardman), but we’re probably going to have to move to stay with the company. And, at 59, it’s kind of a bummer age to have to be making that kind of change.”



As a coal plant closes, workers reflect

“The people here made the plant. What we did is something that was needed.”

PHOTOS BY SAGE BROWN | TEXT BY CARL SEGERSTROM

TO REACH THE TOP of the coal-fired power plant outside Boardman, Oregon, one must first ascend 19 floors in an elevator, then climb a couple of sets of stairs, all the while passing a labyrinth of heavy metal machines and metal catwalks. These various — and, to the untrained eye, mysterious — machines work together to spin a turbine that converts heat into electricity. From the roof, the plant’s smokestack rises even higher above a barren coal yard that was once filled with piles of coal from the Powder River Basin of Wyoming. After four decades as one of Oregon’s top power producers — and the state’s number-one point-source of carbon dioxide emissions — the Boardman plant closed in October 2020. But glimpses of the present and future of energy production are visible next door and on the horizon.

Within a couple hundred yards of the coal facility, a puff of exhaust rises from a natural gas power plant. Over the last decade, natural gas has supplanted coal as the top source of electricity generation in the United States. Now, wind turbines can be seen dotting fields of sagebrush or grain in every direction from the top of the coal plant. On a recent morning, Brandon Hendricks, the plant’s operations manager, pointed to a low hill in the distance, where the Wheatridge Renewable Energy Facility — which

combines solar, wind and battery storage — is under construction. In 2019, renewable sources produced more energy than coal in the U.S. for the first time in recent history.

Every power source comes with costs and benefits to workers, nearby communities and the environment. Ten years ago, Portland General Electric, Boardman’s owner, in response to Clean Air Act lawsuits from environmental groups, agreed that the cost of coal power was too high. Since then, the plant has been slowly winding down operations. Repairs were skipped, jobs were slowly phased out as less maintenance work was done, and the utility company began offering its employees career training and assignments at other plants.

Now, crews are taking the plant apart. The first task is to make the giant machine, housed in a metal-sided building, “cold, dark and dry,” as the plant manager put it, so demolition crews can come in and level the rest. Wires are being cut. Some parts may be cleaned and sent to other plants. In mid-December, *High Country News* visited Boardman to talk with some of the people who ran the plant about the work they’ve done powering the region, the changes in the energy industry and the hole the closing is leaving in their careers.

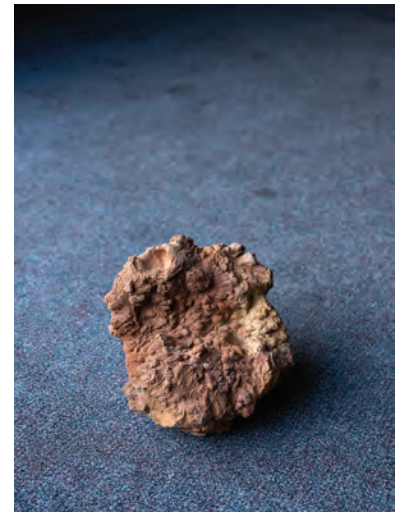


Denice Strawn - Plant Operator

“Pretty much all I’ve had is male-dominated jobs. I was in the Marine Corps. I grew up roofing houses. I worked out at Hanford (the now-defunct federal nuclear production site) and at the railroad. I’ve always worked with men.

My son’s getting married next November, and his girlfriend is learning how to weld. I’ve been trying to encourage her to get into a welders’ union. She’s kind of afraid that, ‘Oh, I can’t do that kind of work.’ I said, ‘You’re welding, you’re doing the job as a hobby, but you can do it.’

Girls, women need to realize that there are jobs in the union that they can do and do well. They’ve just got to be willing to step out there. They’re good-paying jobs and they have good benefits, and I’d like to just encourage them to step outside of their comfort zone.”



The control system at the head of the main turbine (left). A piece of bottom ash slag from the main boiler at the Boardman Power Plant (right).

Dave Rodgers - Plant Manager

“I’ve been at this for a long time. And it seems like you’re always kind of preoccupied with the plant. So if you’re at home, you get a phone call, you wonder: ‘Is this the plant?’ You get a phone call late at night, on the weekend or any night, you know: It’s the plant.

You’re always thinking ahead — what’s the next shoe that’s gonna drop?

I feel really good about what I’ve done. What I try and tell people is: We produced power for people to use and at a fair and reasonable rate. When I go down to Portland, I always feel pretty good walking around seeing all the lights, going to a soccer game. There’s nothing better in life than to eat, drink and know that your work is good. And our work here has been really good. And the people here made the plant. What we did is something that was needed.”



Chief Corpus - Shift Supervisor

"I came to work with Portland General Electric purely by accident. We were married, two kids and the third one on the way. We decided to take a break from school, and my in-laws lived up here in Boardman. The only place that had a decent wage was PGE.

When I got here, the plant only had a year of runtime, so, essentially, I had 40 years of work. So, I'm thinking, I can work here my whole career. I missed it by 10 years.

It's kind of like an impending doom. Here I was with the prospect of being 55 and unemployed. The way the industry changed, it's not like there's other coal plants to go to, and I like it here.

I went back to school and finished up a bachelor's. I teach night classes down at the junior college. I'm on a decommission crew for a couple more years. Then I'll retire and see where life takes me."



Paz Barraza - Work Control Center Supervisor

"On the last day (burning coal), I filled in for a control operator. I was actually one of the ones who helped shut down the unit. It didn't hit me until then: Wow, we're not going to run this anymore. That's kind of when it hit me.

It's not like it was out of the blue. I would have been more impacted by that. I kind of just see it as a process that needs to be done. I knew hiring into this job that we'd be shutting down, so I don't think it really affected me.

One thing I think of is the impact it has on the community. It's a small community they have in Boardman. It's not like big counties or big cities. So they're losing this, but they still have the gas plant, so that should provide some economic relief."



The control room of the Boardman Power Plant (left). High-voltage electrical transmission lines in Boardman, Oregon (right).





LIFE AFTER COAL

Diné activist Nicole Horseherder's long quest for equity from the rise and fall of the coal economy.

By Jessica Kutz | Photos by Cassidy Araiza

ON A CHILLY December morning in northern Arizona, near the town of Page, Nicole Horseherder stood beside a barbed-wire fence, waiting for the smokestacks of the Navajo Generating Station to fall. The coal-fired power plant, just a mile away, towered against the backdrop of the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and a cloudless blue sky.

As they waited, Horseherder, a Diné (Navajo) environmental activist, and her husband, Marshall Johnson, spoke into a phone camera trained on the power plant. They were livestreaming the demolition on Facebook. Horseherder's hands were nestled in the pockets of her long tan wool jacket, its tassels swaying at her ankles. She and Johnson switched between English and Navajo as they spoke to the tens of thousands of people who had tuned in to watch.

The Navajo Generating Station, which opened in 1974 and operated for decades before shuttering in 2019, was the larg-

est coal-fired power plant in the Western United States. It supplied electricity to millions of customers in Arizona, California and Nevada, using coal from Black Mesa, where Horseherder lives. As she spoke, she acknowledged the economic benefits the plant had brought to the region. "But it has also had devastating impacts to the environment and to some of our most valuable elements of life, such as water," she said, leaning into the microphone.

The towers shifted and slowly, almost gracefully, began to tilt. The first smokestack began to crumble. Explosives crackled, and Horseherder could feel the earth move through the soles of her boots. And then, one after another, they hit the ground with a thundering boom, leaving a cloud of gray dust in their wake. The demolition was the culmination of years of work: Horseherder has been fighting the ravages of the coal industry for nearly two decades. In her lifetime, thousands of acres of Black Mesa

were destroyed for strip-mining, while coal mining depleted the area's only source of drinking water. Coal miners got sick, and many residents still suffer from asthma, including Horseherder's mother and two of her daughters.

