

# High Country News

A young girl with brown hair and a light blue hair clip is standing in front of a wooden wall. She has her hands covering her eyes. The wall is made of horizontal wooden planks. There are large, dark shadows of trees and foliage cast across the wall behind her. The overall lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

SEEN AND  
UNSEEN

Vol. 55 / June 2023  
No. 6 • [hcn.org](http://hcn.org)

When fire  
goes feral

The flamboyance  
of wildflowers

Seeking answers  
at the Salton Sea



## HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Victor Reyes, Anayeli Galindo, Ryan Sinclair and Quinn Montgomery launch the inflatable motorboat that the Salton Sea Community Science Program uses to collect water samples and other data.

**Mette Lampcov / 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. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.

# An accumulation of stories

**IF YOU'VE BEEN READING** *High Country News* for a while — or for any time at all — you likely know at least part of our story. We were founded in Lander, Wyoming, in 1970, then migrated south to western Colorado in 1983, eventually opening an office in a former feedstore in the small town of Paonia. Though our staff now lives and works all over the West and beyond, Paonia remains our mailing address. It's also where this publication — and more than a few of its past and present staffers — did a lot of growing up.

Paonia and the surrounding North Fork Valley taught many of us, including me, not to romanticize the West: Though I still consider the North Fork the most beautiful place I've ever lived, I lived there long enough to know that, like most places, it is both welcoming and exclusive, fortunate and impoverished, sunlit and shadowed. It taught me that even the smallest place can be layered with stories, and that each story changes with time and its teller.

For me — and, I suspect, for many of us who think we know the North Fork Valley — Trent Davis Bailey's haunting photographs in this issue are both familiar and disorienting. There's no mistaking that light, or those ridgelines. And yet Bailey's experience of the valley is not quite my experience of the valley, nor is it anyone else's. To see a place through another's eyes is, in a sense, to see it anew.

The complexity of place has special historical significance in Jaclyn Moyer's feature about Letitia Carson, a Black woman who came to Oregon from Missouri in 1845 and, despite the new territory's Black-exclusion laws, homesteaded there for the next 40 years. The land Carson lived on near present-day Corvallis, Oregon, was storied long before she arrived, and has acquired new stories since. Now, the inheritors of all those stories are debating how best to commemorate them.

I'm delighted to report that *HCN* Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Sahn has returned from leave, and that you'll hear from her in our next issue. It's been an honor to serve as your acting editor-in-chief for the past nine months; I look forward to all the stories to come.

—**Michelle Nijhuis**, *HCN* contributing editor

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Trent Davis Bailey** is a photographer born and based in Colorado whose work pulls from personal resonances of loss, trauma, family and geography, particularly as they relate to ecology, place, memory and time. Instagram: @trentdavisbailey

**Leland Cheuk** is an award-winning author of three books of fiction, most recently *No Good Very Bad Asian*. His writing has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, NPR and *Salon*, among other outlets.

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**Karen Holmberg's** award-winning poetry collections are *The Perseids* and *Axis Mundi*. Her young adult novel *The Collagist* is forthcoming from Fitzroy/Regal House in 2024. She teaches at Oregon State University.

**Maya L. Kapoor** writes about climate change, biodiversity and environmental justice. Previously, she was an associate editor of *High Country News*. @Kapoor\_ML

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**ON THE COVER**

*Izzi and Cece, Hotchkiss, Colorado,  
2013. Trent Davis Bailey*

Elsa Applen Aycock, a player in the Ohtani basketball program, takes a shot during a practice scrimmage in Berkeley, California. **Kori Suzuki / HCN**





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#### THE 'DELUSION' OF DISCOVERY

"The illusion of discovery" (May 2023) — Michelle Nijhuis' editor's note — has haunted me since I read it. The "Doctrine of Discovery" brings it all into perspective of what emboldened individuals to violate and completely disregard Indigenous rights. This article opened up how this got started, and now I can see more clearly how we got to where we are.

Thanks to the Doctrine of Discovery, we have a shameful blot on our history and a daunting task to work through and remedy actions that unfortunately should have never happened.

**Al Dorow**  
**Seattle, Washington**

#### TODAY'S FORECAST: EXTINCTION

As temperatures continue to climb, fewer and fewer places will be safe from global warming's calamitous effects ("Seeking sanctuary," May 2023). And many species might suffer the same fate as the woolly mammoth did.

**@Milw\_Mac\_Guy**  
**via Twitter**

#### THE RIGHTS OF RIVERS

Ruxandra Guidi poses "the" question in "The spirit of the Rillito" (May 2023): "What if we sought to secure the same rights for nonhuman beings that we do for people?" Her short but excellent essay made me think of how the Cuyahoga River in Ohio has caught fire more than once because it was so polluted. It reminded me of another story *HCN* ran about the government of New Zealand passing legislation actually giving rivers rights. It was probably the most progressive thing I've ever heard of. If we have any real chance at sustainability, we need to answer her question.

**David Poling**  
**Grand Junction, Colorado**

#### THEY ARE THE WEST, TOO

We enjoy the back covers that show the diversity of our fellow humans (#iamthewest). We think it would be a good place to show off our other residents and neighbors, like the magpies, frogs, coyotes, wolves, elk, bison, whitebark pines, mule deer, cottonwood, salmon and cutthroat trout. The West would

not be the West without them — our creeping, crawling, flying, leaping, growing family.

**David and Mary Dudley**  
**Ola, Idaho**

#### REVEALING GLEN CANYON

I wanted to take a moment to thank you for the article "Glen Canyon Revealed" by Craig Childs (February 2023). It was an amazing article, very eye-opening, to say the least. I live in southern Idaho, close to the Snake River. Even though this is the desert, there is also a lot of farming, because of the water. It is really sad to see what the lack of water — or even too much — can do to an area.

**Alisa Molt via Facebook**

#### MORE NUTS-AND-BOLTS

##### EXPLAINERS

It's a huge relief finally to see a concise nuts-and-bolts piece with bold graphics showing how much energy solar panels on the flat roofs of big-box stores could produce, along with the benefits of covering California's aqueducts with solar panels ("Save public lands: Put solar on Walmart," February 2023).

I've been searching for a simple, clear, trustworthy comparison of the costs/benefits of the primary sources of clean, safe, readily accessible energy. I'd love to see this approach for a rational analysis of solar, wind, biomass that includes the embodied carbon costs.

This two-page spread should be reprinted and offered to lawmakers, teachers, city planners, architects, contractors — all those concerned with the fastest, most efficient, least costly way to address the climate crisis.

**Charlene M. Woodcock**  
**Berkeley, California**

#### CONSERVATIVES LIVE HERE, TOO

I fear that *HCN* has turned boldly to the left and too often leaves out the perspective of the many conservatives who do live and work in the West. Many of these conservatives are people that renewable energy and transmission developers must deal with. It is important in our polarized world to make sure we are talking to each other. My concern is that *HCN* might be dismissed as "elitist" by people we need to deal with.

**Tom Hiester**  
**Kingston, Washington**

#### THE WHOLE WEST

I have to say I absolutely love that you have so many stories about Indigenous issues and racial politics in the West. My friends and I used to joke that your paper, as much as we loved it, was "For WHITE people who care about the West." But now, with Native voices and non-white Westerners represented throughout, it is so much better, so much richer, so much more meaningful. Thank you for making that change, especially in the face of all the pushback from white subscribers (and even former editors) who think that white folks' version of what constitutes news about the land and communities we love is all that should be covered. I am renewing and donating.

But please, never, and I mean NEVER, send me an issue wrapped in plastic again.

**Linda Kenoyer**  
**Livingston, Montana**

#### CORRECTION

In "The spirit of the Rillito" (May 2023), we mistakenly referred to Natalie Avalos' paternal grandmother as her maternal grandmother. We regret the error.



## WHEN WINTER DESCENDS

upon the Northern United States, deep snow blankets the boreal forest for months on end. It's a stark season, but that very harshness helps lynx out-hunt other predators. These elusive felids, which caterwaul during mating season like Taylor Swift superfans with front-row seats, grow shaggy gray winter coats, blending into the landscape. With long hind legs and large furry feet, they bound across the snow, pursuing snowshoe hares where other predators tend to posthole.

Canada lynx in the U.S. live at the southern end of the species' range, and they depend on forests that are increasingly affected by climate change. One of their most important habitats in the West is northern Montana's Glacier National Park, created in the early 1900s after the United States starved and massacred the region's Indigenous peoples, including the Blackfoot Nation. Today, the Blackfoot Nation's reservation land, which covers 1.5 million acres to the east of the park, includes lynx habitat. Faced with warming temperatures and changing snowpacks, the nation has begun developing a climate adaptation plan to try to conserve habitat for species including the Canada lynx. Because Glacier prohibits mining, logging and other landscape-fracturing endeavors, the park could also become a refuge for lynx as the West becomes drier and hotter.

But studying the region's lynx is difficult. In other places, winter offers a chance to track lynx by following their prints in the snow, but most of Glacier's roads and trails are impassible in winter.

Now, according to a study in *The Journal of Wildlife Management*, researchers have



## ON THE MOVE

# Where the wildcats go

As the climate changes, biologists find new ways to track the elusive Canada lynx.

BY MAYA L. KAPOOR | ILLUSTRATION BY XULIN

found a way to track the park's lynx in the summer. Using motion-sensitive trail cameras, biologists have identified lynx by the patterns on their inner legs. This technique will help researchers learn which habitats lynx use, how close to one another they live and how they are responding to climate change.

It "gives us this baseline information for lynx populations in Glacier Park," Alissa Anderson, a biologist who led this study for her graduate research at Washington State University, said. Anderson monitored cameras on most of the park's trails over four summers, changing out memory cards and making sure the cameras hadn't

been mangled by curious bears. One summer, she collected data in the park's southeastern section using paired cameras, which took pictures of passing lynx from both sides. This setup made it easier to capture their unique inner-leg markings. From those photos, she estimated that about 50 lynx live in the park.

Camera traps are far less intrusive than other types of monitoring, which can involve piercing the ears of wide-eyed kittens or collaring individuals to track them using GPS. "It doesn't bother them, doesn't alter their behavior. They are already using the trails," Anderson said.

This approach is also easier on the biologists. "I basically

spent the summer hiking," she added.

Stan Boutin, a boreal ecologist who has studied lynx in Canada's southwest Yukon for more than 30 years, said the method is a "real breakthrough." The 50-lynx estimate is rough, using only one year of data for a species that follows a boom-and-bust survival pattern linked to snowshoe hare population cycles. Still, it's a "very good first approximation," Boutin said.

Camera traps could prove transformative for understanding lynx's vulnerability to climate change, which has been missing from previous assessments by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 2017, the agency attempted to remove federal Canada lynx protections after looking at threats to the species only until the middle of the century, a time frame too narrow to include the most severe climate change impacts.

Dan Thornton, a wildlife ecologist at Washington State University and Anderson's research advisor, said one concern is that changing snow texture could cost lynx their winter advantage over generalist predators.

"If there are more rain-on-snow events that lead to changes in density of snow, making it harder and more compact, that will likely result in increased ability of other species to get up in those environments," Thornton said. At the very least, lynx may contend with a world in which boreal forests move north and upslope, and snowshoe hares become harder to come by. Lynx's long leaps and giant paws will take them only so far in a warming future. ☼

*In "On the move," Maya L. Kapoor writes about how the climate crisis is shifting life in the West.*



# Is Harriet Hageman an ally of Indian Country?

The rookie congresswoman says she wants to advance tribal autonomy.

BY ANNA V. SMITH &  
TAYLAR DAWN STAGNER

**IN EARLY MARCH**, five hours into a markup hearing in the House Natural Resources Committee, a conversation about an energy bill evolved into an existential half-hour debate on “meaningful tribal consultation.” It began when Rep. Mary Peltola, D-Alaska, introduced an amendment to add consultation language to the bill, though she assured the Republican-controlled committee that she had no “delusions that the amendment is going to pass.”

Republican Rep. Harriet Hageman, the chair of the Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs and Wyoming’s sole House member, argued against it, prompting a question from Rep. Ed Case, D-Hawai’i: “As the chair of our subcommittee of jurisdiction, I ask whether you generally are supportive of some obligation of including Indigenous peoples in our country in decisions affecting them?”

“It depends on the context,” Hageman responded, adding that the National Environmental Protection Act already includes consultation.

Hageman, who defeated Liz Cheney in the 2022 primaries to claim her first term in Congress, was tapped to chair the subcommittee in February by Bruce Westerman, R-Ark, chair of the House Committee on Natural

Resources. Hageman, who will help determine the House agenda for tribal interests for the next two years, exemplifies how political divisions can become blurry and allegiances nuanced when they concern Indian Country. While Hageman’s record in Indian Country is sparse, she says she supports tribal sovereignty, and both Hageman and Westerman agree that tribes would be better at managing lands than federal agencies. But her vision is distinctly conservative, with a preference for small government.

“The resources and the authority ought to be with the (government) closest to the people. And that applies, whether it is to tribal lands or tribal governments or the state of Wyoming,” Hageman told *High Country News* in April. Her political agenda, she said, has “always been to take power out of Washington, D.C., and return it to the people who actually make the decisions.”

**SINCE HER APPOINTMENT**, Hageman has prioritized hearings on tribal economic development and health care. In February, she introduced a bill with bipartisan support that would allow tribes to lease their trust land for 99 years instead of the current 25 years, a limitation that can hinder long-term investment and development. Speaking with *HCN*, Hageman lamented what she described as “a Third World situation” in tribal communities, adding that too much funding goes to bureaucrats in D.C.

While Hageman is a vocal supporter of former President Donald Trump, there are similarities between her views on tribal autonomy and those of the Biden administration. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) has actively advocated for tribal nations to assume more authority in managing ancestral lands.

“Politics makes for odd bedfellows, as the saying goes,” said Torivio Fodder (Taos Pueblo), who manages the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Arizona’s Native Nations Institute. “You’ve got someone who’s rather conservative who’s very interested in returning local control over some of these lands, away from D.C., back to the people who live there. And that policy is actually eminently consistent with what the Biden administration is advocating in terms of tribes and co-stewardship.”

But Hageman and the admin-

istration have major differences on land-management authority. Together with her party, she opposes Obama and Biden’s establishment of national monuments, even though some have included tribal co-management. Previously, as a litigator in private practice, she led Wyoming’s legal opposition to the Clinton-era Roadless Rule, which protects some national forest from development, logging and other activities.

Prior to her subcommittee appointment, Hageman’s main professional experience with tribal issues seems to have occurred when she represented a Wyoming irrigation district after its manager flooded parts of the Wind River Reservation by illegally inserting four dikes in the Wind River, according to a report by Accountable US, a progressive watchdog organization. A judge ruled that the district, represented by Hageman, had to restore the land and river. Then-Northern Arapaho Chairman Dean Goggles applauded the decision, calling the flooding a “violation of tribal sovereignty.”

The Accountable report also noted that the New Civil Liberties Alliance, which Hageman joined in 2019 as a senior litigation counsel, has filed multiple briefs in opposition to the Indian Child Welfare Act over the past few years. At a natural resource conference in 2017, Hageman presented just before anti-tribal sovereignty activist Elaine Willman as one of just a handful of speakers. In response to follow-up questions about the report’s findings, a spokesperson for Hageman said in a written statement that “her goals and the issues of today do not include discussing a previous election cycle, a speaker who just happened to appear at the same seminar in 2017, or legal cases from her time in private practice.”

Hageman, whose father, Jim, was a longtime state legislator, did not make it a priority to schedule any meetings on the Wind River Reservation during her campaign for Congress. Last fall, Hageman ran against Democratic Party candidate Lynnette Grey Bull, an enrolled member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe who is believed to be the first Indigenous person in the state’s history to run for its House seat. Grey Bull invited Hageman to debate but never heard from her campaign. “Even through email, or phone calls — there’s been absolutely nothing,” Grey Bull told *HCN* in March.