Now she's charting a new path forward for the Diné people as the coal economy fades — a complicated quest, since coal has long been an integral part of life on the nation. The industry brought high-paying jobs that sustained families for generations. Many former plant workers were there to watch the demolition that morning. "For the older folks like my dad, that is where they worked," Irvin Frank Jr., the son of a former steam-pump mechanic at the plant, told me. "That's how they supported their family over time."

Over the years, Horseherder has attended public hearings and testified in front of lawmakers, from the reservation to Washington, D.C., advocating for an end to

"Thirty years of strip-mining have devastated the land and disrupted the life of many people."

A crowd gathers as the smokestacks of the Navajo Generating Station come down in December outside Page, Arizona.

“Why would you leave to go do something else when the blueprint for a good life is right there?”



Nicole Horseherder and her husband, Marshall Johnson, on the day the Navajo Generating Station smokestacks came down.

extractive energy economies. She’s often been the lone voice in the room — confronting not only the coal companies and private interests, but also her own neighbors and tribal government. Now that the Navajo Generating Station has closed and other power plants in the region are soon to follow, her vision of a more sustainable energy

economy — one powered by wind and solar — is coming more clearly into view. “No matter how frustrated I get, sometimes with the way tribal government works or with how hard it is sometimes to educate people and the community — still, it’s the right thing to do,” Horseherder told me. “And it’s a worthwhile thing to do.”

Though some states like New Mexico and Colorado have recently passed laws that together provide millions of dollars for workforce training and economic support for coal-dependent communities, other states, including Arizona and Nevada, have not. Horseherder is demanding support directly from utilities and industry. It’s a moral

imperative, she says. “We’re trying to compel them to provide some kind of transition support for the Navajo Nation instead of just walking away and leaving — leaving the NGS plant and leaving the communities behind,” Horseherder said.

The demolition of the Navajo Generating Station marks the decline of coal in the West. And, if Horseherder is successful in her work, it will also symbolize the beginning of what she calls “a just transition”: A new, more equitable relationship with the energy economy — “one in which there is mutual benefit between the Navajo Nation and its partners,” Horseherder said.

BLACK MESA, A PLATEAU that rises thousands of feet above the Painted Desert, has been home to Horseherder’s people for centuries. Her parents, like the generations that came before, were nomadic shepherders. On breaks from school during her childhood, Horseherder would wake while it was still dark to lead her family’s sheep to water. She remembers digging in the dry, sandy arroyo for a seep, waiting for water to well up for the sheep to drink. When she returned home a decade later, she found that the land had changed. “I discovered that the seeps had vanished,” she wrote in *High Country News* in 2013. “The springs at all of the camps from my childhood were drying up.”

Beginning in the late 1960s, the water that Horseherder’s family depended on was diverted to transport coal through a slurry line, 273 miles from a mine on Black Mesa to the Mohave Generating Station in Laughlin, Nevada. At the time, Peabody Energy, the coal-mining company that owned the operation, pumped nearly 3.3 million gallons of water a day out of the Navajo Aquifer, known as the N-aquifer. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, or NRDC, an environmental nonprofit, Peabody’s pumping depressurized the aquifer, lowering the water table and causing the

springs to dry up. Peabody disputes this. In an email to *HCN*, a company spokesperson stated that the aquifer “is healthy and robust,” something that is “well documented through decades of public and private study.” However, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, some of the wells on the mesa had been in decline for decades. They only stabilized in 2010, a change that one environmental researcher linked to the closure of Peabody’s slurry operation.

The aquifer was Black Mesa’s only source of drinking water in a region that, in some years, gets just six inches of rain. Horseherder and others who lived on the mesa, including members of the Hopi Tribe, whose land lies entirely within the Navajo Nation, didn’t want their precious water carried away to burn coal.

For decades, U.S. mining laws favored corporations and cleared the way for industry to exploit tribal lands under the guise of tribal consultation. Oil prospectors negotiated with a Navajo tribal governing body, which was formed in 1923 by the Department of Interior for the express purpose of energy development on Indigenous land. Too often it was a lopsided relationship, where most of the benefits of ownership flowed off the reservation. On Black Mesa in the 1960s, for example, a Utah lawyer named John Boyden formed an illegitimate council that did not have majority support from the Hopi Tribe. Through this “puppet council,” he negotiated on behalf of the tribe and sold mineral and water leases to Peabody at exorbitantly low rates: \$1.67 per acre-foot of water at a time when that water was worth far more than that. According to legal files unearthed by a University of Colorado law professor, Boyden was on Peabody’s payroll at the same time he was working for the Hopi.

Many residents of the Navajo Nation still lack electricity in their homes, but for decades their coal made the lights on the Las Vegas Strip visible from space. While

the tribes’ water was depleted to slurry coal, the energy their land produced powered the Central Arizona Project, an extensive canal system, which used the electricity to move water from the Colorado River down to Phoenix and Tucson. Development was booming outside the reservation, but families like the Horseherders hauled water from community wells at chapter houses miles away to care for their homes and animals.

In the 1990s, Vernon Masayesva, a former Hopi tribal chairman and a vocal critic of Peabody’s aquifer use, began hosting talks about coal’s impact on local water. He eventually formed a nonprofit called the Black Mesa Trust. It was during one of these meetings that Horseherder pieced together what had happened to the springs of her childhood. She had recently moved back to Black Mesa, after completing her master’s in linguistics from the University of British Columbia. At a meeting about how to drum up awareness of the water situation, a former tribal leader told her, “Somebody needs to do this work, and I think that person has to be you.” Horseherder didn’t hesitate.

She first consulted with elders to figure out: “OK, how do we do this? How do we start this?” Later that year, she and Marshall Johnson, her husband, founded their own organization — Tó Nizhóní Ání, which means “sacred water speaks” — to halt the use of the N-aquifer for the Black Mesa coal mine. For Horseherder, it also came down to protecting her children and future generations on Black Mesa. “I know outside people just have a hard time understanding that it’s home. There are just so many generations of your family that have existed there and have been living there,” she told me. “Why would you leave to go do something else when the blueprint for a good life is right there?”

WHEN HORSEHERDER BEGAN organizing in 2001, some of the largest strip-mining operations in the United States were on Black Mesa. Horseherder and Masayesva

THE BIG BREAKDOWN

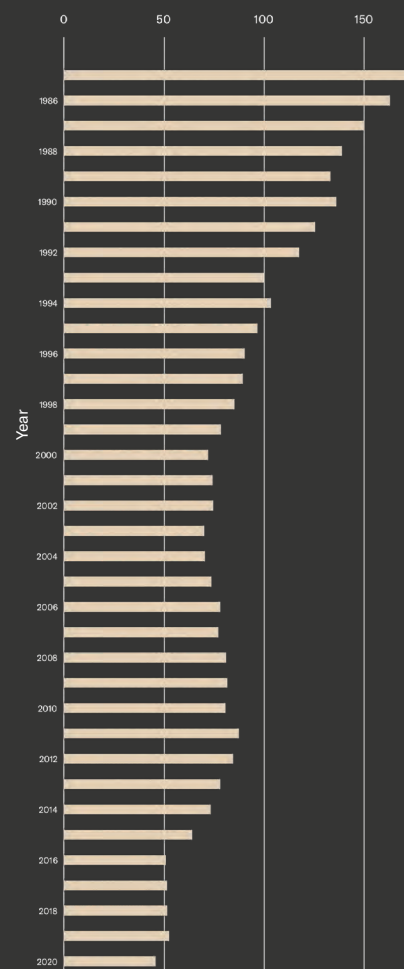
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Number of Westmoreland Coal Company’s 1,732 U.S. employees receiving “valued employees” retention bonuses in 2018 while the company was in bankruptcy proceedings, because those employees “are critical to the Debtors’ business operations and efforts to preserve and maximize stakeholder value.”

8

Number of those employees who had “mining” in their title.

Thousands of employees in the coal mining industry



\$1.2 million

Amount paid in employee incentive bonuses to Westmoreland CFO Gary Kohn in the month prior to his December 2018 resignation from the company.

were part of a growing resistance, but they were not yet representative of a larger tribal opposition. After attending a Navajo tribal government meeting, Horseherder realized that Black Mesa's concerns weren't registering with tribal officials in Window Rock, where the government offices are located. She set out to change that.