During the 2020 race, Wyoming’s

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then-congresswoman, Liz Cheney, debated Grey Bull in person. Grey Bull said she respected that Cheney took the time, even though she voted against reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act, whose altered version included funds to address the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons. During her three terms, Cheney worked regularly with the Northern Arapaho to secure better funding for tribal programs, and in the 2022 primaries, during her run against Hageman, Cheney campaigned on the Wind River Reservation and earned the endorsement of the Northern Arapaho Tribe.

Though Hageman had not previously worked with tribal nations, she was appointed as the subcommittee chair because of her “sharp mind,” familiarity with Western issues and leadership abilities, Westerman told *HCN*. “It was somewhat taking a chance, to put a freshman in that position. But I’m very happy that I did that, because she is just

really knocking it out of the park with the work that she’s doing.” Jim King, a recently retired professor of political science at the University of Wyoming, said that the fact that Hageman was from Wyoming, where the Wind River Reservation is located, made her an easy candidate. “It’s not always a situation where someone has a history of direct relationships with the topics that come before the committees,” he said. “As long as it’s a part of the representative’s constituency, that’s going to be a close enough link.”

In mid-April, Hageman met with the Eastern Shoshone Business Council to discuss policy priorities for the Wind River Reservation. The same day, for the first time since announcing her campaign, Hageman sat down with the Northern Arapaho Business Council, led by Chairman Lloyd Goggles, to discuss water infrastructure and public safety. Goggles said he felt positive about the meeting and looks forward to working with Hageman in the future. “When

I go into these meetings, I think the best way is just go into it with an open mind,” he said.

**ULTIMATELY, PELTOLA WAS RIGHT:** Her amendment on tribal consultation did not pass; Hageman and her fellow Republicans voted against it. During Case and Hageman’s back-and-forth, Case pressed her on tribal consultation.

“I’m trying to get myself to a level of comfort as to whether the subcommittee chair does, generally, believe that Indigenous peoples are owed some general inclusion in the decisions that affect them,” Case said.

“And I’m saying they already are,” Hageman said. “Everyone in the United States is allowed to participate.” ✨

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Wyoming Republican Rep. Harriet Hageman, chair of the Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs, at the House Natural Resources Committee organizational meeting this February.  
**Francis Chung / Politico via AP Images**





# SUGARING THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

BY NHATT NICHOLS

HOW CLIMATE AND COST CRAMP BIGLEAF MAPLE SYRUP PRODUCTION.

IN QUILCENE, WASHINGTON, DARYL DIETRICH HAS SPENT THE LAST FEW YEARS TURNING SAP FROM THE BIGLEAF MAPLE TREES ON HER 20 ACRES INTO SYRUP. MAKING SYRUP SEEMED LIKE A NATURAL ADDITION TO DIETRICH'S AGROFORESTRY BUSINESS, WHICH INCLUDES SAW-MILLING, CABINET-MAKING AND HERBALISM.



SHE'S DRAWN TO HOW VERSATILE MAPLE TREES ARE, AND HOW SO MANY DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE PLANT ARE EDIBLE.

"YOU CAN EAT THE SEEDS, YOU CAN EAT THE SPROUTS, YOU CAN EAT THE SAP."



DARYL DIETRICH, QUALIA AGROFORESTRY

MAPLE SYRUP IS TRADITIONALLY MADE IN THE NORTHEAST AND NORTHERN MIDWEST WITH SAP FROM SUGAR MAPLES, A TREE THAT'S NOT TYPICALLY FOUND ON THE WEST COAST.



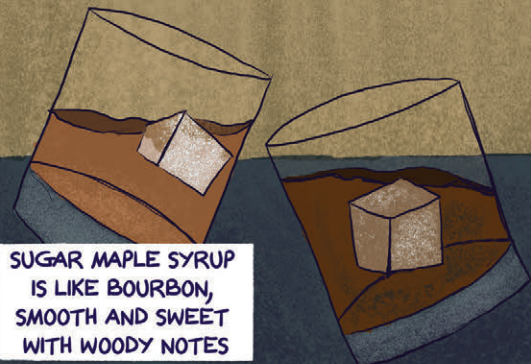
TAPPERS IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST HAVE BEEN EXPERIMENTING WITH THE NATIVE BIGLEAF MAPLE FOR DECADES, BUT ONLY IN THE LAST FEW YEARS HAS ANYONE PRODUCED THE SYRUP COMMERCIALY.

DIETRICH HOPES TO SELL HER SYRUP, BUT IT'S MORE THAN JUST A BUSINESS PLAN.

"IT'S BEEN A FAMILY AND COMMUNITY-BASED ENDEAVOR ON THE EAST COAST FOR GENERATIONS, AND IT'S SOMETHING I LOOK FORWARD TO HIGHLIGHTING AND TAKING PART IN HERE IN THE WEST."



BIGLEAF MAPLE SAP ISN'T AS SWEET AS SUGAR MAPLE SAP, AND PRODUCERS NEED MORE OF IT TO MAKE THE SAME VOLUME OF SYRUP. THE TWO ALSO TASTE VERY DIFFERENT.



SUGAR MAPLE SYRUP IS LIKE BOURBON, SMOOTH AND SWEET WITH WOODY NOTES

WHILE BIGLEAF SYRUP IS MORE LIKE RYE — RICH, ALMOST SAVORY, WITH A MORE PUNGENT TASTE OF WOOD.

"WE TRY TO TREAT IT AS A DELICACY. IT IS A VERY STRONG FLAVOR. SO MAYBE YOU'RE NOT DOUSING YOUR PANCAKES IN IT; YOU'RE USING IT MORE INTENTIONALLY FOR COOKING OR COCKTAILS. I LOVE IT IN AN OLD FASHIONED — THAT'S BECOME MY FAVORITE DRINK."

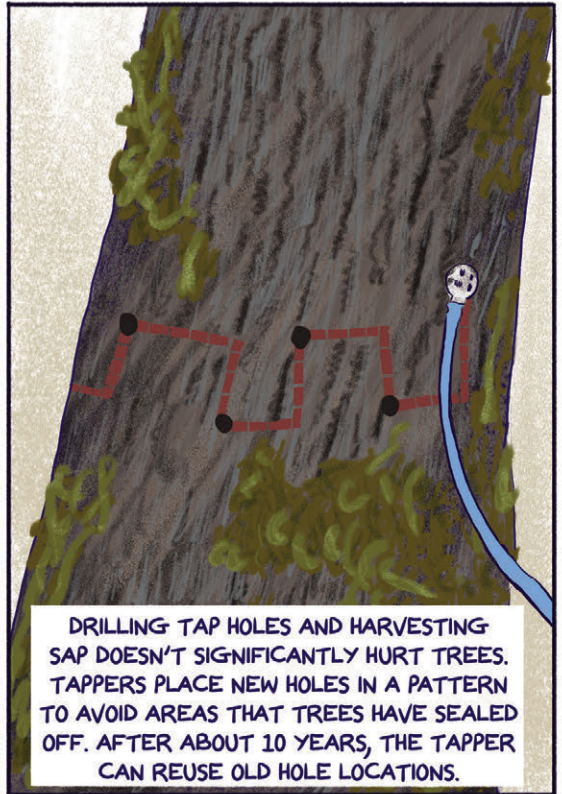
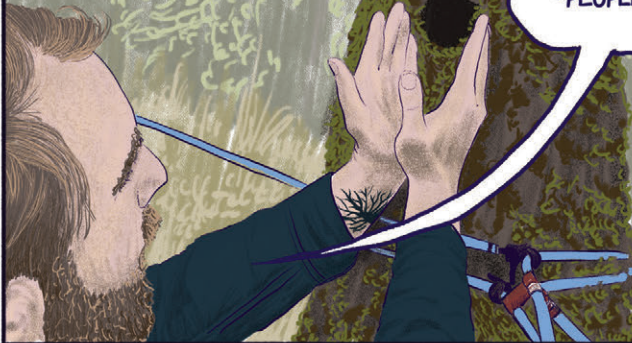




PATRICK SHULTS RUNS WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY'S SUGARING PROGRAM IN OLYMPIA, WHERE HE TEACHES SAP HARVESTING AND SYRUP PRODUCTION TO THE PUBLIC.

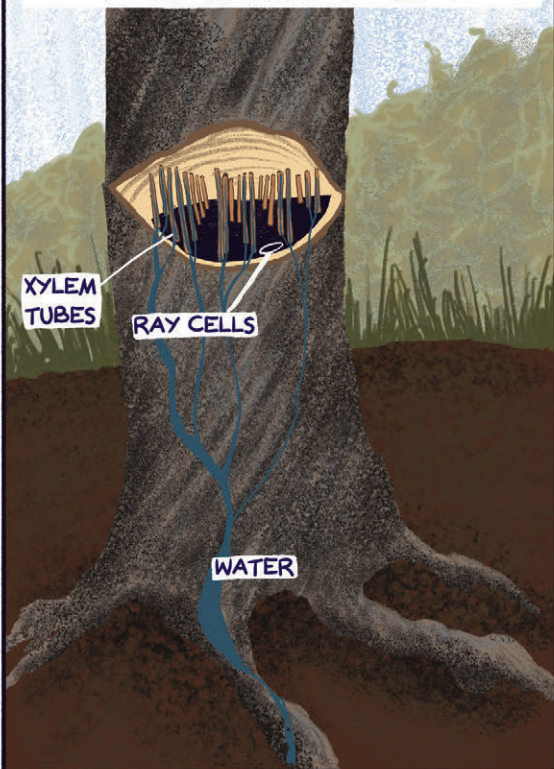
A TREE IS GENERALLY DRILLED FOR A TAP JUST BEFORE THE FIRST FREEZE, AROUND NOVEMBER. EVENTUALLY, THE TREE WILL START TO SEAL THE HOLE OFF IN AN ATTEMPT TO PRESERVE SAP.

"PEOPLE HEAL, TREES SEAL."



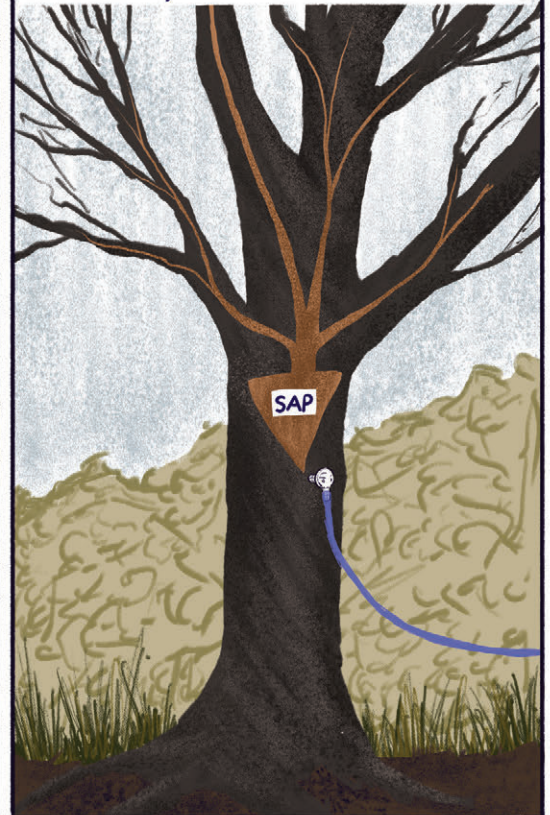
DRILLING TAP HOLES AND HARVESTING SAP DOESN'T SIGNIFICANTLY HURT TREES. TAPPERS PLACE NEW HOLES IN A PATTERN TO AVOID AREAS THAT TREES HAVE SEALED OFF. AFTER ABOUT 10 YEARS, THE TAPPER CAN REUSE OLD HOLE LOCATIONS.

THIS IS THE CURRENT THEORY OF HOW MAPLES MOVE SAP: GASEOUS SPACE INSIDE SPECIFIC CELLS FREEZES AND CONTRACTS, CAUSING NEGATIVE PRESSURE THAT DRAWS WATER FROM THE SOIL THROUGH THE ROOTS AND INTO THE UPPER PARTS OF THE TREE.



AS WATER IS DRAWN UP INTO THE TREE, IT ABSORBS SUGARS STORED THERE AND BECOMES SAP.

THE SAP EVENTUALLY FREEZES, BUT WARM TEMPERATURES THE FOLLOWING DAY "THAW" THE TREE AND ALLOW SAP TO MOVE BACK DOWN THE TRUNK. A HIGHER RELATIVE PRESSURE INSIDE THE TREE FORCES THE SAP OUT, SOME OF IT THROUGH THE TAP.

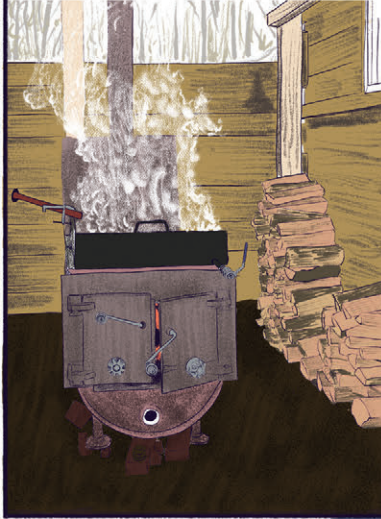




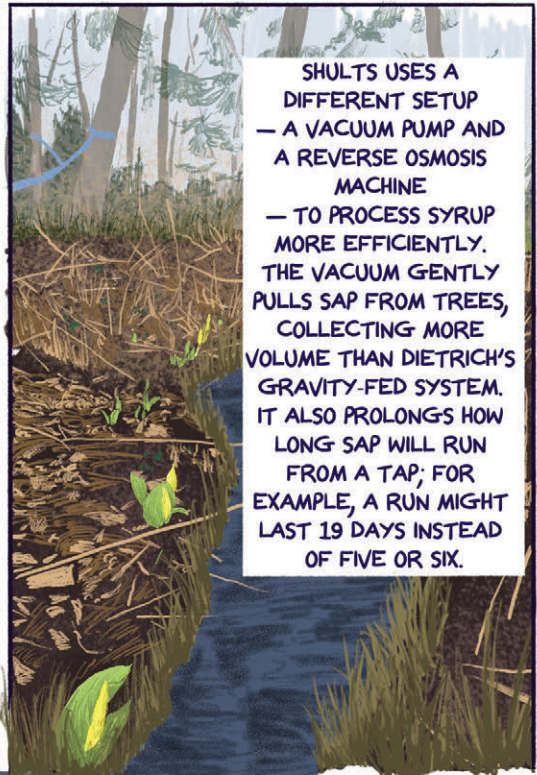
THE PART OF DIETRICH'S PROPERTY THAT'S TAPPED FOR SYRUP — WHAT PRODUCERS CALL A SUGAR BUSH — FLOWS DOWN A STEEP HILL TO HER SUGAR SHACK. SHE PUMPS THE SAP INTO A WOOD-FIRED EVAPORATOR TO COOK IT DOWN TO 66.8% SUGAR, WITHIN THE STANDARD RANGE FOR MAPLE SYRUP.



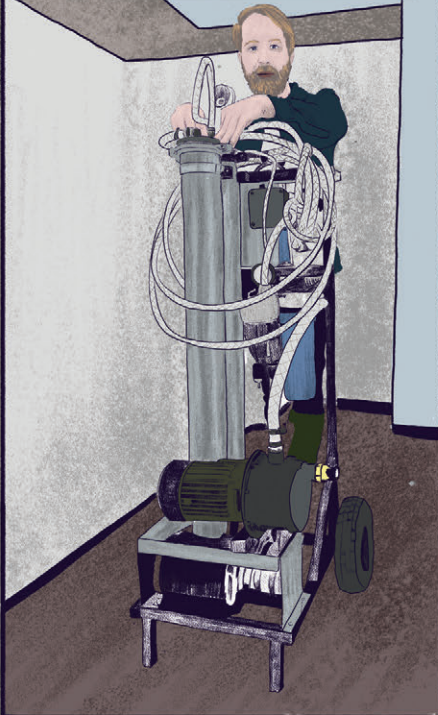
DIETRICH'S EVAPORATOR, A PAN ON TOP OF AN OLD WOODSTOVE, PROCESSES ABOUT 12 GALLONS OF SYRUP AN HOUR. LAST YEAR, SHE HARVESTED 1,500 GALLONS OF SAP, WHICH MADE 15 GALLONS OF SYRUP.



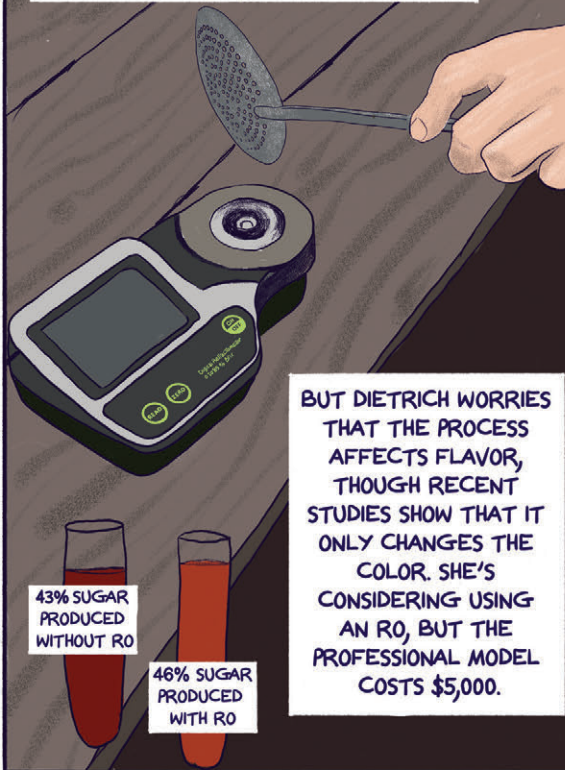
SHULTS USES A DIFFERENT SETUP — A VACUUM PUMP AND A REVERSE OSMOSIS MACHINE — TO PROCESS SYRUP MORE EFFICIENTLY. THE VACUUM GENTLY PULLS SAP FROM TREES, COLLECTING MORE VOLUME THAN DIETRICH'S GRAVITY-FED SYSTEM. IT ALSO PROLONGS HOW LONG SAP WILL RUN FROM A TAP; FOR EXAMPLE, A RUN MIGHT LAST 19 DAYS INSTEAD OF FIVE OR SIX.



THE REVERSE OSMOSIS (RO) MACHINE REMOVES EXCESS WATER BEFORE EVAPORATION WITH A HIGH-POWERED PUMP THAT RUNS RAW SAP THROUGH MEMBRANES, CONCENTRATING IT.



RAW BIGLEAF SAP IS ABOUT 1% SUGAR; THE MACHINE CAN RAISE IT TO 8%, CUTTING EVAPORATION TIME BY MORE THAN HALF.



43% SUGAR PRODUCED WITHOUT RO

46% SUGAR PRODUCED WITH RO

BUT DIETRICH WORRIES THAT THE PROCESS AFFECTS FLAVOR, THOUGH RECENT STUDIES SHOW THAT IT ONLY CHANGES THE COLOR. SHE'S CONSIDERING USING AN RO, BUT THE PROFESSIONAL MODEL COSTS \$5,000.



DIETRICH FACES REGULATORY HURDLES, TOO. WASHINGTON AND OREGON OFFICIALS HAVEN'T APPROVED ANY WOOD-FIRED EVAPORATORS LIKE DIETRICH'S, THOUGH THEY ARE COMMON ON THE EAST COAST. SHE TRIED USING PROPANE, BUT IT WAS TOO EXPENSIVE. THIS YEAR, SHE'S BACK TO USING SAWMILL SCRAPS TO HEAT HER EVAPORATOR.

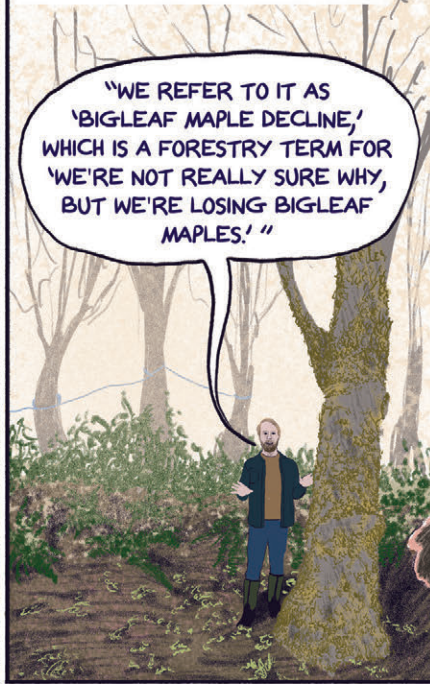


BIGLEAF SYRUP SELLS FOR AROUND \$4 AN OUNCE, MEANING DIETRICH COULD HAVE MADE OVER \$7,500 LAST YEAR. THOUGH EXPERTS AT WSU AND THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON AGREE THAT HER SYRUP IS AMONG THE BEST THEY'VE TASTED, SHE ISN'T SURE HOW SHE'LL MAKE THE TRANSITION TO SELLING.

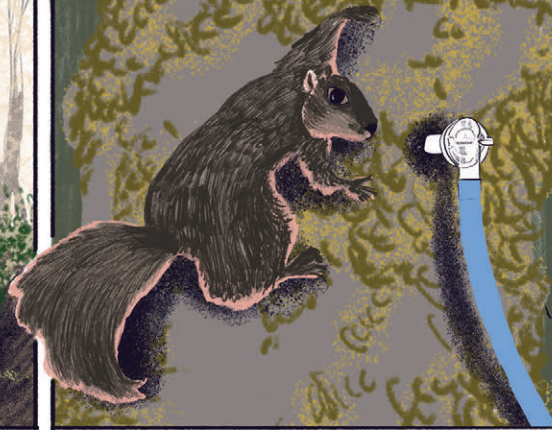


CLIMATE CHANGE IS ALSO CONTRIBUTING TO THE RISKINESS OF THE SYRUP INDUSTRY: IT'S KILLING MAPLES.

"WE REFER TO IT AS 'BIGLEAF MAPLE DECLINE,' WHICH IS A FORESTRY TERM FOR 'WE'RE NOT REALLY SURE WHY, BUT WE'RE LOSING BIGLEAF MAPLES.' "



THIS LOSS IS PROBABLY RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE CAUSING HOTTER, DRIER SUMMERS IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST. BUT SHULTS IS MORE CONCERNED THAT WARMING WILL INHIBIT WINTER FREEZES; IF TEMPERATURES AREN'T COLD ENOUGH, TREES MAY NOT BE ABLE TO PRODUCE ENOUGH SAP FOR COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES.



STILL, MAKING MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING. FOSTERING COMMUNITY IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF SUGARING. SHULTS HAS TAPPED INTO THIS WITH SAPSUCKERS, A PUBLIC PROGRAM THAT TEACHES PEOPLE ABOUT MAPLE TAPPING AND TRACKS AMATEUR SYRUP PRODUCTION ACROSS WASHINGTON. INTEREST IN WORKSHOPS HE HOSTS FOR NEW TAPPERS HAS SPIKED IN THE LAST FEW YEARS.



DIETRICH ALSO LOVES THE COMMUNITY ASPECT OF SUGARING. SHE ENVISIONS SNOWY WORK PARTIES, SYRUP TASTINGS, POTLUCKS, TEACHING AND SHARING EVENTS, AND HOPES THAT HER PROPERTY WILL SOMEDAY BE A COMMUNITY HUB FOR SUSTAINABLE FOODS LIKE SYRUP.

"I THINK IT PROMOTES LAND STEWARDSHIP, APPRECIATION AND PROTECTION OF FORESTS AND, MORE SPECIFICALLY, MAPLE FORESTS, WHICH ARE REALLY BENEFICIAL TO NATIVE POLLINATORS AND WOODLAND CRITTERS. AND IT'S JUST MAGICAL TO DRINK SWEET SAP ON A SNOWY HILLSIDE."

\*





## For Ohtani basketball, a hard-fought season

Housing costs and the pandemic threaten a Japanese American tradition.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KORI SUZUKI



**IN A WALNUT CREEK, CALIFORNIA,** community gym, cheers from the bleachers mingled with the beat of basketballs against hardwood floors. Ohtani and Diablo, two teams of high school students, squared off on a winter's Saturday night. On the sideline, Ohtani coach Eiji Kinoshita watched as his son, Kai, raced down the court.

It was a familiar scene for Kinoshita, who had lapped similar courts hundreds of times himself. He'd spent Saturdays playing basketball in tiny gyms across Northern

California since 1971. The Kinoshita family had just moved from San Francisco to the tiny port city of Richmond when their neighbors, the Kowadas, asked Eiji, who was in third grade, to join their local Japanese American basketball league, which had been around for over 20 years. Kinoshita spent his childhood and a good fraction of his adult life on the team. He grew tall, made lifelong friends, strengthened his Buddhist faith and formed a lasting connection to his Japanese American identity. "It was all because of

Ohtani basketball," he told me.

Now Kinoshita, with white- and gray-streaked hair, was still at a basketball court on a Saturday night.

For generations, teams like Kinoshita's have met in gyms across the state to compete and carry on the long tradition of Japanese American basketball leagues in California. At its height, Northern California had more than 200 teams, from Sacramento to the San Fernando Valley. The leagues served as a sanctuary where community members could





gather and be sheltered from ongoing racism while passing down cultural traditions — and a love for basketball.

In recent decades, though, the leagues have faced mounting challenges. Historic Japanese American communities have dispersed as cities like San Francisco redeveloped their neighborhoods, and the residents moved to the suburbs. Then the pandemic arrived and dealt a major blow to basketball, forcing many indoor sports programs to shut down and leading people

to turn to other options.

Standing on that sideline in January, Kinoshita frowned. Ohtani had won the first four games of the season, but that night they were down by more than 20 points. He wasn't sure if they could come back.

**THE JAPANESE AMERICAN** basketball leagues have deep roots in California. In the years before World War II, the state was home to three-quarters of all people of Japanese descent living on the U.S. mainland.

Parker Nomura, one of Kai Kinoshita's teammates, goes in for a layup during a game against Diablo, a rival program, at Tice Valley Community Center in Walnut Creek, California (*facing page*).

Eiji Kinoshita asks for volunteers for a drill during a practice with his daughter Sara's team in Berkeley, California (*top*). Eiji and other parents make up the coaching staff for Ohtani's different teams.

Families talk during the games at the Ohtani Jamboree at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California (*above*).





Sara Kinoshita and her teammates high-five each other after a game in San Leandro, California.

When the war arrived on American shores in 1941, the U.S. government forced Japanese Americans into remote federal incarceration camps. There, behind barbed wire, they played basketball. Across the West, the sport gained popularity at several incarceration sites, including Heart Mountain in northern Wyoming, where 35 teams met in three separate leagues. When the war ended and the camps closed, thousands of families returned to their homes in cities on the West Coast. They had little, but many fought to keep that spark of basketball and community alive. The challenges were substantial: Prejudice remained fierce, and they struggled to find recreation centers, clubs or other athletic organizations that would allow them to play.

In 1946, Iwao Kawakami, a newspaper editor at the San Francisco-based *Nichi Bei Times*, proposed a solution: Create a league for Japanese Americans. His suggestion took hold; a Southern California league formed, and other programs sprang up around temples and churches and community centers. A total of 10 teams participated in the inaugural Northern California season, including the San Jose Zebras, the San Francisco Drakes and the Sacramento Rockets. In the following decades, thousands of players joined, and the Saturday night games drew massive crowds. For a community dealing with the trauma of

wartime incarceration and the challenges of postwar discrimination, the leagues were something to celebrate.

By the time Kinoshita's family moved across San Francisco Bay in the 1970s, basketball had become part of the Japanese American identity in California. There were three pillars of the community: the temples and churches, the local ethnic newspapers — and Saturday night, when you went down to the court to watch the local game. “The generation before them was like, ‘What camp were you in?’” said Steve Chin, a Bay Area historian and former Ohtani player and coach. “But for the generation after, it was, ‘Who did you play for?’”

Decades later, though, housing laws changed, and the cost of living rose. The neighborhoods that harbored the basketball programs transformed as families migrated to the suburbs. Enrollment in churches

and temples fell, and basketball programs struggled to fill their rosters. The Sangha and Sycamore programs in the Bay Area cut their teams completely. The pandemic, which shut down all the California leagues for two seasons, further disrupted the programs.

To adapt, Lisa Toyama, a key organizer of the Ohtani program, and other organizers have loosened some requirements: Players no longer have to have Japanese heritage, for example, a change that has drawn in more families from outside the Japanese American community. Once, being part of Ohtani basketball meant becoming a member of the Berkeley Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple and attending services every Sunday. Now, Toyama estimates that only a small percentage of families involved in the program participate in religious services.

Many programs are still reeling from the pandemic; Sacramento's church league, a former hub for Japanese American basketball, did not have enough teams to start up again this year. Ohtani, though, came back with a set of teams for the season. Other events, such as the traditional fundraiser Mochitsuki, also returned. On a clear December morning this season, the basement of a church filled with steam as dozens of parents, players and alumni assembled plates of mochi for sale.

Like Kinoshita and Chin, Toyama also grew up in the leagues. Some of her earliest memories are of standing on old wooden bleachers with her cousins watching her father and uncle play in a gym near San Pablo Avenue. When she was in seventh grade, Toyama joined the league, too. And when she became a parent, Toyama rejoined Ohtani in the hopes of giving her son the same experience she had. “You know that these kids are making relationships that are going to last forever regardless of basketball,” she said. “I want to be able to pass that on.” ✨

*“They had little, but many fought to keep that spark of basketball and community alive.”*



# In search of answers at the Salton Sea

To protect air and water quality, shoreline residents become community scientists.

BY CAROLINE TRACEY | PHOTOS BY METTE LAMPCOV

**AS THE TEMPERATURE** on an early April afternoon crept above 80 degrees, Cruz Marquez, a member of the Salton Sea Community Science Program, stood at a folding table under a blue tent, scrubbing a small glass vial with the cloth of his T-shirt. The vial, which held 20 milliliters of water from the nearby Salton Sea, had to be clean before he inserted it into a photometer to identify the water's contaminant levels.

Less than a decade earlier,

the beach where Marquez stood lay under the Salton Sea, California's largest lake. Over the last 25 years, the Salton Sea has lost a third of its water due to an over-allocated Colorado River. As it shrinks, the sea's salts plus pollutants from agricultural runoff reach higher concentrations. All those extra nutrients fuel algae blooms that then decay in the sulfate-rich sea, resulting in a rotten-egg smell that can extend for miles. As temperatures rise and the water retreats

further, locals suspect that the contaminated sediments in the exposed lakebed are worsening air quality; the area's childhood asthma rate is one of the highest in the state.

But for several years, no government agency has monitored contaminant levels in the sea. Meanwhile, most academic research focuses on the dust from the drying lake bed. And even where data exists, it can be hard for the public to access. Now, the Salton Sea Community Science Program is working to remedy this.

The project is a partnership between academic scientists and community scientists like Marquez, most of them local students majoring in the sciences. Ryan Sinclair, a professor of environmental microbiology at Loma Linda University near San Bernardino, helped found the project. Sinclair had previously organized a balloon-mapping project, in which he invited community members to help measure the sea's receding shoreline using a camera mounted on a balloon.