She and her husband, Johnson, devised a strategy: They would visit chapter houses, the local governing bodies on the Navajo Nation, and present their argument. Their community's only source of drinking water was in jeopardy, and in a region with so little precipitation, they wanted that water to stay in the ground.

In those early days, Horseherder raised their children — at that time, a baby and a tween — while Johnson traveled for his job as an ironworker. They spent mornings tuning into the Navajo-language radio station KTNN, often listening outside the house and in their car, “because you know how we had noisy kids back then,” Horseherder said. As the announcer rattled off the schedule, they would jot down the locations of that week's chapter-house meetings, which they would sometimes travel many miles to attend. They'd bring poster boards covered with information and make their case directly to the community. If the chapter houses voted to oppose Peabody's pumping of the aquifer, Horseherder could take those resolutions to the Navajo Tribal Council, hoping that it would do the same.

By March of 2003, she had secured 11 resolutions from 14 of the chapter houses that were directly impacted by the coal mining. (They'd go on to secure dozens; there are 110 chapter houses on the Navajo Nation.) In June of that year, the Navajo Tribal Council voted to approve the resolution, formally making the nation's position clear: The tribe wanted to cease pumping the N-aquifer for the coal slurry that powered the Mohave Generating Station. Peabody had already begun looking for alternative water sources, but when the Navajo



Nation formally voted against the use of the aquifer for the slurry line, that cemented the deal. “The resolution changed everything,” Horseherder told the *Los Angeles Times*. “It meant that if the mine continued using the Navajo aquifer, it did so directly against the wishes and requests of the Navajo tribe.”

“Thirty years of strip-mining have devastated the land and disrupted the life of many people,” Horseherder wrote in her testimony to a California Public Utility Commission at the time. “As the Chapter Resolutions show, the local people are united in this position. We have to stop the groundwater pumping.”

In 2005, thanks in part to the organizing efforts of the Black Mesa Trust and Tó Nizhóní Ání, the Mohave Generating Station closed. The owners, facing a deadline to install expensive pollution controls, could not prove to the California Public Utility Commission that they would have access to the water and coal they would

“(They) sold the water right out from under us to some company that doesn’t give a shit about us.”

need to keep the plant running. For Horseherder, it was a major win. “It motivated us to keep working for the things that we knew to be true,” she told me. “And that is that (this is) our homeland. And there’s no one else that’s going to protect it — except us.”

Over the years, Horseherder and other Black Mesa residents mounted opposition against numerous proposals that attempted to expand or prolong the life of coal mining on Black Mesa — a second mine, the Kayenta Mine, was still operational, carrying coal to NGS by train. She conducted her own community health surveys, showing the impact of the air pollution on asthma rates near the mines, and she often brought residents from Black Mesa to speak in front of the tribal council. She frequently found herself in opposition to tribal government officials who wanted to keep the mines and power plants open. At a coffee shop this fall, Horseherder told me that sometimes she felt the tribal government

A water tank on the Navajo Nation off Highway 89 in Arizona.

prioritized corporations over the people. Raising her voice, she said: “(They) sold the water right out from under us to some company that doesn’t give a shit about us. Once (Peabody is) done mining, they’re going to leave, and they don’t care.”

With NGS shuttered, Horseherder is focusing on clean energy for the Navajo Nation by building support for renewable energy projects. Her organization and other grassroots groups, including the Black Mesa Water Coalition and Diné CARE, have pushed the Navajo Nation to develop a more progressive energy policy in recent years. “They’ve succeeded in making the conversation about transition,” said Andrew Curley, a Diné scholar and assistant professor at the University of Arizona who studies the relationship between coal and the Navajo Nation. “There was even reluctance about that initially. There was a perspective that coal doesn’t need to transition.”

That transition has been painful. The Navajo Generating Station and Peabody paid approximately \$40 million in the 2019 fiscal year to the Navajo Nation and millions more to the Hopi. (In 2016, money from the industry accounted for nearly 80% of the tribe’s budget.) These royalties and leasing income funded essential government services like education and health care. “Everybody wants to talk in the language of economics,” Curley said. But it’s more than that; people forge identities around coal. “The dynamics that are often underappreciated are the social (and) political dynamics.”

For many families, it was a tragedy to see coal jobs disappear. Last August, Peabody laid off its workers, even though many could have transitioned to reclamation work — jobs that, according to the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis, would have kept approximately 200 people employed for at least two years at the Kayenta Mine. Others were more fortunate; the Salt River Project, or SRP, the company that operated the Navajo Generating Station,

offered to relocate all of its workers from the power plant. The company has re-hired more than 300 people at other, often far-away, facilities.

As Horseherder draws up the blueprints for a future where the relationship between energy economies and local communities is more equitable from the start, she’s also pushing to make companies like SRP and Peabody pay. So far, she’s helped secure millions for her community. SRP has agreed to pay \$110 million to the Navajo Nation over the next 35 years and is looking to buy up to 200 megawatts of solar sited on the Nation. The utility company, Arizona Public Service, has pledged \$144 million for transition assistance, economic development and electrification for the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and the communities near the Cholla Power Plant in Joseph City. If approved by the Arizona Corporation Commission, the state public utilities commission, it will be the largest amount pledged for an equitable transition by a utility company in the United States.

So far, Peabody has proven the most difficult to deal with by far. The company has submitted a request to the Office of Surface Mining, a federal regulatory agency, to delay much of the reclamation work, which involves returning the open coal pits to workable land, until 2022 at the earliest. The company doesn’t have the best track record. In 2015, nearly a decade after it closed the Black Mesa Mine, the Bureau of Indian Affairs called its reclamation work inadequate, stating that some of the land had taken on “moonscape surface features” due to poor topsoiling and backfilling. Horseherder also fears what could happen to reclamation if the coal-mining company goes into bankruptcy — a likely possibility, since Peabody announced in November that it would have trouble meeting financial obligations. For more than a year now, rolling mounds of coal have sat at the Kayenta Mine in open pits spanning thousands of acres across Black Mesa.

Over the years, the company has chosen not to work with organizers like Horseherder. “They’ll never reach out and say, ‘You know, we hear your concerns. Can we come to some kind of reasonable agreement?’ ” she told me over the phone this fall. Horseherder, who maintains a calm and measured manner in all conversations, seemed to be holding back tears. “They won’t even suggest dialogue.”

Peabody still hasn’t filed a significant permit revision, as is required by law after the mine’s closure. Horseherder has been urging the tribal government to demand this revision, because it would trigger a full environmental impact statement, opening reclamation to public comment and bringing transparency to the process. “This really is the last opportunity for the tribes to have a say in what reclamation looks like,” said Eric Frankowski, the executive director of the Western Clean Energy Campaign, which works with Horseherder. It’s also the final chance to review the damages to the N-aquifer and fight for reclamation of the groundwater. Frankowski said, “If the permit is renewed and rubber-stamped as is, it lasts for another five years.” Peabody maintains that it will resume reclamation work once pandemic-related restrictions are lifted and that it remains “committed to restoring the land as a vital part of the mining process.”

ABOUT TWO HOURS from Horseherder’s home on Black Mesa, just outside the town of Kayenta, a new future is beginning to take shape. There, the tribe’s first solar facility supplies energy to 36,000 homes on the Navajo Nation. The Kayenta Solar Plant was built in 2016. From the road, the solar panels are arranged in rows like a vineyard, blending in with the sandstone mesa behind them. The project is relatively small; it provides approximately 55 megawatts of solar energy, compared to the 2,200 megawatts-capacity produced by the Navajo Generat-

THE BIG BREAKDOWN

\$54 million

Total annual royalties, bonus payments and water-use fees paid to the Hopi Tribe and the Navajo Nation by the owners of both the Navajo Generating Station and the Kayenta Coal Mine, which were lost when the plant and mine shut down.