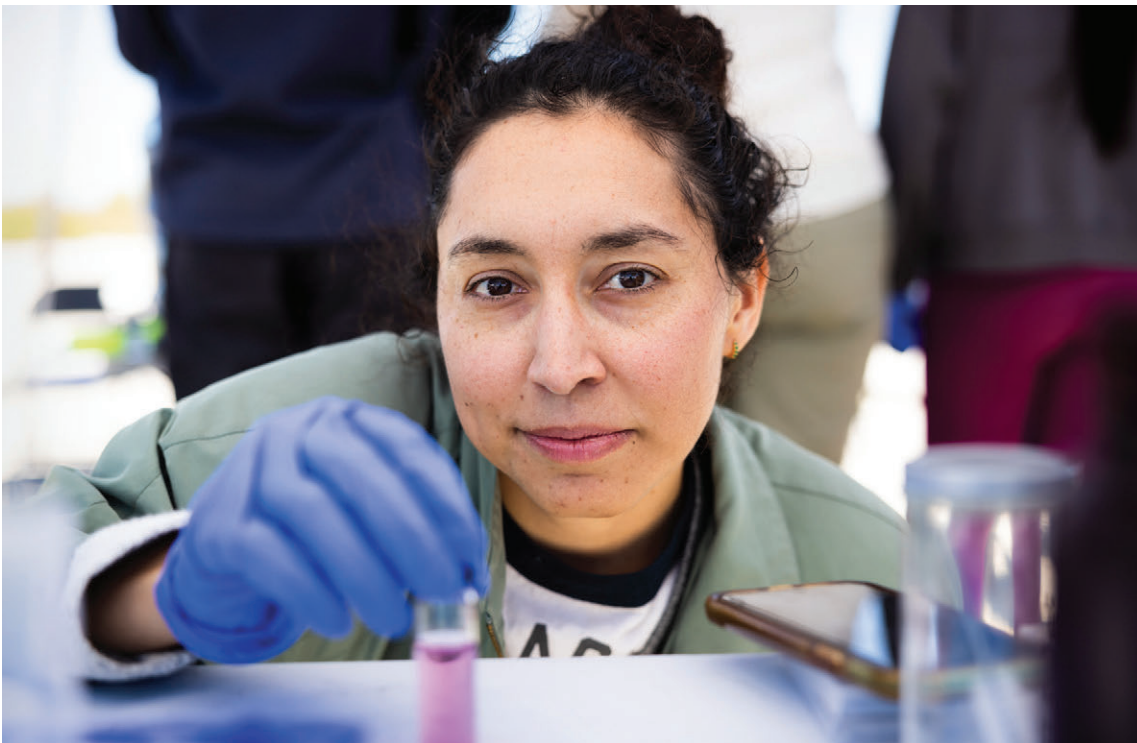
But he realized there was more work to be done. With support from the American Geophysical Union, he partnered with the nonprofit Alianza Coachella Valley and oceanographers from UC-San Diego. They began to hire and train community scientists, the term the team prefers to "citizen scientists," because U.S. citizenship is not required to participate in the work.

The more than 35,000 people who live near the Salton Sea include thousands of farmworkers. Some of them are undocumented, and some are members of Mexico's Indigenous Purépecha community and may not be proficient in either English or Spanish. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that the unincorporated shoreline communities of Thermal, Oasis, North Shore and Mecca, all more than 95% Latino, have a median household income of less than \$30,000 per year. Nearly half of the residents of the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla reservation, which also borders



Andrea Delgado, Rushil Ladhawala and Mara Freilich collect water samples from an inlet where agricultural runoff flows into the Salton Sea.





Paola Meza prepares to test a vial of water from the Salton Sea to determine its phosphate concentration, while Daniel Ramirez looks on (left, top).

Aydee Palomino, an environmental justice program manager at Alianza Coachella Valley, waits for a reaction that will allow her to measure the water's concentration of sulfide (left, bottom).

the sea, live below the federal poverty line. Much of the local housing consists of aging manufactured homes that don't keep out dust and are prone to power outages during the extreme summer heat.

The community scientists have watched the sea change firsthand. "When my dad first came to the U.S., he had the opportunity to fish with his uncles at the Salton Sea. He talks about it

every time we pass by, and when we go visit Mexico, they reminisce about it," said Marquez, who is originally from La Quinta, California, northwest of the sea. "So, it's a sad thing that I didn't get to have that experience."

Marquez, 27, graduated from the University of California-Riverside during the COVID-19 pandemic. When he's not measuring nutrient levels in seawater, he tends bar at a hotel

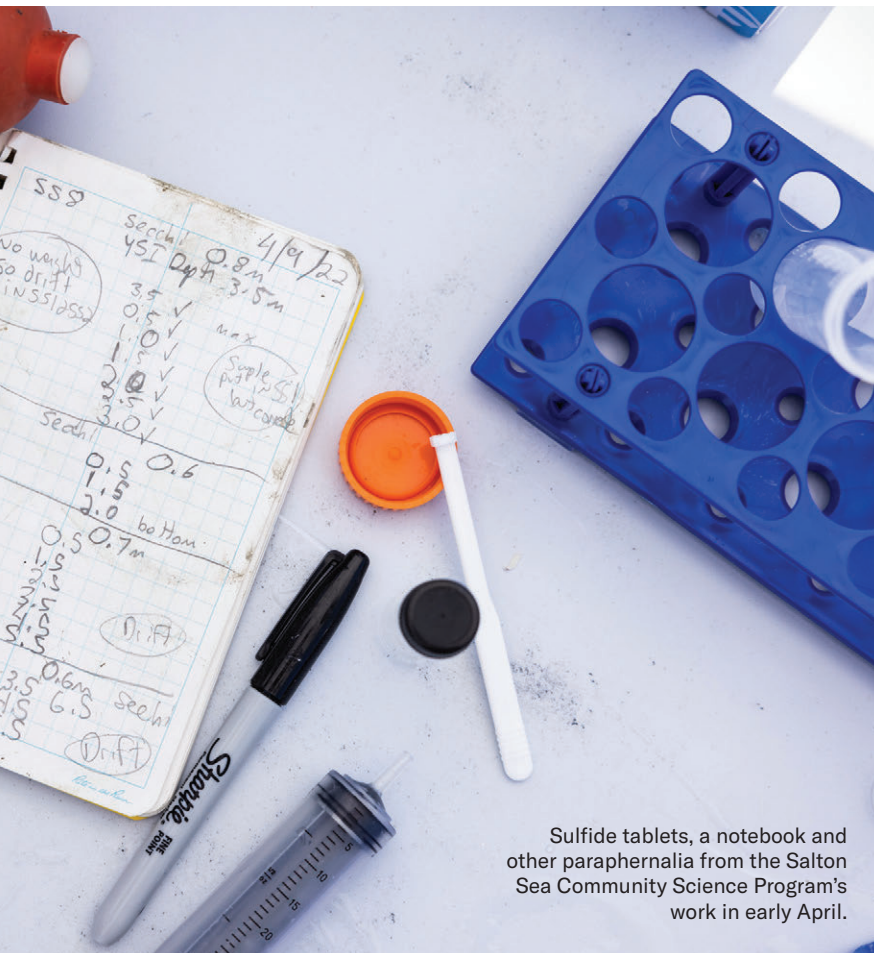
near his hometown. "Between last year (and this year), you can see how much the water has receded," he said. "I can only imagine where it's going to be in five years if nothing is done."

**THE APRIL WORKDAY** began with the scientists collecting water samples, filling screw-top plastic flasks at two algae-filled inlets where water drained into the sea from nearby date and

citrus groves. A smaller group launched an inflatable motorboat toward four sites in the sea, where they collected additional samples and used a water-quality sensor to measure indicators like pH and dissolved oxygen.

Back on land, each community scientist handled a different nutrient, testing the samples for nitrate, sulfide, sulfate, ammonia and phosphate, all of which are found in high levels in the





Sulfide tablets, a notebook and other paraphernalia from the Salton Sea Community Science Program's work in early April.

sea owing to agricultural runoff. Sulfate and sulfide are part of the basin's geology, but appear in even higher quantities because the irrigation water causes them to leach out of the soil and into the sea. The scientists used long glass pipettes to siphon water from the sampling flasks into their vials, filling a control sample and two replicates for each nutrient and adding tablets that corresponded to the vials assigned to each replicate. When Marquez did this, the water in his vial turned a bright purple that allowed the photometer to measure its nitrate content.

Once they were ready, they inserted their vials into the photometer. They selected a nutrient for the machine to read and, within seconds, its small LCD screen revealed the concentration, which they wrote down.

The scientists say that eventually the data could be used to change state policy — and protect the sea's ecosystem and the residents' health. They must work quickly, though. "We're not at the point where it's too late," said Marquez, "but we're getting close."

After all the day's data was collected, they uploaded it to [saltonseascience.org](http://saltonseascience.org), designed by local residents, web developers and the community science team. Aydee Palomino, a project manager with Alianza, emphasized that making the data easily available is part of the program's mission: It allows residents to see whether science backs up their speculations about the impacts of the declining air and water quality.

"Their experiences deserve to be validated by scientific data," she said. ✨

## POEM

### The Mirage of Marriage

By Karen Holmberg

*Two by two in the ark of / the ache of it*  
—Denise Levertov, "The Ache of Marriage"

#### i. Game

Maji's rare gem.  
Gaia's aim.

I'm game.  
Marriage gigs me,  
a gar. Rigs  
a marge-merge.

Grammar agrees:  
*are > am.*

I am a Mr.'s.  
A Mrs.  
An eager aerie.

Egg era, air rare,  
ere marriage's agar  
gags me, rears  
a gamey germ.

#### ii. Arms

Marriage arms  
a grim regime.

A MIG aims,  
maims me; gamma  
rams me. REM  
MIA, I rage.

Ire mires  
ears' gears. Marriage's  
rager ages me:

I'm a meme's meager gram.  
Air's ream.  
Age's mare.

Mirage's émigré.

#### iii. Reimage

I err.  
Mar me.

I rear a rag.

A rim rearms.  
I reimage me  
mega, magma.

*Mea, amie.*  
mere rare me.

**WEB  
EXTRA**  
Listen  
to Karen  
Holmberg  
recite her  
poem at  
[hcn.org/  
mirage-  
marriage](http://hcn.org/mirage-marriage)



# Simmering for a century

Why isn't the West using more geothermal energy?

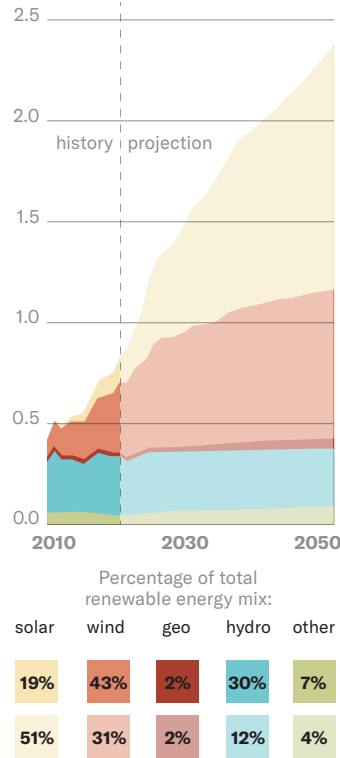
BY JONATHAN THOMPSON  
ART BY HANNAH AGOSTA

**IN 1892, THE PEOPLE** of Boise, Idaho, came up with an idea for staying warm without burning the usual coal or wood: They piped water from nearby hot springs into their own homes to heat them, as well as into the local Natatorium, an indoor swimming pool and spa.

Indigenous peoples had been using hot springs' natural warmth for millennia, but Boise was probably the nation's first settler-colonial city to pipe this energy directly into its homes. Today, Boise's municipal utility employs a similar method to heat its downtown buildings.

Boise is harnessing a simple, lower-temperature form of geothermal energy found relatively close to the Earth's surface. It's tapped elsewhere in the West, warming swimming pools and sidewalk snow-melting systems — even an alligator farm in Colorado — as well as greenhouses and a prison in Utah. The Earth's heat can also be harnessed to create steam to turn a turbine and generate electricity, without burning dirty fossil fuels or sparking dangerous nuclear reactions. Geothermal doesn't flag when the sun sets or the wind stops blowing, and it takes up far less space than

**Renewable electricity generation in the U.S. in trillion kilowatt-hours**



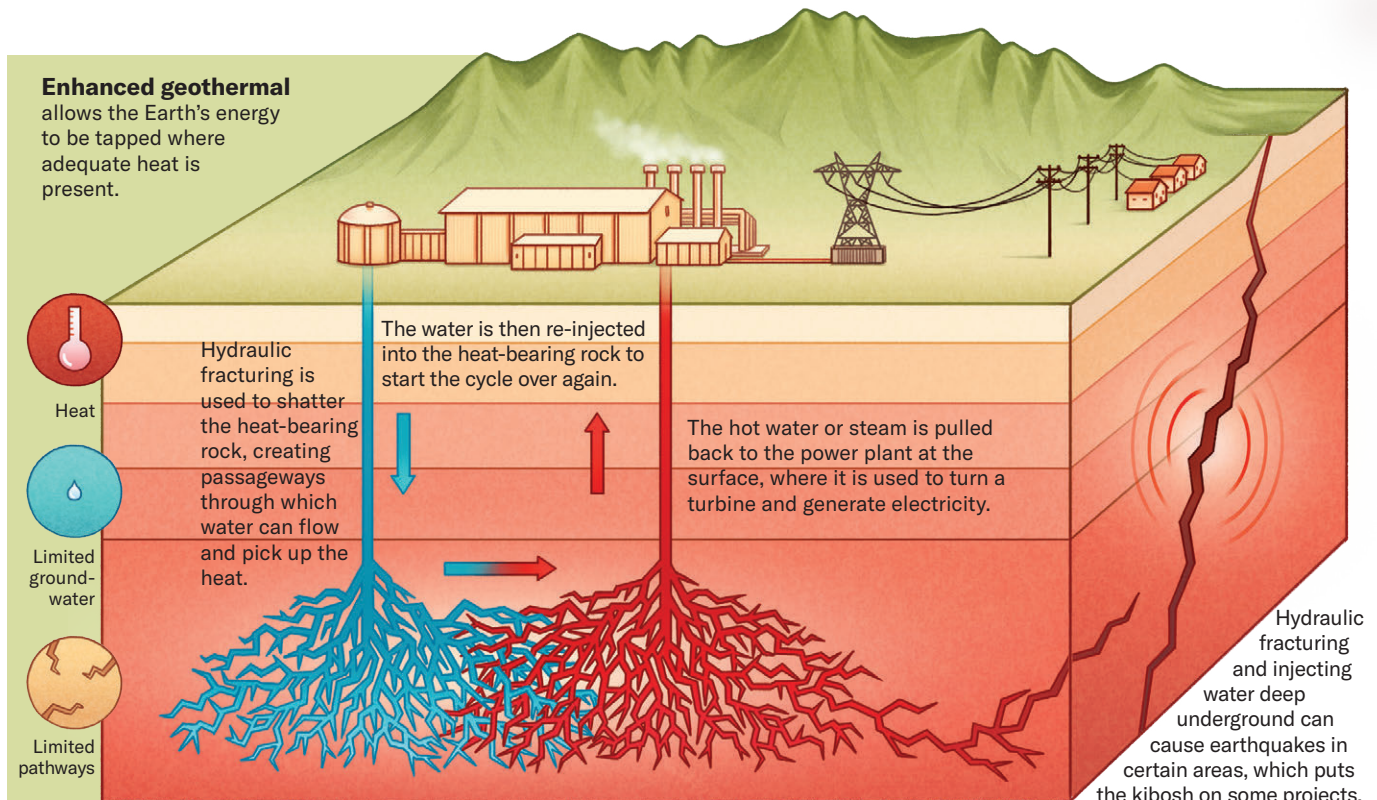
other clean energy sources. And it won't be exhausted until the Earth's core is, which (hopefully) won't happen for another several billion years.