\$20.6 million

Compensation paid to Peabody CEO Glen Kellow in 2017 as the company exited bankruptcy. Peabody owns the now-closed Kayenta Coal Mine.

2,785

Number of coal-mining fatalities in the U.S. in 1913.

12

Fatalities in 2019.

5

Fatalities in 2020.

20 million

Metric tons of carbon dioxide-equivalent greenhouse gases emitted by the Navajo Generating Station (CO₂) and the Kayenta Mine (methane) annually while they were in operation.

472; 4,370; 259

Pounds of mercury, arsenic and selenium, respectively, emitted by the Navajo Generating Station annually when it was still operating.

1.3 million

Tons of coal combustion waste produced by the plant each year.

9 billion gallons

Amount of water drawn from Lake Powell each year for steam generation and cooling at the plant. This was all consumptive use, meaning none of this water was returned to the source.

3 million

Megawatt-hours of electricity the Central Arizona Project uses to lift, transport and deliver 1.6 million acre-feet of Colorado River water to Phoenix and Tucson annually — enough to power about 240,000 Arizona homes for one year. Most of that power previously came from the Navajo Generating Station.

15,000

Approximate number of households on the Navajo Nation that lack electricity.

ing Station. Still, it's one example of a growing effort by the tribal government to bring renewables to the nation. Navajo President Jonathan Nez has been increasingly vocal about steering the nation toward clean energy. "For the many who have called upon our Nation's leaders to transition away from our overdependence on fossil fuels," Nez wrote in 2019, in what's now known as the Sunrise Proclamation. "The Navajo Nation will strive for a balanced energy portfolio and will pursue and prioritize clean renewable energy development for the long-term benefit of the Navajo People and our communities."

Horseherder's work securing transition assistance and obligations for new energy contracts could help Diné entrepreneurs get the investments and infrastructure they need to be successful in this energy future. Brett Isaac, for example, grew up near Kayenta in an area called Baby Rocks. In 2018, he cofounded a company called Navajo Power. He's developing a 750-megawatt project, but, unlike

the coal companies of the past, he's working with the community, building out infrastructure that ultimately benefits Navajo. Eighty percent of his company's profits will go toward community benefits and investment in new projects. Black Mesa resident Wahleah Johns started Native Renewables, a nonprofit. She builds off-grid solar projects and leads workforce training programs, including for some former coal miners. "We see off-grid solar as a solution to making home stronger," she said. "When a family member can manage their energy load and own their power, that's part of the self-determination and self-reliance that we are trying to attain, as a nation and as a people."

Curley, who has studied past energy transitions, is cautiously optimistic but worries about the existing dynamics around extraction and exploitation. "We were part of an energy economy for 50 years. (Coal) transitioned out, and we were left with all of its costs. ... How do we prevent that from happening again, regardless of the

"(This is) our homeland. And there's no one else that's going to protect it — except us."

The Kayenta Solar Project outside Kayenta, Arizona, is Navajo-owned and the first large-scale solar project on the Navajo Nation.

Christie Hemm Klok

technologies involved, whether that be solar or wind?" he said. If "we're selling (energy) to Phoenix and Tucson, and suddenly there's something else that comes on the horizon and they don't want our wind anymore (and) they don't want our solar, who is going to be left to clean up the cost? Again, it's going to be us to bear the cost of the transition."

"Energy is a dangerous game to get into," Curley continued. "If you do clean energy in a colonial setting, you're still in a colonial setting." Horseherder agrees: A new energy economy must be structured differently than the relationships of the past. That's the whole point: "We want to make sure that there's clear guidelines as to how to operate projects on the reservation, especially for outside entities, but also for inside Navajo developers," she said.

AS THE DECEMBER demolition livestreamed over Horseherder's cellphone, Diné teachers made their students watch the smokestacks fall from afar. As the towers disappeared into a pile of dust, people cheered, and those in cars honked their horns. Others teared up. "A lot of people that were here this morning to watch this demolition are expressing their sadness to see it go," Horseherder told her audience. "But, in addition, there are a lot of people here who are looking forward to a renewal of the economy and a renewal of a way of life that doesn't rely on this coal industrial complex."

The COVID-19 pandemic was still raging, and the Navajo Nation was closed to visitors. Still, hundreds of people gathered to witness the demolition in person. Sam Minkler, a Diné photographer and associate professor at Northern Arizona University, drove up from Flagstaff to document what he called "the end of coal." For him, it was the beginning of a new chapter — one that could be more sustainable for the people and the planet. He, like Horseherder, thinks renewable energy should come next.

"The sun is very powerful," he said. "It runs the earth." ☀



Mountaintop removal threatens traditional Blackfoot territory

Stop the Grassy Mountain coal project before it starts.

BY ROSALYN LAPIER

MY GRANDMOTHER lived to be 97 years old. Throughout her life, she went to the Rocky Mountains and their foothills to gather plants for Blackfoot ceremonies, medicine and food. Every day, at sunrise and sunset, she prayed to the divine. Never in her life did she worry if the mountains or the plants would be there. It was a given.

Today, the Rocky Mountains that lie within Blackfoot traditional territory are threatened with mountaintop removal. The Grassy Mountain coal project in Alberta, Canada, is slated to begin coal extraction in fall 2021. It is expected to be profitable for only 25 years. However, by then the almost 4,000-acre project will have blasted the terrain with explosives, separating the substrata from the coal and creating a new rock-scape the size of almost 3,000 American football fields.

When this happens, where will Blackfoot grandmothers go for plants?

As an ethnobotanist trained by my grandmother, as well as by an environmental studies professor, I believe the Grassy Mountain project should be stopped before it begins. Places where mountaintop coal removal occurs are never the same; just look at West Virginia, where mountain areas once rich with biodiverse forests have been reduced to barren desolation. And, as my grandmother taught me, disturbed areas are not places to practice Blackfoot traditional knowledge.

The Alberta foothills and Rocky Mountains have been off-lim-

its to open-pit coal mining since 1976. However, Alberta surprised the public by withdrawing this policy last June, thereby opening the region to coal development. A federal joint-review panel held a public hearing in November. Final deliberations, and possible approval of the project, are expected this summer.

Alberta argued that its coal policy was “obsolete.” Alberta Environment Minister Jason Nixon stated in a news release that Alberta was “striking the balance of ensuring strong environmental protection with providing industry with incentive to increase investment.” Locals worry about potential water and air pollution and their effects on human health. But on a global scale, the most serious long-term impacts will be on the growing climate crisis. Several other Rocky Mountain coal projects are also waiting for approval.

The Grassy Mountain project has been in the works for five years. During that time, Australia’s Riverdale Resources contacted tribal leadership, including the Piikani and Kainai nations, both Blackfoot tribes, as required by Canadian law. Riverdale also sought letters of support for the project, which the operators got in exchange for minor considerations.

There is some local support for the project because of its potential opportunities for employment and economic growth. A growing number of Blackfoot and Indigenous people in both Canada and the

U.S., however, oppose it, because of concern over potential environmental degradation, pollution and curtailed access to traditional natural landscapes. There are also fears about the fossil fuel industry’s connection to the missing and murdered Indigenous women crisis in Canada and the U.S.

Concerned citizens do not need to travel far to see examples of the desecration they fear.

The British Columbia side of the Rocky Mountains has five large mountaintop removal operations. Areas near the mines and downstream from them have experienced selenium pollution, in addition to landscape desecration. Selenium in high levels is toxic: In British Columbia, government studies have shown that it has contaminated and deformed fish and polluted local water supplies.

Downstream and across the border, the state of Montana is taking action. Recently, the state’s Department of Environmental Quality passed new environmental regulations to lower the amount of selenium in Montana waters flowing from Canada.

Meanwhile, the unreclaimed mined landscape in British Columbia looks like a moonscape.

It is these kinds of issues local citizens and Indigenous people hope to avoid by stopping the Grassy Mountain project.

Young Kainai citizens who believe that the mountains are their ancestors are organizing to stop the Grassy Mountain project through

a new grassroots Indigenous environmental justice group, the Niitsitapi Water Protectors. They fear that their communities will experience the same human health and environmental degradation issues that they have seen in other Indigenous communities in the Rocky Mountains.