So it's no wonder that, in March, U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm tweeted: "I'm \*obsessed\* with geothermal, and I'm pumped to see startups launching commercial-scale projects for geothermal — a nearly inexhaustible heat source for clean energy."

So far, however, geothermal provides just a half-percent of the electricity consumed in the U.S., due in part to geographical and geological constraints. And, though it is relatively clean, it has impacts on groundwater and hot springs as well as the people and wildlife that depend on them. We looked into the effort to develop this age-old energy source and how it might help — and hurt — the West. ☀

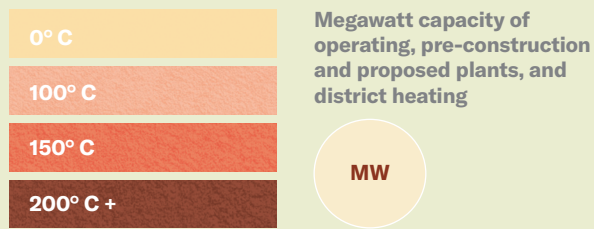
**The natural geothermal** energy that heats Boise's buildings and Western hot springs requires specific geologic conditions:

-  Heat
-  Water to transfer heat
-  Pathways in rock to move water

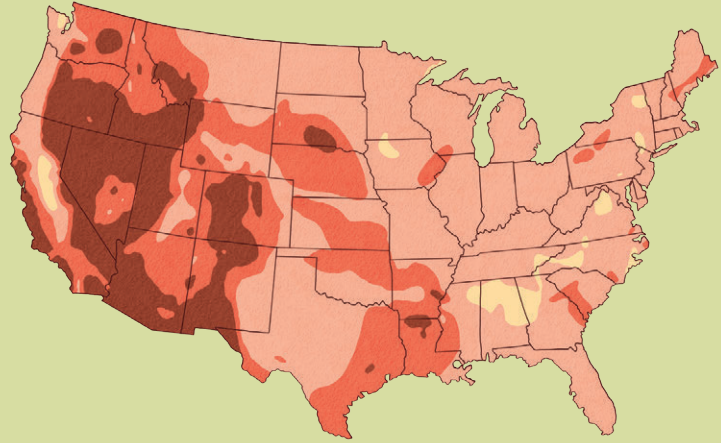




## The country's geothermal resources and power plants are centralized in the West



Higher temperatures indicate greater potential for both natural and enhanced geothermal energy production.



After the Bureau of Land Management approved Ormat Technologies' proposal to construct two 30-megawatt geothermal power plants near **Nevada's Dixie Hot Springs** in 2021, the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe and the Center for Biological Diversity sued over concerns that the facility would dry out, cool down or otherwise alter the hot springs, which are culturally significant to the tribe.

The springs are also home to the imperiled Dixie Valley toad, which has recently received endangered species protection, further snarling Ormat's ambitions; the project remains tangled in the courts.

**The Geysers** is the largest geothermal power complex in the U.S.

Ormat Technologies also proposed an exploratory geothermal drilling project near the tiny town of **Gerlach, Nevada**. But residents were worried the project would industrialize the landscape, dim the night sky and scare off tourists. Meanwhile, the Burning Man Project, which holds its annual bacchanalia in the nearby Black Rock Desert, sued to stop the exploratory drilling. In April, Washoe County withdrew its permit, putting the project on ice, at least for now.

In **northern Nevada**, Texas startup Fervo is testing flexible geothermal power production, which could act like a battery that could be turned up and down to smooth out variability in solar and wind power production.

**Boise, Idaho**, is home to the nation's largest municipal geothermal system, which is used to heat 6 million square feet of downtown buildings, as well as to the Warm Springs Water District, which heats 300 homes with the Earth's warmth.

The **Imperial Valley Geothermal Project** is the second-largest geothermal power complex in the U.S.

The **Salton Sea** and the surrounding area are geologically suited to producing geothermal power with high-temperature fluids, which dissolve minerals — including lithium — that occur naturally in the earth. The briny fluids, which are brought back to the surface to produce power, also contain lithium, a mineral used in electric vehicle and grid-scale batteries, and companies hope to pair geothermal power production with lithium extraction for a clean energy twofer.

SOURCES: City of Boise; Boise Warm Springs Water District; Ormat; National Renewable Energy Laboratory; Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Energy Information Administration; Idaho Governor's Office; U.S. Department of Energy; Controlled Thermal Resources; Global Energy Monitor; "Geothermal District Heating in the United States" by National Renewable Energy Laboratory, Amanda Kolker et al.



# Save our shrimp

'The consequences of something so small can just be so big.'

BY CAROLINE TRACEY  
PHOTO BY NIKI CHAN WYLIE



**ON MARCH 17**, Gov. Spencer Cox, R, signed a bill making the brine shrimp Utah's official state crustacean. The designation, inspired by the activism of a sixth-grade classroom, draws attention to a monumental problem — the decline of the Great Salt Lake — through something relatable: a tiny creature under serious threat.

Fully grown brine shrimp are just half an inch long, but they comprise a critical part of the food web of the Great Salt Lake; eared grebes and other birds eat 20,000-30,000 of them per day. They are also important to Utah's economy: Their dormant eggs, called cysts, are exported around the world as fish food for commercial aquaculture, bringing up to \$60 million to Utah every year.

But between 2012 and 2022, the lake dropped more than nine feet due to water diversions and increasing temperatures, and increased salinity has caused brine shrimp eggs to hatch when temperatures are too cold for the larvae to survive. (While this year's record snowpack is expected to offer some reprieve, it's not likely to be enough to restore the lake to a healthy level.)

Sixth-graders at Salt Lake City's Emerson Elementary School and their teacher, Josh Craner, studied brine shrimp and worked with state Rep. Rosemary Lesser, D, to introduce the bill that codified the brine shrimp's importance into law. *High Country News* spoke with Craner and two students, Jesse Selman and Maurine Aldrich, both 11, about why they decided to organize on the tiny

creature's behalf. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**How would you describe brine shrimp, and why are they important?**

**Maurine Aldrich:** Brine shrimp are small pink creatures that float around in the salty water. They're funny little creatures. It looks like they're swimming upside-down sometimes.

**Jesse Selman:** The brine shrimp are a keystone species for the Great Salt Lake. They eat the algae so it doesn't overtake the lake. They're really unique and amazing.

**Maurine:** The millions of birds migrating over the lake eat the shrimp. The consequences of something so small can be so big.

**This was the second attempt to pass the state crustacean bill; last year, the Legislature ran out of time. What was this year's process to make the brine shrimp the state crustacean?**

**Jesse:** First, for our science topics, we learned about the Great Salt Lake. We took a field trip there to learn how the brine shrimp survive and how important they are.

**Josh Craner:** After that, the kids wrote letters to Rep. Lesser from Ogden, asking if she would sponsor the bill again. Then a few kids gave a speech at the House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee. Then Rep. Lesser presented on the House floor. Lastly, we went to the Senate Natural Resources

Committee, and it passed the Senate on the last day of the legislative session.

**One lawmaker who voted against the bill said it didn't do enough to help the Great Salt Lake. Why do you feel differently?**

**Craner:** Even though this doesn't change policy, a symbol gives people something to fight for. The lake is a huge thing. It's hard to fathom all the numbers and dollars (referenced in statistics). But it *is* possible to fathom an organism. We even have brine shrimp in our classroom.

**Why is it important to you, as young people, to save brine shrimp and the Great Salt Lake?**

**Maurine:** If the lake dries up, it could blow toxic dust into our air in Salt Lake City.

**Jesse:** The lake also affects the snow in our mountains. So if it dries up, that would be a big deal for skiers and snowboarders. The snow is also important for the fresh water that we drink — and the nice weather.

Also, the city we live in, Salt Lake City, is literally named after the Great Salt Lake. So if it dried up, it would be kind of stupid and funny. We'd have a city named after a pile of dirt. ✨

Left to right, Maurine Aldrich, Josh Craner, Camila Reza, Shayla Sissoko, Jameson Hunt and Jesse Selman pose for a photograph in their classroom at Emerson Elementary School in Salt Lake City, Utah. Reza, Sissoko and Hunt delivered a presentation on brine shrimp to the Utah Senate.



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—Karen Kurtak, Idledale, Colorado



# High Country News

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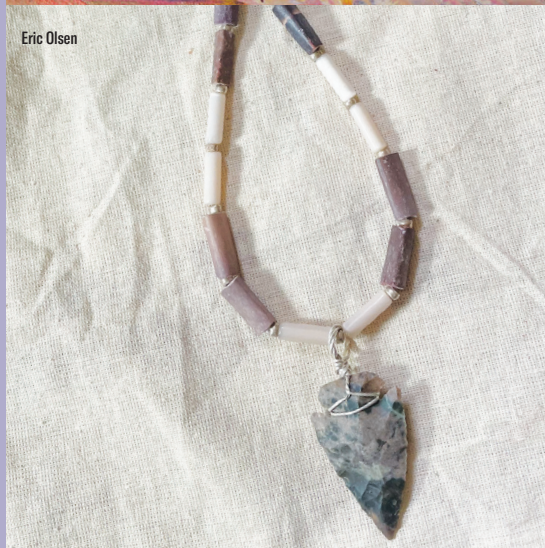
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Vicky Stein

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# Summer Reading with HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

Read a book that is  
a collaboration with  
the dead

- Melissa Chadburn

Read a book that  
queers a traditional  
narrative

- Melissa Chadburn,  
contributing editor

Read a book written  
from a collective  
perspective or voice

- Paisley Rekdal,  
poetry editor

Read a book that  
includes at least two  
different genres

- Paisley Rekdal

Read a book that is  
both literary and has  
zombies

- Melissa Chadburn

Mariah Quintanilla/HCN





Read a book that challenges your assumptions about Western history  
- Michelle Nijhuis

Read a book about a species you think is ugly or scary  
- Michelle Nijhuis

Stop to read a historical marker. Bonus: Research and write an alternative version of it — and send it to [dearfriends@hcn.org](mailto:dearfriends@hcn.org).  
- Michelle Nijhuis, contributing editor

Read a book whose protagonist is a river  
- Paisley Rekdal

DEAR FRIENDS

## Read with us

For the second year, *High Country News* is running a summer reading challenge. Like the library programs of our youth, *HCN's* summer challenge is designed to spark the joy of reading, offering a bit of structure and a few gentle nudges to explore topics, genres and forms you might not otherwise seek out.

The game is simple: Follow the path and read something inspired by each prompt as you go. If you make it all the way through to the end, congratulations! But even if you don't, enjoy the journey.

This year, the prompts were written by **Melissa Chadburn**, *HCN's* contributing editor for books, culture and commentary, Poetry Editor **Paisley Rekdal** and Contributing Editor **Michelle Nijhuis** — an all-star lineup to kick off your reading season!

The prompts are open to your interpretation: You are in charge of your precious reading hours, and we get to marvel at the path you end up taking. Share your book picks at [reading.hcn.org](http://reading.hcn.org) and see what everyone else is reading, too.

Additional information about the summer reading challenge can be found at [reading.hcn.org](http://reading.hcn.org), including how to participate and get updates, win *HCN* prizes and enjoy book events with your favorite authors this summer.

Happy reading!

—Michael Schrantz, marketing communications manager and summer reading emcee



# The Many Legacies of Letitia Carson

*An effort to memorialize the homestead of one of Oregon's first Black farmers illuminates the land's complicated history.*

By Jaclyn Moyer | Illustrations by Aaron Marin

**EIGHT MILES NORTH OF CORVALLIS, OREGON**, a wedge of open prairie known as Soap Creek Valley tucks up against the eastern foot of the Coast Range. A sweep of grassland rimmed in forested hills, the valley is both vast and sheltered at once. Here, in 1845, Letitia Carson concluded a more than 2,000-mile journey from Missouri. Though she'd survived the expedition's many dangers — including the birth of a daughter along the way — her arrival in the fabled Willamette Valley would have offered little comfort: Letitia was a Black woman entering a region that had, among its first acts of governance, barred Black people from residing within its borders or claiming land.

Born into slavery in Kentucky, Letitia came to Oregon with a white man named David Carson, their infant daughter Martha, and a cow she'd purchased en route. Though the nature of their relationship remains unclear, Letitia and David secured a land claim in the amount allotted to married couples: 640 acres. On this land, Letitia grew potatoes, raised hogs, and tended to a growing herd of cattle. She became one of Oregon's first farmers.

After five years of homesteading and the birth of another child, in 1850 the Carsons' claim was halved to the single man's allotment — 320 acres — because county officials did not recognize Letitia as David's wife. The Carsons cultivated their reduced acreage until 1852, when David died suddenly. Though he'd promised to make Letitia his sole heir, he left no will. A white neighbor named Greenberry Smith took control of David's estate and swiftly dispossessed Letitia and her two children of everything they owned, denying them rights to their

homestead and auctioning all their possessions — including Letitia's herd of 29 cattle, the family's Bible, butter churns and bedsheets.

Abruptly homeless, Letitia paid \$104.87 to buy back a few of her belongings. With two cows and a calf, bedding and dishes, she and her children moved to Douglas County, a 160-mile trek south. By now, Oregon had passed the second of its three Black-exclusion laws. The first, enacted in 1844, decreed that any Black person who attempted to settle in Oregon would be publicly lashed 39 times every six months. The second was passed in 1849, and the third was written into the Oregon Constitution in 1857, where it remained until 1926.

Even in this decidedly anti-Black climate, Letitia refused to accept the injustice she'd been dealt. Instead, she sued Greenberry Smith — twice: Once for wages owed, and again for the theft of her cattle. Despite an all-white, all-male jury and judge, Letitia won both cases. Her victory, historians suggest, is testament to her tenacity, to the local respect she'd earned (enough to inspire a white man to testify on her behalf) and to the legal strategy she and her lawyer employed. At the time, debates over slavery dominated local and national politics. Most of Oregon's settlers hailed from the Old Northwest and opposed slavery on economic, not moral, grounds. Believing that Black people, enslaved or free, would disadvantage white workers and non-slave-owning farmers, they wanted neither in Oregon. By identifying herself as David's employee rather than his wife, Letitia aligned her case with the cause of free labor: A ruling that denied a Black woman payment for years of work would be akin to an endorsement of slavery.



Leticia Carson  
W. Grubery Smith,  
adm'r. 4c

Executions

Township N<sup>o</sup> 10 South Range N<sup>o</sup> 5 West Willamette Meridian.

OREGON

Just prior 1888, westward surveying 186.



HOMESTEAD.  
Receiver's Office, Pasco, Ore June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1888.  
FINAL RECEIVERS RECEIPT, APPLICATION,  
No. 14 No. 103  
RECEIVED OF Leticia Carson the sum of  
One (1) — dollars — 92 — cents, being the second half  
of compensation of Register and Receiver, and balance of payment required by law for the  
return of the said 1/2 & land 1/2 of 1888.







Sources: Shantae Johnson portrait, farmers in field and greens photos courtesy of Mudbone Grown; Zachary Scott portrait courtesy of Zachary Scott; background painting courtesy of James L. Lavadour.

Opening spread sources: Archival documents, map and black-and-white landscape photo of homestead site, contemporary homestead site and tree photographs by Barbara Forrest-Ball and Letitia Carson gravestone photograph by Bob Zybach, all courtesy of the Letitia Carson Legacy Project. Background painting courtesy James L. Lavadour; Martha Lavadour portrait courtesy of Joseph A. Lavadour Jr.; landscape with cows image by Ivan McClellan.