The Niitsitapi Water Protectors argue that even though tribal leadership was contacted years ago about the Grassy Mountain project, the community at large did not know about the coal project until the public hearing in November.

I applaud these kinds of community efforts and Indigenous-led environmental justice groups. We need to address the potential risks, and permanent impacts, of coal extraction on our Blackfoot land.

In 1895, Blackfoot leader White Calf famously lamented, “Chief Mountain is my head. Now my head is cut off,” after the U.S. government swindled the tribe, taking the mountain away.

Now, Grassy Mountain, just 100 kilometers north, is slated to face immeasurable violence. Its head, and our Blackfoot way of life, might literally be cut off. ☼

Rosalyn LaPier (Blackfeet/Métis), Ph.D., is an award-winning Indigenous writer, ethnobotanist and environmental activist. She is an associate professor of environmental studies at the University of Montana and a research associate at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.



Mountaintop removal mining in Alberta's Rocky Mountains. Callum Gunn

How Wyoming's Black coal miners shaped their own history

Many early Wyoming coal towns had thriving Black communities.

BY BRIGIDA R. BLASI

TODAY, THE SAGE and sandstone of Wyoming's vast Red Desert show little evidence of the coal-mining town of Dana, which once stood about 150 miles west of Cheyenne. No photos of Dana have ever been found, but in 1890 it probably looked much like southwestern Wyoming's other Union Pacific Coal Company towns: a few boardinghouses, a company-contracted general store and just enough basic amenities to keep the town functioning. The main feature likely would have been the tippie, where coal was processed. Though largely forgotten, Dana was once home to a significant population of Black miners, originally recruited by a well-known Washington state politician and community leader, James E. Shepperson.

In 1890, the UPCC hired Shepperson to recruit the first Black miners specifically enlisted to work in the company's Wyoming mines. He was a Black man who had migrated from Virginia to Roslyn, Washington, where he led the charge to bring more Black citizens to town. Working for the Northern Pacific Railway, he brought roughly 300 miners to Roslyn, where they forged a strong community. Shepperson had made a name for himself as a successful recruiter of Black miners, and so the UPCC hired him to bring workers to Dana. In early February 1890, about 200 Black miners from the Ohio area, accompanied by their families, stepped off a train in Dana — completely unaware that the company wanted to use them as strikebreakers.

Recruiting laborers for the coal mines and fighting labor organizers were nothing new for the UPCC. As coal production grew in the late 1800s, company officials, like all good industrialists, focused on profits. They did this by hiring laborers from impoverished areas, primarily in Europe and Asia — people they could entice with tenuous promises of riches, land or at least opportunity.

These recruitment practices inadvertently created some of the most ethnically diverse communities in the region. In the early days, the company, which owned and assigned all worker

housing, routinely integrated neighborhoods. The thinking went that if members of a specific ethnic group were not housed together, they would be less likely to form unions. There were exceptions to this company rule: Native Americans weren't sought out at all, and company bosses saw Chinese, Japanese and Korean workers as simply too different from other groups to integrate. Though the fight for workers' rights went on for decades, in the long run, the company's tactics failed, as unions such as the Knights of Labor became ever more integrated and influential.

In a time of intense labor disputes, strikebreakers were met with scorn and sometimes violence, particularly when they were members of an already disparaged ethnic group. Moreover, according to newspaper accounts, the Black miners in Dana were union men themselves. Because of this, they refused to “usurp striking brothers,” the white miners they were brought in to replace. By this time, the whole affair was making headlines, and the company needed a cover story. So, whether through miscommunication, deliberate misrepresentation or outright company duplicity, Shepperson became an easy scapegoat. One night soon after he arrived, Shepperson found himself in a dark, freezing barn, hiding from his own recruits: Company officials had told the newspapers that Shepperson was solely to blame for misleading the Black miners about their status as strikebreakers. He was threatened, detained and questioned, but the details of that night are lost. Somehow, however, Shepperson escaped, and resumed his life in Washington, where he was known as an honest man who worked to strengthen the Black community in Roslyn. Among his many other accomplishments, he was a founder of the Black Masonic Lodge and president of the Washington State Colored Republican Club. He remained prominent in Roslyn until his death in 1934 and is now remembered as one of the most influential Black mining leaders during that time.

Most of Shepperson's recruits stayed on at the Dana mine after their insistence on a fair wage



Front-page photo of James E. Shepperson from the defunct Black newspaper, the *Seattle Republican*, on Oct. 26, 1900.

helped influence legislation regulating how coal was weighed — and thus how much miners were paid — effectively ending the strike. As for the town of Dana, it was one of only two Wyoming communities to ever have a majority Black population. But it was short-lived. In 1891, due to the inferior quality of its coal, the UPCC closed the mine, and many of Dana's Black miners moved to nearby Wyoming coal towns. By the 1920s, places like Rock Springs and Hanna had thriving Black communities. When coal production decreased in the 1940s and 1950s, many of their descendants left for areas that offered more opportunity, such as Denver. As a result, the role of Black residents in the story of these early coal towns has often been skewed or forgotten altogether.

Whether Shepperson deliberately recruited the Dana miners as strikebreakers will probably never be known. He certainly realized that the men would already face challenges wherever they went in the U.S. due to the color of their skin. Companies that brought workers across oceans didn't recruit experienced Black miners from just a few states away until the era of the fight for workers' rights. But the West, despite these barriers, still offered Black miners a chance at prosperity — and people like Shepperson made it happen. ✨

Brigida R. Blasi is a public historian and museum professional. She lives in Laramie, Wyoming.

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Lauren Crow / HCN

Q&A

IN MID-DECEMBER, a federal survey found that more than 1.5 million Californians were behind on rent, while more than 2.5 million had little to no confidence that they'd be able to make their rent in January. The Biden administration extended a federal eviction moratorium through March, but tenants across the West are bracing for eviction when that moratorium ends.

According to Jackie Fielder (Two Kettle Lakota and Hidatsa), who is queer, Latina and a former candidate for the California State Senate in San Francisco, the cause of California's housing inequities is far bigger than COVID-19. It stretches back to colonization, when, she said, "the commodification of housing — the idea that one should

only be housed if one has enough resources to pay for it — began to

Is it time to decolonize the housing market?

In California, COVID-19 is exacerbating housing inequities. Indigenous activist Jackie Fielder believes she has a solution.

BY JESSICA DOUGLAS

take hold on this land." Instead, Fielder proposes a housing market

based on need, not profit.

Even before the pandemic, approximately 53% of California renters spent more than a third of their household income on rent, with about a quarter spending more than half on it. People of color and working-class renters are particularly likely to face this hardship. Meanwhile, California's intense real estate speculation only increases gentrification and displacement.

In 2020, Fielder campaigned on the need for radical change in the for-profit housing system. *High Country News* recently spoke with her about California's housing crisis, its roots in settler colonialism, and the future of tenant rights. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What is the housing crisis in California?

The crisis is that most renters are what we call “rent burdened,” which means that they’re paying more than 30% of their income on rent — and that was before the pandemic. Now we have thousands of people who are facing eviction, and also the daunting responsibility of paying all the rent that they may have missed in the months of the pandemic (during) which they were not employed.

Gentrification, in some areas, is (also) the housing crisis. That’s been the case for low-income communities of color here in San Francisco and across California. Gentrification is basically the process of low-income, working-class people being forced to move anywhere cheaper than their current communities, which are then exploited by real estate developers to sell to newer, wealthier, largely whiter classes of professionals.

If we continue to ignore the realities that gentrification and displacement have caused, we’re not going to be able to reach our goals of affordable housing for everyone.

What is causing this housing crisis?

It’s a problem of disinvestment from the federal and state governments in developing truly affordable housing.

We’ve entrusted the development of housing to the private markets, which (are) largely Wall Street-backed, and we have a glut of luxury homes — thousands of vacant units across the state — where we need thousands of affordable units.