This strategy won her compensation for her labor and cattle, but gave her no legal footing to reclaim her homestead. In 1857, it was sold to another white man. Perhaps it was the pain of this loss that forged in Letitia the resolve to acquire a piece of land that could not be so easily taken: one held free and clear in her own name. After the federal Homestead Act, which did not explicitly exclude Black people, passed in 1862, she applied for a land claim near Myrtle Creek and began cultivating a new homestead. She built a house, barn and granary, planted 100 fruit trees and raised cattle and hogs while serving as a local midwife. On Juneteenth 1868, after farming the land for five years in accordance with the act, Letitia received a certificate of ownership. She became the only confirmed Black woman in Oregon, and one of the first 71 people in the country, to

secure a homestead claim. Letitia lived and farmed for the rest of her life on her own land.

After she died in 1888, her story slipped into obscurity. Letitia's name shows up only once in the media of her time, a brief mention in the *Oregon Statesman* announcing her case against Greenberry Smith. Her unprecedented accomplishments were included in no newspapers or history books, and few details of her life were remembered even by her descendants. Meanwhile, her original Soap Creek Valley homestead passed from hand to hand, eventually becoming part of a World War II training camp that was later given to Oregon State University. All the while, the land gained value: today, those 320 acres are worth approximately \$1,168,000.

Letitia's story might have vanished altogether if, in the late 1980s, a graduate student named

Bob Zybach hadn't stumbled on an unusual detail while researching Soap Creek's history. One land claim, he noticed, named "estate of David Carson" as the claimant. "That struck me as odd," Zybach told me. "How can a dead person claim land?" His question led him to the Benton County Courthouse, where a clerk dug out a file never before checked out. Inside, a stack of 180 documents detailed the Carsons' estate sale and Letitia's lawsuits. "It was like striking gold," Zybach said. "Every item she'd owned was listed, all the legal records were there, and no one had touched them since 1856." For the next three decades, Zybach and his research partner, Jan Meranda, transcribed century-old cursive, tracked down relatives, and located gravesites to piece together Letitia Carson's story. Their findings revealed "one of the most interesting and



consequential figures of 19th century Oregon,” Zachary Stocks, executive director of Oregon Black Pioneers, the state’s only historical society dedicated to the African American experience, told me. “Her story can go toe-to-toe with anyone we associate with early Oregon history.”

Now, a new Black-led collaborative called the Letitia Carson Legacy Project seeks to commemorate Letitia’s life and illuminate seldom-told aspects of Oregon’s history. At its heart lies Letitia’s original homestead site in Soap Creek Valley. Here, leaders hope to create a 21st century version of her homestead where the public can engage with Letitia’s story and future generations of Black farmers can access resources to support their success.

“What if we used this same piece of land that was taken away from Letitia and her children to create a site that promotes healing and environmental stewardship and history education?” Stocks said. “Maybe this could be a good model of what reparations could look like for us.”

**IN FEBRUARY 2019**, 174 years after Letitia Carson arrived in Oregon, the first-ever Pacific Northwest conference of Black-identified farmers was held in Corvallis. The previous night, a pre-broadcast screening of a documentary called *Oregon’s Black Pioneers* was held at the same venue, and several conference attendees sat in the audience. The film explored the experiences of several of Oregon’s earliest Black residents, but it was Letitia who most caught the crowd’s attention.

“It was so powerful to hear her story,” Shantae Johnson, a Black food-sovereignty advocate and co-founder of Mudbone Grown farm, told me recently. Familiar with the state’s history

of Black exclusion and whites-only land policies, Johnson was astonished to learn that a Black woman was farming in the Willamette Valley during that time and eventually came to own land in Oregon.

Johnson herself doesn’t own the land she farms; Mudbone Grown’s three sites are on leased properties. For farmers who haven’t inherited land or the capital to acquire it, she told me, finding secure tenure is a huge barrier. And without it, farmers can’t make the investments necessary for long-term success.

Unlike many white farmers, Black farmers in Oregon haven’t benefited from the free land given to the state’s early white settlers through the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850. The most generous land giveaway in U.S. history, this law validated claims made under Oregon’s provisional government which, beginning in 1843, enticed white settlers to journey west by offering white male citizens 320 acres each — 640 if they were married. Claims of half the original acreage could be filed for another five years.

When the Oregon Donation Land Act expired in 1855, 2.5 million acres of land had been given to 7,000 white settlers. Arguably the most consequential of Oregon’s Black-exclusion policies, this law trails a stark legacy: Today, 96.7% of farm producers in the state are white, according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Only an estimated 0.1% of farm producers are Black, according to an analysis of the census data by Oregon State University. Johnson, who sits on the Oregon State Board of Agriculture, described attending an organization event, where she and her partner, Arthur Shavers, sat at a table with several other farmers. “Each farmer was saying, ‘I’m a fourth-, fifth-, sixth-generation

*Letitia Carson  
became the only  
confirmed Black  
woman in Oregon,  
and one of the first  
71 people in the  
country, to secure  
a homestead  
claim.*

---

farmer and I own 2,000 acres.’ But we couldn’t say we owned anything; nothing was passed down. If you don’t have land, you don’t really have anything to pass on to your family. That’s where equity and wealth is built.”

In the theater that February night, Letitia’s story struck a particularly resonant chord for Johnson. It not only illustrated the depth of Oregon’s anti-Black history, but also revealed the perseverance of a woman who dared to insist on justice and ultimately attain something still rare for Black farmers in the state: land ownership.

A few seats down from Johnson sat Lauren Gwin, associate director of Oregon State’s Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems. Like Johnson, Gwin had never heard of Letitia Carson. On the way out of the theater, the two women started talking, and Gwin mentioned that Letitia’s original homestead site

was now owned by OSU. At that, Johnson turned to Gwin. “How do we find out more about this story,” she asked, “and what is happening with that land?”

It turned out that the land was part of the College of Agricultural Sciences’ Soap Creek Beef Ranch, a cow-and-calf operation used for hands-on learning and research. The Carsons’ 320-acre land claim, located in the middle of the 1,200-acre ranch, remained open pasture. It was a rare find: a site where a significant piece of Oregon history took place that remained intact and owned by a public university. All this presented a powerful opportunity, Gwin believed, for OSU to use its resources as a land-grant university to address racial inequalities.

Gwin and Johnson began to discuss how the Carson land could be repurposed to serve restorative justice. “Early on, we thought: What if we could acquire that land and set up a land trust to hold it for Black farmers?” Gwin told me. She reached out to Oregon Black Pioneers and the Linn Benton NAACP, while Johnson and a team of other Black women founded the Black Oregon Land Trust, a nonprofit that conserves agricultural land for Black farmers. Together, leaders from these three organizations and OSU established the Letitia Carson Legacy Project and outlined a collective vision for the Carson land. They imagined a living history center based around a re-creation of Letitia’s homestead; public tours and community events; agricultural research and training programs to support Black farmers; and opportunities for these farmers to once again cultivate this land. The site would become the first monument in the Pacific Northwest dedicated to interpreting the life of a rural Black woman.

Jason Dorsette, president



of the Linn Benton NAACP, brought the Legacy Project's ideas to OSU's leadership. "The initial conversation was easy: the discovery phase, the story of this fantastic, phenomenal woman," he told me. "All that was good and great." But when Dorsette and other project members raised the possibility of shifting the use of the land, momentum slowed. In late 2020, following that summer's call for a national reckoning with racial injustice, the college signed off on the project's design phase but made no promises in regards to the land.

**TWO YEARS LATER**, on a drizzly December afternoon in 2022, I met Larry Landis at the northern edge of the Soap Creek Ranch. Landis, a recently retired OSU archivist, has been working with the Legacy Project to help disseminate Letitia's story and link it to contemporary Black farming in Oregon. He's collaborated with sociology graduate students and faculty to conduct and archive oral histories of Oregon's current Black farmers, ensuring that their stories, unlike Letitia's, won't be so easily erased from public memory. That afternoon, Landis took me to the Carsons' homestead site to look at the land, an archive of its own.

We set out across a soggy pasture, passing a concrete WWII-era bunker tangled in blackberries before reaching the place where Letitia's cabin is believed to have stood. I turned southwest to take in the view: Open grassland spread across a flat basin floor, then slimmed to a ribbon and disappeared into forested hills. No buildings or roads fell within sight. Half a mile away, a herd of elk lay veiled in a drift of fog. Catching our scent, the animals stood and ran.

At a glance, the place appears remarkably similar to how it

*"If you don't have land, you don't really have anything to pass on to your family. That's where equity and wealth is built."*

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might have looked when Letitia and David first arrived. But a keen eye would note differences: Canada thistle, an invasive weed that thrives in disturbed soil, proliferates. Pasture grasses displace native rushes and sedges. Camas, a flowering plant once abundant in open prairies like this one, persists only in sparse patches.

When the Carsons reached Soap Creek in 1845, they were among more than 16,000 overland settlers who came to Oregon between 1844 and 1850 in pursuit of those copious land giveaways, undeterred by the fact that the authorities promoting free acreage — first Oregon's provisional government, and later the U.S. — had no legal claim to the land they offered. No treaties with the region's tribes had been ratified; the land belonged to Indigenous people.

David and Letitia's claim

was located in the homelands of the Luckiamute Band of the Kalapuya, whose descendants are now members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. Once a tribe of around 20,000 people, the Kalapuya stewarded the open prairie landscapes of the Willamette Valley for over 14,000 years, using fire to clear encroaching shrubs and trees, enrich soil, and encourage desirable vegetation. In the 1830s, the tribe lost 90% of its people to a malaria epidemic. "So when Letitia arrived in 1845, we're talking about a people in recovery, people trying to regain their populations and culture," David Lewis, a scholar of Kalapuya history and member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, told me. But the influx of settlers like the Carsons, eager to claim Kalapuya land 320 acres at a time, precluded their recovery, denying them access to the resources upon which their survival depended and pushing many to starvation. Native foods were destroyed as settlers plowed carefully managed meadows and ran pigs and cattle across prairies. By 1851, the entire Willamette Valley had been claimed by settlers. Cut off from their means of survival, the Kalapuya had no choice but to sign the 1855 Willamette Valley Treaty, ceding over 1 million acres to the U.S. They were then forced onto a 61,000-acre reservation in the Coast Range.

On the Carson land that December afternoon, Landis pointed to a ruffle of black plastic protruding from the rain-drenched soil. It marked one of five test pits dug during an archaeological exploration organized by the Legacy Project. Here, a quarter-sized shard of mid-19th century transferware pottery was found. Along with

this possible relic of the Carsons, the dig unearthed several artifacts left behind by Indigenous toolmakers: basalt flakes, chert cores and pieces of obsidian.

For the Legacy Project, and its central aim of telling a more truthful account of Oregon's past, this layered history presents a challenge: How to commemorate a settler's story without obscuring the devastating legacy of settler colonialism on the region's Indigenous people? But many of the project's leaders also see an opportunity here. "From the beginning, we've acknowledged that Letitia's story was made possible only because of the violent removal of the Kalapuya," Gwin told me. The Soap Creek site provides the chance to tell a multi-vocal history of a single piece of land — one that includes perspectives from the Black and Indigenous communities connected to it — in order to reveal a more complete picture of the scope of the white supremacist ideologies embedded in Oregon's history.

Figuring out how to achieve this ideal remains a big part of the Legacy Project's work. "We're going to be doing a lot of community-building and hearing from the Kalapuya to ask, 'What is the vision around Black and Indigenous solidarity in regards to this land?'" Johnson said. "Because there's a lot of richness there, so many stories."

The Legacy Project has reached out to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians to invite their collaboration. So far, neither tribe is officially involved, and I was unable to reach tribal officials for comment. In the meantime, the Legacy Project is consulting with Indigenous faculty at OSU and community leaders, including David Lewis, an assistant





professor of anthropology and ethnic studies.

“It’s not enough anymore to just have a little plaque with our name on it,” Lewis, who formerly worked as the manager of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Cultural Resources Department, said. If tribes are going to invest in this project, he believes, it needs to offer tangible benefits and an equal voice in the process.

Lewis sees possibilities in the Legacy Project. Remnant populations of native plants, including camas, a traditional staple food of the Kalapuya, persist on the Carson land, indicating good potential for restoration. He’d like to see the Legacy Project work with tribal leaders to restore sections of the property to native landscapes and confer gathering rights to tribes. This would honor Kalapuya culture and history while creating opportunities for

Indigenous studies students and faculty to engage with the land. But, Lewis said, “There’s a reluctance on the part of Ag. College to take the cattle off the land. That doesn’t bode well for a true restoration project.”

Jason Dorsette of the NAACP also expressed skepticism about the sincerity of OSU’s commitment to both communities. He’s wary the university will try to use the project for a “two-for-one,” checking off its obligations to both groups without allocating additional resources. Dorsette fears that Letitia’s story and the Black experience in Oregon will be pushed to the side or watered down in service of a multicultural vision — one in which people of color are lumped together and their communities’ unique experiences and histories are obscured. Lewis shares this concern. “Under this new BIPOC label, it’s like we’re all in the same

boat,” he said. “We’re not.”

Both Lewis and Dorsette believe it’s possible to create an interpretive site that honors each community’s histories and connections to the Carson land — maybe even one in which the whole amounts to more than the sum of each part. But accomplishing this would require additional resources and land, which OSU hasn’t committed to. And that squeeze is creating tension between the two communities, Dorsette told me. “I find this to be one of the oldest tricks in the book, to pit communities of color against each other so we’re fighting for presence, for attention,” he said. “I get a little emotional because it reeks of anti-Blackness and white supremacy ideologies that cause communities of color to compete for funds that a university like OSU should just make happen because it’s the right thing to do.”

Sources: Archival photograph of Martha Lavadour, Narcisse Lavadour and Nelson Lavadour courtesy of Joey Lavadour; portrait of Joseph Armand Lavadour Jr., Joseph Armand Lavadour Sr., and James L. Lavadour courtesy of Joseph A. Lavadour Jr.; background painting courtesy of James L. Lavadour; tapestry detail photograph courtesy of Joseph A. Lavadour Jr.; camas flower photograph by Ivan McClellan; Belden map of 1855, public domain.



**AT THE EDGE** of a grassy square on the Oregon State campus in Corvallis, a stately brick building houses the College of Agricultural Sciences. I'd come here one winter afternoon to talk with Dean Staci Simonich. No sign marked the door, and I wasn't sure I'd found the right building until I stepped back, craned my neck and saw a row of colossal capital letters towering above the fourth-story windows: AGRICULTURE.

In 1868, the year Letitia received title to her Douglas County land, OSU was designated Oregon's land-grant university. Created in part to bolster the nation's agricultural industry by institutionalizing farm research, land-grant universities were federally funded via land expropriated from Indigenous tribes. OSU received 91,629 acres from several tribal nations — including the Kalapuya — which were sold to raise the endowment principal of what would amount to \$4,182,259 today. The university has since become the largest in Oregon.

In her office, Dean Simonich expressed enthusiasm for Letitia's story and the Legacy Project. She told me that the College of Agricultural Sciences has recently "upped its game" in regard to diversity, equity and inclusion, and she views the project as part of that work. "We want to show that this is not your grandfather's College of Agricultural Sciences," Simonich said.

I asked her if the beef ranch was willing to relinquish the Carson land to accommodate the project's goals. "It's not determined yet," she told me. "We're still developing the vision for what the project could or might be." And cattle ranching, Simonich said, is an important aspect of Letitia's legacy. She pointed to a frame on her

office wall, which held a cherry-red silk scarf printed with dozens of cattle-brand symbols surrounding the words *Oregon Cattlewomen*. "I got it at a silent auction," she told me. "It's 70 or 80 years old. So you see there's a strong heritage of cattlemen in Oregon, and Letitia was among the very first." Today, cattle ranching is crucial to Oregon's agricultural industry. After greenhouse and nursery products, cattle and calves are the state's most valuable commodity, followed by hay and dairy.

Simonich believes the beef ranch and the Legacy Project can co-exist. "I'm a 'both/and' person," she said, "not an 'either/or.'" Some goals can be achieved without altering the ranch's current use of the land: Occasional events can be held, archaeological surveys conducted, a memorial marker erected. But the project's fundamental aspirations — creating a historic homestead where the public can learn Letitia's story, cultivating Native landscapes and First Foods, and restoring the land to Black and Indigenous stewardship — will require the beef ranch to give up at least part of its claim to those acres. "That section is some of the best grass we have," Simonich said. "It would be hard to lose that."

One of the first calves of the season had slipped out between the rungs of its corral on the frosty January morning I visited ranch manager Mike Hammerich at the Soap Creek Ranch. Once weaned, Hammerich said, this calf and the 120 others expected this spring will be sold for around \$1,000 each. From where we stood watching the calf squirm back through the rails to its mother, Letitia's cabin site was out of view. But we could see parts of her 320-acre claim: flat grassland giving way to sloping

*"This is the real history. Stories of people who existed in between all the 'History.'"*

hills and eventually woods. That land, Hammerich explained, produces most of the hay the ranch depends on and provides essential pasture. "Losing those acres would be devastating," he said.

Still, Hammerich supports the Legacy Project and believes a portion of the land — five or 10 acres — could be fenced off for an interpretive center without harming the ranch. In the meantime, he moves cows and works to accommodate the project's events, like last summer's Juneteenth celebration and a field trip from the recently renamed Letitia Carson Elementary School, where he was impressed to see fourth-graders learning Letitia's story. "I grew up in Oregon and I never learned any of this history," he said. "I learned about slavery, of course, but nothing about Oregon's history of racism and Black exclusion."

If, as the dean said, Oregon State is "not 'your grandfather's agriculture college,'" whose is it? According to OSU's Office of Institutional Research, 72% of students in the College of Agricultural Sciences are white. Black-identified students make up 1.3%, and Indigenous students make up 0.8%. "If we look at our student success metrics, we know we are not doing as good a job as we need to around serving Black and Indigenous students," Scott Vignos, the university's chief diversity officer, told me.

In 2016, following a student protest about racism at OSU, the university established the Office of Institutional Diversity to address this persistent problem. "Part of that work involves building relationships that have been injured or never built in the first place," he said. By connecting the land's various stakeholders — Black-led community organizations, tribal partners, students and faculty — Vignos believes the



project could present a unique means of doing that work. But it won't be easy. "Anytime we talk about almost any site in the West, we are going to find at once really exciting, but also painful, stories, and pain that has not been reckoned with, so that's going to be a big part of this process."

**THREE MILES** across town, in the library of Letitia Carson Elementary School, a glass case holds two intricately woven forms: a traditional Walla Walla woman's hat and a colorful root bag. Opposite it, a five-paneled painting of mountain landscapes spans the length of a wall. This art was given to the school at its re-naming ceremony last fall by Joey and James Lavadour. Renowned artists, brothers and Walla Walla members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indians, the Lavadours are two of Letitia Carson's great-great-great-grandsons.

"As a kid, I was always sitting around with the old people, listening to their stories and looking at pictures instead of out playing," Joey told me recently. One picture in his family's collection, a photograph from 1891, showed a striking young woman in a black dress: Martha Carson, Letitia and David's daughter. She stands with her husband, a Walla Walla and Métis man named Narcisse Lavadour, and their son. Martha married Narcisse in 1868, and her daughter from another partnership later married his brother. Both couples lived on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, where many of their descendants remain today.

Though Joey grew up knowing he had Black ancestors, this knowledge wasn't widely held in his family. At some point, Joey explained, the older generations who'd known Martha Carson and her children stopped talking

about their Blackness. "They knew, but they quieted it." Over time, this part of the family's heritage was largely forgotten.

As a young adult, Joey became friends with a historian who later introduced him to the findings of Bob Zybach and Jan Meranda. Joey was amazed to learn of Letitia's accomplishments and proud to be her descendant. But not everyone in his family shared his immediate enthusiasm. "I was bringing a new story to my parents' generation," Joey told me, and some found the news unsettling. "My father looked at me and said, 'I've fought all my life because I'm Indian. I don't want to fight because I'm Black.'"

"It comes from being mixed themselves — Indian and white," Joey said. "Living on the reservation, they experienced prejudice. Not from everyone, but a little prejudice goes a long way."

Years have passed since that moment. "Today, my family is extremely proud of Letitia and being descended of her," Joey said. "We're multiracial, and in being so there's a lot of conflict involving history, you know, about what has taken place." He told me about his tribe's ongoing efforts to reclaim lands lost through settlement. "It's a difficult thing, a quandary," he said. "You're proud of one side of your family, although it steps on the toes of the other side." Joey was silent for a moment, then added, "To me, it's one big picture."

When I asked the Lavadour brothers how they felt about the Legacy Project, both expressed ardent support. "This is the real history," James said. "Stories of people who existed in between all the 'History' — it's who people are, who I am."

**LAST DECEMBER**, the Legacy Project launched a traveling

exhibit about Letitia's life with a reception at the Douglas County Museum in Roseburg. Inside, I followed a din of voices past the museum's gift shop, where visitors can buy petrified wood and books from a box labeled "True Western Stories" (titles include: *Mountain Men*, *Loggers* and *Cowboys*), to a room where eight colorful panels told Letitia's story via photographs, maps and text. The exhibit will travel across Oregon, bringing Letitia's story to museums and community centers throughout the state.

Dozens of people milled about, nibbling snacks while examining the panels. Midway through, Gwin and Zachary Stocks from Oregon Black Pioneers gave a brief overview of the Legacy Project. Afterwards, a visitor raised her hand, explained that she worked in rangeland management and had spent time in the Soap Creek Valley. "I'd love to know where Letitia's homestead was," she said. "Is there a marker of some kind?"

Stocks looked at Gwin. She shook her head: "Not yet."

The Legacy Project has accomplished a lot in four years: It compiled a digital history, organized an archaeological dig, held public events on the land, recorded and archived oral histories of contemporary Black farmers, created this exhibit. But the question of what will happen with Letitia's land remains stubbornly unanswered.

"Whether or not we create anything there will ultimately be up to the university," Stocks told me. He hopes projects like the traveling exhibit will increase public interest and encourage OSU to enter into a perpetual use agreement with the Legacy Project partners to allow them to begin building their vision on the land. "We're dreaming big

while keeping our expectations small," he said. "For now."

One February afternoon, I drove once more to Soap Creek Valley to see the Carson land in the bright light of a clear day. Sunshine swept over the grasslands, and I tried to imagine the Legacy Project's visions manifested there: A working homestead, meadows blue with camas, field crops cultivated by emerging Black farmers. Instead, I found myself captivated by the sight of the open land, by the sense of possibility such a view conjures in America, where land is deeply entwined with freedom and wealth. It's what Black leaders advocated for upon emancipation — 40 acres and a mule — and what they and many of their descendants have been repeatedly denied through exclusionary land policies. It's what provided the carefully stewarded resources that sustained Indigenous tribes for millennia, and what many are fighting to regain today. It's what drove thousands of settlers to journey west, and what America's formidable agricultural industry — and the prosperity and power it generates for some — is built upon.

Here, in Soap Creek Valley, these strands of history are threaded together through the same 320 acres of prairie. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that the Legacy Project has thus far encountered more quandary than ease in its attempt to create a different future for this land. A cloud passed over the sun, and the valley fell into shadow. I thought of what Joey Lavadour said when I asked if he had a particular vision for the future of his great-great-great-grandmother's land. "I just really love that her story is getting out there," Joey said. "I didn't realize, years ago, that it would mean so much to so many different people." ☀









# North Fork Refuge

*Harvesting memories on  
Colorado's Western Slope.*

Photos and text by Trent Davis Bailey

**THESE PHOTOGRAPHS** were taken between 2011 and 2018 on Colorado's Western Slope, in a high-desert enclave of small-scale farms and wilderness. The locals in the towns of Paonia, Hotchkiss and Crawford refer to the surrounding river valley as "the North Fork." For me, the North Fork is also a place in my imagination.

I first visited in 1992, when I was 7 years old. My dad took my brothers and me there to meet our aunt, uncle and their six kids, who at the time were living in a large tent at the base of a mountain. Their backyard had three ponds and a garden where they grew their own food. Beyond was a dense forest of scrub oak and juniper trees where I imagined coyotes, black bears and mountain lions lurked — and even farther out were troves of aspen and pine, guarding a seemingly infinite and unknowable expanse.

I marveled over my cousins' world and envied their freedoms. I viewed their free-range way of life as an enduring vestige of the frontier, as if they were on a never-ending adventure that was at once exciting and terrifying. I was also mystified by their

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*Karen, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2014.*





*Compost, Paonia, Colorado, 2015.*



*Lilly (Picking Apricots), Paonia, Colorado, 2012.*



*James, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2016.*





*Amaya, Paonia, Colorado, 2016.*

homegrown meals, especially my aunt's macrobiotic dishes, which consisted of peculiar heirloom crops and other strange and colorful local foods I had never seen, smelled or tasted anywhere else.

In the years that followed, my dad and his brother had ongoing personal disputes, which ended with a breach of trust and led to a falling out between our families. I never again visited the valley as a child, but my memories of it remained.

And, almost 20 years later, I returned. I found my way back through an orchardist and vintner known as Justy, who let me camp on his land. He showed me his raspberry thickets and native cottonwoods, his compost piles, his chicken and turkey coop, his goat pen and apple orchard, and his rows of grapevines supported by trestles. We harvested garlic together, ate figs off a tree in

his greenhouse, and swam naked in his friends' pond. The North Fork was even more remarkable than I had remembered.

After several returns, as fate would have it, I bumped into my aunt at the Paonia food co-op. Awestruck, we embraced each other and exchanged stories. She told me that her family had left the valley in 1999, only to return in the early aughts. In the years since that chance encounter, I've rekindled ties with her and my North Fork cousins, and my fondness for them gives me all the more reason to keep coming back.

During my longest stay, two days before my 30th birthday, a friend from Paonia took me foraging for chanterelles and brought along another friend of hers named Emma. Almost unbelievably, we found more than 15 pounds of mushrooms. Come sundown, Emma and I





*Angela, Lost Lake, Colorado, 2015.*



*Scott (Watering), Paonia, Colorado, 2016.*



*Farmhands, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2014.*





*Austin (Suze's Cherry Tree), Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2015.*

washed and sorted our haul and devoured a sautéed helping of it with dinner and homemade mead. Afterward, we lay in the grass and talked late into the evening under a waxing crescent moon, beginning a long imagining of our own new constellations.

Emma and I are now married and raising a family of our own, growing crops, tending to a backyard perennial garden and living among century-old pines in a mountain community along Colorado's Front Range. When I'm home, I'm reminded that the woods around us are related to the forest where we met. The North Fork, that uncanny refuge on the other side of the Continental Divide, has given me family in more ways than one. ✨



*Eggs, Paonia, Colorado, 2017.*





*Jars, Plums and Apples, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2012.*



*Bill, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2011.*





*Ryan (Sunning), Paonia, Colorado, 2014.*



*Fruit-picking Ladders, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2017.*





*Lost Boy Ranch, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2012.*



*Roundabout, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2013.*

*The photographs featured here are from Trent Davis Bailey's book, The North Fork, forthcoming in late summer 2023 from Trespasser, a Texas-based independent art book publisher. Bailey's work is also the subject of an exhibition at the Denver Art Museum titled "Personal Geographies: Trent Davis Bailey | Brian Adams," which will be on view from July 30, 2023, through Feb. 11, 2024.*

*Editor's note: "Karen," who appears in the photos on pages 36 and 40, now works at High Country News.*



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# THE SPELLBINDING ADVENTURE

*of* **TWO WOMEN** *who* **RISKED THEIR LIVES** *to make an*  
**UNPRECEDENTED BOTANICAL SURVEY**  
*of a* **DEFINING LANDSCAPE** *of the* **AMERICAN WEST.**

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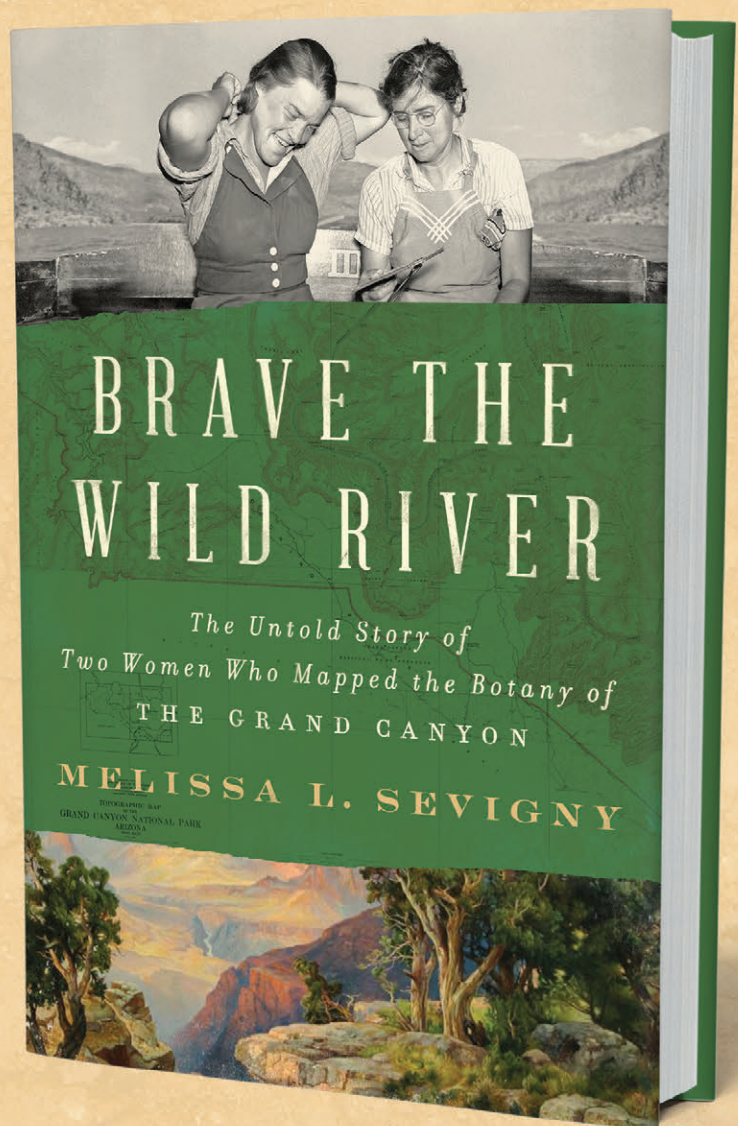
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**Executive Director** — The Executive Director of the Badlands Conservation Alliance (BCA) builds and leads a premier North Dakota advocacy group that serves to protect the ecology of the North Dakota Badlands, an expansive geologic feature that includes the largest national grassland in the United States. With the support of its board of directors, the BCA fully

empowers the Director to coordinate decision-making processes, invent solutions, make discoveries, inspire the public, and shape the future of life in western North Dakota. In addition to carrying out administrative duties that include financial and operational reporting, the Director will engage with our stakeholders and the public, and serve as the leader of our organization. You will have access to the spectacular North Dakota Badlands, the extraordinarily influential members of BCA, our expansive knowledge database and our donors. You will be the voice that the media turns to when controversies emerge. You will help shape the future of the North Dakota Badlands.

The BCA emphasizes with enthusiasm and confidence that the incoming Executive Director of the Badlands Conservation Alliance will have significant, far-reaching impacts. This is your opportunity to develop and expand relationships with local environmental, political, agricultural, government and commercial entities that intersect within the Badlands of North Dakota. You will develop a regional communication plan and lead fundraising efforts to help protect our environment, parks, grasslands and wildlife. You will review and revise existing short and long-range plans that reach the highest levels of government agencies. You'll participate in meetings, discussions, and negotiations with other conservation groups and western North Dakota counties, and work with local, State, and Federal agencies, pertinent to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, the Dakota Prairie Grasslands, and the long-awaited Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, which is expected to be one of the most transformative cultural additions in North Dakota history.