(Housing) also faces the challenge of remaining affordable. If, for example, a private equity group on Wall Street decides to purchase a building, it will be long lost to the private market, instead of being maintained at affordable prices.

You see the nation’s housing crisis as a problem that is not new to the United States, but instead is rooted in its founding.

What can history teach us about the current moment we’re in now in terms of housing equity?

I always tell people, before there were skyscrapers in San Francisco, before there were paved roads and this whole infrastructure — before, really, settler colonialism — there was an entire existing society here. There were more than 15 million people here before any settler set foot on this continent. In the time leading up to settler (colonialism), there was an entire society of people who understood how to allocate resources in a way where everyone had housing, and health care was a guarantee, as long as every individual to their ability contributed to society.

To me, housing *has* been and *is* a guaranteed right, especially when we’re talking about Indigenous cultures. But that’s not guaranteed in this current economic system, because it is a vehicle for profit maximization and speculation.

When running for California State Senate, you campaigned on moving to a housing system based on need, not profit. Can you explain the difference between a market-based and a need-based housing system?

Market-based housing is what we have now, where each person is allocated housing according to what they can afford, not necessarily what they need. Here in the Bay Area, that means that there are thousands of people that go without shelter and many that go without stable, adequate housing in the most basic sense.

(Housing) according to need would be a system in which the government could fund, guarantee and coordinate the allocation of housing, no matter what anyone could afford.

What are the drawbacks of a need-based housing system?

I don’t see any. In my opinion, if housing is a human right, it needs the protection of the federal government and the state government to make it so.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has extended the eviction moratorium. After that, many renters across the country may owe months of rent and face eviction. How will this further exacerbate our housing crisis?

In a pandemic — where we’re seeing thousands of people being evicted because they cannot afford to pay rent, either because they’re unemployed or someone in their household has lost employment — if we don’t cancel rent, if we don’t add a gigantic stimulus in the realm of hundreds of billions of dollars to renters, we’re going to see an explosion of homelessness. We’re going to see more cases of coronavirus because people are jam-packed in households. That’s the harsh reality, and I don’t think that we’ve seen the worst of it. I think it’s going to be a long time until we see the actual devastating effects of this economic downturn.

Why haven’t elected politicians done more to address the housing crisis in California?

For people who actually have the power, I don’t think that they could care any less. They accept money from the real estate lobbies, and those real estate lobbies are really pushing to make sure that they have power to evict people — even in a pandemic, even without a just cause.

Until (politicians) reject that kind of money, they’re not going to be in a position to negotiate on behalf of everyday people. I don’t care what political party any elected official is in, if they’re not advocating for canceling rent or mortgages, they’re leaving everyone else to hang in the dust. I actually do think people will be left to languish in the streets unless there’s some gigantic protest movement. But I don’t know if that will materialize.

On your campaign website, you wrote that “decades of exclusionary zoning since the days of redlining and white flight have allowed the

wealthiest cities and suburbs to neglect their responsibilities in building housing while reaping the benefits of tremendous economic growth throughout the region.” How is this history playing out in California?

The housing system prioritizes housing the wealthiest people first, and everyone else, largely low-income people of color, gets pushed around to wherever. They are the last to get housed, because they can least afford to decide where to live. There is no freedom of being able to live wherever you want to, it’s whatever you can afford to pay. Because wealth is so extremely linked with race, we have a racialized and classist housing system.

How might we transition to a need-based housing system?

We have to find the funding. This election cycle, San Francisco passed a ballot measure that increased (how much) the city (could) tax the sale of properties worth over \$10 million. This will provide funding for rent relief, and affordable housing for low- and middle-income people. That’s just one such mechanism to do so.

I am part of a wave around the nation of politicians and organizers calling for housing to be recognized as a human right and invested in as such. That means committing serious investments to make sure that everyone, not just the wealthy, has decent, safe, affordable housing.

The least we can do, the bare minimum, is ensure a legal right to representation for anyone facing eviction. Another one would be a landlord-licensing system to ensure that tenants have access to as much information about landlords as possible, where they decide to pay their income to and live.

I think that will take time. It will take organizing. It will take much more than just one person getting elected to office. But even informing people and educating them that this is not the only system to live by is a crucial aspect of making those big ideas practical. ✨

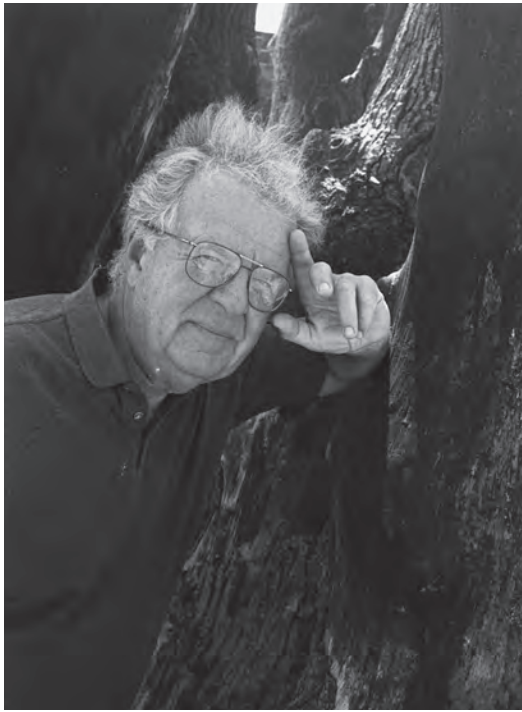


PERSPECTIVE

Remembering William Kittredge

The beloved teacher and writer was preoccupied with the particular.

BY KATE SCHIMEL



THERE'S ONE PASSAGE in William Kittredge's *The Next Rodeo* that has sneaked into my brain and my way of thinking. It's from the essay "Home": "Looking backward is one of our main hobbies here in the American West, as we age. And we are aging, which could mean growing up. Or not. It's a difficult process for a culture that has always been so insistently boyish."

When Kittredge died, I went back and reread *The Next Rodeo*, his last book of essays. Once again that passage struck me with the same note of caution it has before: Aging is unavoidable. Growing up, though, takes work. Through his writing, Kittredge offered a path for doing this: He waded through his own ancestors' complex relationships with the land. Through writing rooted in place — and in a detailed understanding of human nature — Kittredge modeled a way to tell more clear-eyed stories about the West.

William Kittredge died on Dec. 4, 2020, at 88. He was a giant of the literary world of Montana, "the king of the Missoula literati," as one writer called him. He taught at the University of Montana for three decades and was a beloved teacher to many. He told his students not to write like anyone else: "Find your obsessions and follow them," he said in a 1997 interview with *Cutbank*, as he was retiring.

Kittredge also edited an anthology, *The Last Best Place*, with his wife, Annick Smith, giving it the name that is now a stand-in for Montana. That book — a touchstone for Montana literature — argued that this community of writers did not need the blessing of the coasts to have worth.

But his obsession was southeastern Oregon. Kittredge was raised in and around the Warner Valley, in Lake County, Oregon, butt-up against

Nevada and the sagebrush sea to the east. His family ranched and hunted in the area, and he helped with both. He wrote beautifully about the entire stretch of land, from the Alvord Desert and Steens Mountain to the bird-filled lakes of Malheur to the forests of the Klamath Mountains. Kittredge's most famous work about that time, his memoir *Hole in the Sky*, is the work of someone deeply in love with stories — preoccupied with the way they can bring a place and its people to life.

Kittredge mourned the way his father and grandfather had discarded the stories of how they came to be in southeastern Oregon, the deaths, losses, joys of their lives. "In a family as unchurched as ours there was only one sacred story, and that was the one we told ourselves every day, the one about work and property and ownership, which is sad," he wrote. "We had lost track of stories like the one which tells us the world is to be cherished as if it exists inside our own skin."

Kittredge used the stories of his family and his ranching community to tie himself to the places he lived, to document his responsibilities to them. He traced the way his community's farming practices and lifestyle decimated the rich bird life of the area; the lakes of southern Oregon are major waypoints for migrating birds. He scorned glowy and aspirational tales about the brutal colonization and settlement of the area he grew up in, the boyish myths of white settlement that made heroes out of ordinary people.

Still, he was just one voice in what should be a chorus describing the places Westerners live in and come from. I was reminded of this when I called him during the 2016 Malheur occupation, when armed "Sagebrush Rebels" invaded Oregon's Malheur Wildlife Refuge. The extremists threatened federal agents in a standoff that lasted nearly two weeks, and they dug up archaeological remains around the refuge's headquarters, which includes tribal lands not ceded under ratified treaties. A bit perplexed by my questions about the occupiers, Kittredge eventually demurred: Others understood the occupiers better. What he knew was already in his books. It was my job, and that of other Westerners, to make sense of things for ourselves. It wasn't his, not anymore, and certainly not his alone.

To Western writers, Kittredge posed this question: What if, instead of mythology, we wrote stories? Writers such as Kittredge, Raymond Carver and Indigenous author James Welch, among others, embraced the small confines of people's lives, the messy ways in which we move through the world. Of course, Kittredge's stories, like all stories, had limits defined by his own perspective. And while Kittredge saw the need for many storytellers, he was part of a literary community that elevated the stories of white Western men.

Kittredge loved the particular, but sought a universal. "We yearn to escape the demons of our subjectivity," he wrote in *Hole in the Sky*. "We yearn to sense we are in absolute touch with things; and we are of course." This yearning is where he stepped into dangerous waters. In trying to understand his ancestors, "trying to loop myself into lines of significance," as he called it, Kittredge often skipped over the other people he shared the world with, particularly the Paiute and Bannock nations violently removed from and kept off the land his community farmed. He noted the women of his family, but in his writing they still remain at a distance, as do the laborers and farmhands with whom he shared space, but not class, racial or ethnic ties. His stories, fully realized and painful, still flirt with the perils of myth, a form he alternately dismissed and embraced. Mythical stories make things less real, less bloody, less painful or known.

"There are a lot of people with stories that can be told," Chris La Tray, a Métis writer and storyteller from Missoula and an enrolled member of the Little Shell Nation, told me recently. Stories of settlement like Kittredge's so often cover up the truth about where La Tray's people lived and came from. Their stories rarely get the same airing as those of Kittredge and his lineage, La Tray said: "The storytellers are there and they've been there."

At his best, though, Kittredge looked into the lives of those around him and respected them for what they were: He sought the human stories beneath the wide-open sky that invites such sweeping myths. There's a balance to strike between mythologizing the past and dismissing older ways. Kittredge's detailed view of the places he lived is one to hold on to, and something to seek out in the storytellers who never attained his stature. The universal is made up of the small and particular, and there's plenty of room for more.

Here's how Kittredge imagined his own death in *Hole in the Sky*: "I am most concerned to examine the possibility that I may come to die and feel myself slipping back into everything. I hope I may feel that such slipping back into things is proper while it is happening." Like growing up, a peaceful death is a proper thing. For those he left behind, there's plenty of work left to do. ✨

Kate Schimel is managing editor of Searchlight New Mexico, and a writer based in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Lake Abert in Warner Valley, Lake County, Oregon (opposite). **David Hanson**

William Kittredge, photographed in 2001 (above). **Sophie Bassouls/Sygma via Getty Images**

Finding meaning on Joan Didion's frontier

With the release of a new collection, the 86-year-old author returns to her old work and a vast, complicated legacy.

BY ALEX TRIMBLE YOUNG

“CALIFORNIA BELONGS TO JOAN DIDION,” the book critic Michiko Kakutani declared in *The New York Times* in 1979. Born in Sacramento to a family that proudly traced its heritage to 19th century settlers, Didion has become inseparable from California and the West. Plenty of readers continue to take Kakutani's claim at face value, even though Didion has resided in New York City for decades. Didion's novels and nonfiction, and her chic brand of California cool, are still lauded as an alternative to the masculine myth of the frontier.

Didion, who is 86, hasn't published a book of new work in nearly a decade. Her latest, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, is a slim volume of previously uncollected essays that contains just a smattering of reflections on California and the West. Most of the pieces, which range from a begrudgingly admiring feature on Martha Stewart to a self-effacing reflection on being rejected from Stanford, will be familiar to any Didion fan with an internet connection. The collection nonetheless offers an important opportunity to revisit the question of Didion's fraught connection to place, one that has always been more complicated than Kakutani's declaration suggests.

As its title implies, *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* is part of Didion's effort to define her own legacy. She

is wary of literary marketing gone awry: In one of the essays, “Last Words,” she reflects on the decision of Ernest Hemingway's fourth wife to violate her husband's wishes by posthumously publishing much of his uncollected and unfinished work. “What followed was the systematic creation of a marketable product,” Didion writes — his name was ultimately licensed to Thomasville Furniture Industries for the “Ernest Hemingway Collection.” Didion's horror at seeing one of her literary heroes reduced to a marketing slogan for a middlebrow furniture line hints at the motivation behind her own publication. *Let Me Tell You What I Mean* does not peddle the false promise of a glimpse at the woman behind the authorial persona. Instead, it allows Didion to achieve what Hemingway could not: a collection of B-sides that enriches, rather than undercuts, her carefully constructed literary brand.

This is a timely maneuver, as a new generation of readers approaches Didion's work with a more critical eye. In a May 2020 piece in *Electric Literature* entitled “It's Time to Take California Back from Joan Didion,” Chicana author Myriam Gurba calls for a “rebellion against Didion's racial grammar” that could “unseat her as California's thin-lipped literary grand dame.” Gurba critiques Didion's early work, focusing on her

writing about the Donner Party, the storied band of would-be California pioneers who resorted to cannibalism in the snows of the Sierra Nevada. Accusing Didion of whitewashing history, Gurba restores to the narrative the stories of Antonio, a Mexican, and two Miwok Indians, Lewis and Salvador, who travelled with the Donners but are never mentioned in any of Didion's writings. Lewis and Salvador were hunted down and shot by the white settlers for food; Antonio was cannibalized after dying of exposure.

In her conclusion, Gurba writes that “Didion inherited a wagon-trail morality from her ancestors. From my queer Brown ancestors I inherited a different kind of morality, one that drives me to write for Lewis, Salvador, Antonio, and Jeanne (Córdova)” — a queer Chicana activist who worked for a time as Didion's nanny. “In this moment, California belongs to them. This sentence is their title, their deed.”

Gurba confronts Didion's image from the other side of a literary frontier, highlighting the voices of those who defined California before the arrival of Didion's ancestors and before American statehood. A different image is painted by *The New Yorker* critic Hilton Als in his introduction to *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*. Als' Didion is the late-career author who examines “the racial bias and the Central Park Five” in *The New York Review of Books*, “Reagan-era El Salvador” in her third novel, and “the smug, violent, white male carelessness” of a Southern California high school gang, known as the “Spur Posse,” in her 2003 memoir *Where I Was From*. This Didion is not only presciently attuned to issues of social justice; she is someone whose identity as a Californian is merely incidental to her brilliance: “Could be California, could be anywhere.”

Indeed, in *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, the West takes center stage only briefly. “A Trip to Xanadu” offers an incisive appraisal of the aesthetics of San Simeon, the monstrous California castle built by William Randolph Hearst; “Fathers, Sons, Screaming Eagles” uses a

reunion of the 101st Airborne Association in Las Vegas to meditate on the cost of the nation's endless wars. Taken on their own, these essays do little to reconcile Als' image of Didion as a woke cosmopolitan with Gurba's portrait of a racist regionalist. The book's most significant lessons about Didion's relationship to the West arrive more subtly.

One such lesson comes in “Why I Write,” a 1975 meditation on craft. Here, Didion wrestles with her own tendency to play both the role of detached observer and that of committed social commentator. It opens with a declaration of the insidious nature of writing's persuasive force. “There's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition,” she writes. Didion meditates on her failure as a young writer “to forge for (herself) a mind that could deal in the abstract,” acknowledging that her “attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible.”

These sentences echo “On Morality,” an essay she wrote a decade earlier in a Death Valley motel room while trying to ward off the apocalyptic desert heat. “With the help of the ice cubes I have been trying to think ... in some abstract way about ‘morality,’” she writes, “but my mind veers inflexibly toward the particular.” In a meditation on the Western landscape, frontier history and the social unrest of the summer of 1965, Didion traces this insistence on the particular to the “wagon-train morality” of the frontier. Against the “insidious ethic of conscience,” Didion embraces this morality “that has as its point only survival, not the attainment of the ideal good.” The celebrated coolness of Didion's style, the detachment from fashionable moral imperatives that enabled her incisive perspective on both hippies and Reaganites, is inherited, in her telling, from the pragmatism of her pioneer ancestors.

Such pragmatism is easier to celebrate when one forgets that some of the prominent “moral imperatives” in early 1965 were



Photo illustration: Julia Lubas / HCN
Portrait: Neville Elder/Corbis via Getty

those that led Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery. “On Morality,” like so much of Didion’s early writing, elides the contemporary and historical racial violence that Gurba uncovers. In her debut novel *Run River* (1963), Didion’s semi-autobiographical protagonist Lily Knight ponders her family’s frontier story only to

conclude that it “had been above all a history of accidents — of moving on and accidents.” One can hardly imagine Indigenous or Mexican Californians describing the history of Anglo settlement of the state in those terms. Beneficiaries of that history like Didion, on the other hand, have far more motivation to explain its violence as incidental.

If this “wagon-train morality” shaped Didion’s approach to her craft, then an honest assessment

of her legacy demands that we echo Gurba’s questions about the writer’s relationship to the violence of settlement. But it’s just as important to acknowledge that Didion has posed these questions herself.

In *Where I Was From*, Didion interrogates her own “confusions about the place in which I grew up, confusions as much about America as about California, misapprehensions and misunderstandings so much a part of who I became

that I can only to this day confront them obliquely.” Here she draws connections that are anything but accidental — tying her ancestors’ violent encounters with Indigenous people to the crimes of the late 20th century “Spur Posse” that Hilton Als mentions. The book’s title expresses, on the one hand, doubt over the very possibility of regional belonging. On the other, to borrow Didion’s words, it implies that “we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not.”

Let Me Tell You What I Mean reminds Didion’s readers that the most enduring theme of her work is an endlessly recursive self-scrutiny, a movement from the abstractions “floating in the distance” of her mind to the disillusion of the particular. This is an important lesson for anyone who finds her work either an inspiring or odious model for negotiating one’s place in the American West. Her genius emerges neither from a detached pragmatism nor an unacknowledged idealism, but from the ongoing tension between the two. “Didion’s California” will always be a storied place in the process of disenchantment.

At the conclusion of her essay on San Simeon in *Let Me Tell You What I Mean*, Didion remembers her own childhood fascination with the then-private Hearst castle. She reflects on what has been lost — what fantasies have been dispelled — by taking her young niece on a tour of the grounds with her. “She liked the flowers and the pools and the ornate ceilings, but it occurred to me as we left that she would have found it more affecting had she only glimpsed it from Highway 1, the gates barred, the castle floating in the distance,” Didion writes. “Make a place available to the eyes, and in certain ways it is no longer available to the imagination.” ✨

Let Me Tell You What I Mean

Joan Didion
 192 pages, hardcover: \$23
 Knopf, 2021.

Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org.

BY BETSY MARSTON

WYOMING

Yellowstone National Park's neon-colored hot springs belch up bubbles that delight the tourists, but the resident volcanic microbes have proven equally important to entrepreneurs. A Chicago-based company called Nature's Fynd has invested \$45 million in those microbes to grow a "meatless meat," reports *VegNews*. The company feeds its microorganisms glycerin and starches, then ferments them to produce a complete protein it calls "Fy," which contains "all nine amino acids and (is also) high in fiber and vitamins." Nature's Fynd plans to have vegetarian hot dogs, nuggets and hamburgers in stores as early as 2021.

Yellowstone's superheated pools have already contributed to humanity's welfare, reports *National Geographic*. Back in the 1960s, microbiologist Thomas Brock was visiting the park when he realized that a bizarre gelatinous mass floating in Little Octopus Spring was "definitely living" despite the water's forbidding temperature of 190 degrees Fahrenheit. A year later, he and his graduate student Hudson Freeze discovered that a gooey mass in Mushroom Spring contained a microbe that produces weird heat-resistant enzymes. Their find revolutionized molecular biology: The heat-tolerant enzymes enabled scientists to automate the copying of DNA and RNA, making testing fast, easy and routine. The enzymes are the key component of PCR — polymerase chain reaction — which is "now being used to boost the signal of viruses in most of the available tests for COVID-19." Brock never imagined that his investigations would

add up to so much. "I was free to do what is called basic research," he said. "Some people called it useless because it was not focused on practical ends." But serendipity ultimately triumphed: "The find has made a world of difference."

THE WEST

Fox News recently reported on a surprising condition shared by some young people. Let's call it "bovine deficit disorder." A study of 3,500 Americans between the ages of 11 and 24, conducted by the RV travel site *Parked in Paradise*, found that 33% — "a shocking number" — claimed to have never seen a cow "in person." If these udderly deprived youngsters ever do encounter a 1,000-pound cow, they might benefit from a new wellness trend: cow hugging. "Cuddling cows is thought



Armando Veve / HCN

to reduce stress in humans by releasing the bonding hormone oxytocin." One farmer told the BBC that interacting with cows is pretty basic: "You come to the fields and we have some special hugging cows and you can lay next to (them). People think it's relaxing" — though so far no one has asked the cows for their opinion. Therapeutic cow snuggling apparently got started in the Netherlands more than a decade ago.

MONTANA

In Bozeman, there's a far easier way to commune with mammals that are much fluffier and considerably more portable than cows: You can pet the purring kitties at Montana's first Cat Café. Started by Josh Marks and Josh Pecukonis, the cat lounge is located above the Foxtrot restaurant. Patrons can take their food upstairs

and hang out with whatever felines, usually three or four of them, are currently on duty. All of the cats are adoptable through the Heart of the Valley Animal Shelter, reports KBZK. "We're just really crazy cat people ... and we really just wanted to offer an extra outlet for people to be able to spend time and adopt cats," Pecukonis said. The Cat Café is currently focusing on older cats, which are experienced enough to hide from potential owners, reports the "Town Crier" briefs in *Explore Big Sky*.

COLORADO

A fond farewell is overdue for a gallant woman named Henrietta Hay, who died last year in Grand Junction at the fabulous age of 106. Hay was always a maverick, a liberal in a conservative western Colorado town who rode a motorcycle into her 60s, worked as a librarian for a quarter-century and wrote a column for the Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel* for 22 years. One of her most provocative columns was reprinted by the *Denver Post* in 2002. In "What is a liberal?" Hay declared that she was tired of hearing people use the word "liberal" as an obscenity. "Liberals are not criminals, she wrote. "They are not traitors. ... Most of them probably have cats. Most of them are Christians. Most of them are Democrats. Some are Republicans. Most of them say, 'You believe your thing and let me believe mine.' Liberal," she concluded, is "not a dirty word. It is a proud word." And, quoting Mark Twain, she added, "The radical of one century is the conservative of the next. The radical invents the views. When he has worn them out the conservative adopts them." ✨

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#IAM THE WEST

MARY BARCLAY
Retired coal miner, rancher
Paonia, Colorado

I chose mining because it was the best job in the area, and I figured I was tough enough to do it. I could handle a horse, so I could handle a truck. But it was a lot harder than that. Going into the mines is like going to the front lines. It's a battle with yourself to overcome fear. You know you might not come out, every day. You go down underneath, and you don't know if it will collapse on top of you. You learn to appreciate the smallest things, sunsets and aspen trees, because you're in the dark all day. When you see the sunset coming out of the mine, it's the most beautiful because it's the simplest thing.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
Let us know on social.

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