BCA's headquarters are in Bismarck, the legislative center of North Dakota, where we share an office space with other vibrant and active natural resource groups. Passion and knowledge of the North Dakota Badlands is a must, because you'll be planning and leading

Badlands outings on a regular basis. Some in-state travel is necessary. Expenses will be reimbursed. When required, the ability to accommodate and implement virtual meeting technologies is expected.

The salary range is \$60,000-\$75,000. Benefits in addition to salary will be negotiable, depending on success in fundraising and membership recruitment.

Job applicants, please email the cover letter and résumé to the chair of our search committee: [cahogan128@gmail.com](mailto:cahogan128@gmail.com).

Please cc [bca@badlandsconservationalliance.org](mailto:bca@badlandsconservationalliance.org) and include the subject line: BCA Executive Director Application.

Badlands Conservation Alliance is dedicated to the preservation of the North Dakota Badlands, providing an independent voice to ensure agencies adhere to the principles of the laws that provide for wise stewardship of the natural landscapes with which the citizens of the United States have entrusted them — for this and future generations. 701-450-1634. [bca@badlandsconservationalliance.org](mailto:bca@badlandsconservationalliance.org). [BadlandsConservationAlliance.org](http://BadlandsConservationAlliance.org).



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## GARDEN & OUTDOOR

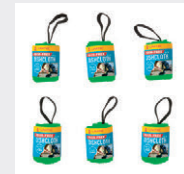
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Q&A

**ON MAY 1, 2016**, the Alberta, Canada, oil boomtown of Fort McMurray received warning of a wildfire in the forest about seven miles to its west. Despite initial reassurances from fire officials, the fire raced toward the city, swelling to more than half a million acres, and on May 3, 88,000 people were forced to evacuate. The fire — locals called it “The Beast” — destroyed more than 2,400 homes, caused \$9 billion in damages, and profoundly disrupted the lives of all who experienced it. To author John Vaillant, who lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, its ferocity served as both a literal and a metaphorical expression of the

## When fire goes feral

A conversation with John Vaillant, author of *Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World*.

BY MICHELLE NIJHUIS | ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN CROW

petroleum industry’s power — as well as a shocking harbinger of the future. Which it was: By mid-May of this year, there were 90 wildfires burning in Alberta, 23 of them out of control.

*HCN* spoke with Vaillant about his new book *Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World*,

out this month from Knopf. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Many of us in the U.S. West don’t know how devastating the Fort McMurray fire was. What set it apart from other North American wildfires?**

The size and the speed — and the fact that it ran right into an oil hub. The only reason Fort McMurray is where it is, and is the size it is now, is because of the bitumen industry, which is a feedstock for petroleum. We import nearly 4 million barrels a day of Fort McMurray petroleum into the United States; it’s our biggest foreign source of petroleum.

There’s a sense in Fort McMurray that we’re a young, strong, hardworking city of achievers. We overcome massive obstacles. So when they saw this fire, there was a sense of, *we got this. Fire is nothing new to us up here.*

That’s all true, but in the



21st century, it's harder to accurately predict how fire is going to behave. We're learning that there are micro-thresholds — when you have, say, 11% humidity instead of 25% humidity and 90 degrees Fahrenheit instead of 75 degrees Fahrenheit — where fire becomes empowered. It goes feral.

**You have an amazing scene where one of the fire managers is on the local radio station, sending a message of “It’s OK, we’re on top of this.” And as he’s being interviewed, the cloud of smoke on the horizon gets blacker and blacker, and the reporter sees him start to sweat. Even people who knew intellectually what might happen just found it hard to imagine.**

This is the advantage that climate change has over us. We can have the data, but that doesn't mean we always interpret it in a meaningful way. So the people whose job it is to protect communities can look at the fire weather index and see that *wow, this is serious*. And yet that doesn't automatically translate into action, into *oh my gosh, this could overrun the city, we should evacuate now*. That's why one of the things that really resonated for me was the idea of the Lucretius problem.

**Tell us about the Lucretius problem.**

Lucretius was a poet and philosopher who lived in Rome during the first century BCE. The Lucretius problem, roughly paraphrased, is that the fool believes the tallest mountain of all is the tallest mountain that he himself has seen. In other words, we're often limited by personal experience. If you haven't felt it viscerally yourself, there's a little part of you that can't believe it's possible.

**Nobody could believe the Fort McMurray fire was going to be**

**as bad as it was except for the volunteer firefighters from the nearby town of Slave Lake, who had experienced a fire of similar ferocity in 2011.**

The firefighters from Slave Lake were kind of a Greek chorus; the future had already happened to them. In a matter of hours, they lost 500 houses, they lost the library, they lost the city hall, they lost the radio station. They lost a third of the town in an afternoon. What was most notable about that fire was the heat. People came back looking for the tractor mowers in their garage and found that the garage and the tractor mower had basically vaporized. That's not what a house fire does, and it's not what most wildfires do. But it's what a 21st century fire is capable of doing.

It was important to me to get at the psychological destabilization that results from that kind of fire. This place where you raised your kids, and might have been raised yourself, is gone. It isn't like, well, the roof burned off, maybe we can rebuild. There's simply nothing left. You've been negated.

**During the Fort McMurray fire, the evacuation orders came very late, but the evacuation itself was almost miraculously smooth. And this was in an oil town with a definite rowdy side — it's easy to imagine how it could have gone another way. What happened?**

I think people are going to be puzzling that out for a long time. Many of the workers in the bitumen camps were evacuated by jet — those facilities are so big that they have their own aerodromes. So most of the people in the endless lines of cars snaking through the flames in Fort McMurray worked in the industry as permanent employees. They owned real estate, they

*“The petroleum industry is a wholly owned subsidiary of fire. It’s founded on burning, and if it doesn’t keep burning stuff, it will be out of business.”*

had families.

There's also a very strong culture of faith in Fort McMurray — not just evangelical Christians, but many Muslims, many Hindus. So there's community through the neighborhoods and through the churches. And then there's this sort of Canadian discipline that says, it's not all about you. The Canadian equivalent of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is peace, order and good government. So during the evacuation, people were stopping at traffic lights even as every single tree in sight was on fire and their kids were in the back screaming and crying. They followed the rules, and those rules saved their lives.

**It's been almost exactly seven years since the Fort McMurray fire. How has the city changed?**

Well, the petroleum industry is a wholly owned subsidiary of fire. It's founded on burning, and if it doesn't keep burning stuff, it will be out of business. The notion of responding to climate change in a way that might stifle or redirect the energy of the petroleum industry is pretty much off-limits in northern Alberta. And so Fort McMurray is rebuilding as fast as it can, expanding production as fast as it can.

There are plenty of people in Fort McMurray who are still traumatized by the fire. Many first responders have health issues, and some have had to resign themselves to the fact that they're going to live shorter lives. But the links between the industry and climate change and between climate change and fire are still a little bit abstract. People think: “This was a terrible thing that happened to us, one that we would never want to happen to anybody else. But we've got to go on; we've got to get back in the saddle.” ☀



## Gambling's hidden price

*Meet Me Tonight In Atlantic City* details the cost of gambling addiction for one Asian American family.

BY LELAND CHEUK | PORTRAIT BY CHONA KASINGER

**EAST OF LOS ANGELES,** in San Gabriel Valley, Asian Americans make up more than half of the population. The casino buses aren't hard to find here; they run back and forth from Las Vegas and Southern California's many gambling houses, picking up passengers in the parking lots of Asian supermarket chains like 99 Ranch. They're run by companies with nondescript names like Da Zhen and QH Express. The buses are often unmarked and hard to find on the web, because their older clientele doesn't often speak English and therefore doesn't use the internet. The companies are frequently resented by city councils and residents alike, because the buses clog up traffic, and the crowds of gamblers are regarded as a nuisance. Safety is also an issue; as reported in *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 25 passengers were injured in 2018, when a bus overturned at 4 a.m. in downtown Los Angeles on the way back from Pala Casino in San Diego County.

Gambling addiction is a well-documented problem among Asian Americans. Social workers and academics point to the pressures and obstacles that low-income,

non-English-speaking immigrants face — the loneliness and the lack of bilingual treatment options for problem gambling. Others blame the gaming and hospitality industry, which targets Asian Americans with special deals on transportation, meals and gambling vouchers.

In *Meet Me Tonight In Atlantic City*, her new memoir, Jane Wong doesn't deeply investigate the causes of this blight on Asian American immigrant communities. Instead, she illustrates the heavy toll that gambling addiction can take on families by describing her own experiences: "(M)y father played all night in Atlantic City. He did not stop to eat or go to the bathroom or ask where his family was. My father owned a Chinese American takeout restaurant on the Jersey shore, and we would lose this one asset from his gambling. ... When we didn't go to Atlantic City with him, he'd disappear for days, sometimes a week. My mother ran the restaurant without him, her arms scraping the fryer, grime peeling like bark. Her anger: strips of wonton wrappers seething in that fryer, slow and dangerous."

Eventually, Wong's father leaves the family. "That day was

like any other," writes Wong. "I went to school. My mother slept, since she'd started working night shift for the United States Postal Service. ... But he — my father — was gone. Just like that."

The consequences of her father's abandonment hang over Wong and her family for decades. Her mother, lovingly depicted throughout the book, works as a mail sorter to pay the bills after Wong's father gambles away the family restaurant. As an essential worker, she continues to work overtime at night when COVID-19 arrives, risking serious illness and death. And their father's abandonment haunts his children into adulthood. In an especially heartbreaking scene, Wong's brother, now grown up, visits his father, hoping to develop a relationship with him through watching the NBA playoffs together. But his father only turns him away, claiming to be "too busy." When Wong recalls her father's love for playing Ping-Pong with his friends, she describes it as a rare example of him expressing joy in her presence. "More often than not, he would refuse to use words," she writes. "He'd just grunt like a rock falling off a truck bed. Who knows, maybe I learned my

silence in school from him."

Wong pokes fun at her lingering "daddy issues," but her relationships with men tend to echo her dysfunctional relationship with her father. After a yearlong romance, one boyfriend leaves for work, and, days later, breaks up with Wong, telling her "he never loved me ... none of it was real." In one particularly disturbing interaction, Wong is propositioned in a used bookstore by a middle-aged white man, who offers her \$1,000 cash for a night together. In these painful episodes, the reader can't help but see shadows of the "nonchalant disregard" Wong's father had for her when she was a child.

Wong offers no theories as to what drove her father to behave in such pathological ways. But the reader learns that her parents' marriage was an arranged one, and it's unclear whether the two were ever in love. Perhaps marital strife, combined with economic pressures, contributed to Wong's father's uncontrollable desire to gamble. Wong cites a 2016 article by Michael Liao entitled "Asian Americans and Problem Gambling," which theorizes that "the impulse to gamble" is "tied to matters of control." Wong adds, "Among vulnerable communities who may feel powerless in their everyday lives, this is one way to take action."

Do a quick Google search on "Asian marketing jobs," and you'll find Las Vegas-based postings from companies like The Venetian and Caesars Entertainment at the top of the list. But while big casino marketers might target Asian Americans, they don't always succeed. Lucky Dragon, for example, was deliberately designed to capture Asian high-rollers, employing feng shui and Asian street food and marketing itself as Las Vegas'



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first Asian-themed resort experience. It opened in 2016 only to close in January 2018, becoming one of the “shortest-lived casino ventures in the history” of the city, according to Casino.org. Lucky Dragon would reopen in 2020 under new ownership but then fold again in late 2022.

Though the roots of Wong’s father’s addiction remain mysterious, the family’s response to losing their patriarch to gambling is admirable. Today, Wong teaches creative writing at Western Washington University and is an acclaimed poet. Her mother stuffs Wong’s second book, *How to Not Be Afraid of Everything*, into her work bag and shows her co-workers on the night shift at the post office. “My daughter was in the *New York Times*,” her mom says. “Can you believe it?” In a video in which he reads a scene from one of Wong’s published essays, her brother “talks about how he wants to be a great dad, to loosen the weight of his own relationship to his father.” “The video was too tender, too generous,” Wong writes. “I couldn’t share it.”

Wong’s loving portrayal of her mother and brother and her bracingly honest account of her own struggles in the aftermath of her father’s poor choices illuminate the lasting damage gambling can do to families. The memoir also shines as an ode to working-class Asian immigrants and the pressures and dangers they face without complaint, pressures that, to their American-born children, seem unendurable. ✨

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**Meet Me Tonight In Atlantic City**

Jane Wong  
388 pages,  
hardcover: \$27.95  
Tin House, 2023.

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## CONFETTI WESTERNS

A column that explores the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.



*inland echo*. Oil on canvas, 2023. **Sabrina Piersol**

# The flamboyance of wildflowers

Commemorating queer culture amid the California superbloom.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS



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**IN MANY MAJOR U.S.** and European cities in the 1930s, a surge of queer underground parties sprouted like pansies from the soil. Queer and transgender performers sang proud songs about waving buttercups and daisies. The revelry attracted thousands, but after only a few years, homophobia and Nazism trampled this short-lived superbloom, which historians call “The Pansy Craze.”

When I was growing up near conservative Colorado Springs, Colorado, my classmates called me a “pansy” so often that I began to embrace the wild pansies in my backyard as part of my identity. I didn’t see the bright yellow-and-purple flower as weak; it could bench-press heavy mats of ponderosa pine needles. Derogatory terms like “daisy,” “evening botanist” and “lavender boy” have been used to demean effeminate men for over a century, but queer people have never shied away from horticultural association. From the feminine desire symbolized by Sappho’s violets to Oscar Wilde’s green carnations, worn on the lapels of gay men, we have often reclaimed and celebrated our identities or spoken through flowers.

During the massive blooms of 2017, I set out on what I called “The Pansy Craze Expedition,” backpacking, biking and driving across the Colorado and Mojave deserts in search of flowers. Perhaps it was my own way of processing the violence against queer and trans Americans that intensified in 2016, culminating in today’s frenzy of transphobic legislation. Now, I view my expedition as an ongoing celebration of flamboyance. It’s also a protest against our worsening drought of equal rights.

This winter’s record-breaking precipitation has animated blooms as dramatic as drag shows. Their flamboyance of color follows a ferocity of gray, when atmospheric rivers hundreds of miles wide gathered moisture from tributaries over the Pacific and collided with the West Coast, shrouding the mountains in snow.

I continued my Pansy Craze Expedition this year with my boyfriend on a cold afternoon in March, returning to the Chumash’s

Tšihkukunitš, “place of rabbits,” also known as Carrizo Plain National Monument. Tšihkukunitš at peak bloom resembles a tie-dyed tapestry of yellow, purple and orange pulled tightly across its plain and scrunched in its ring of mountains. The swaths of flowers flicker in the sunlight like a hummingbird’s iridescent gorget.

We walked a narrow road up the Temblor Range and were surrounded by millions of hillside daisies. I call their electric gathering *The Yellow*. On all fours, I counted a daisy’s disc florets, full of male and female sex organs, thinking of writer Ellen Meloy’s term “botanical eroticism.” I felt like I was free-falling through an endless loop of daisies, the florets and yellow carpets recursively appearing within themselves.

Farther up the hill, we entered *The Purple*, composed primarily of lacy phacelia. They emitted an ambrosial, gender-neutral perfume that drifted through the air like painted lady butterflies. The phacelia’s deep purple hue on shapely hills often reminds me of the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, whose phallic flowers were as masculine as the leather daddies who posed for him in subterranean sex clubs.

Mapplethorpe’s anemones, irises and other floral portraits projected into my mind within that funnel of phacelia. Flashes of leather thongs resembled the San Andreas Fault at the base of the Temblors and the blue-eyed grass the Chumash named *sh’ichki-‘i’waqaq*, or “frog’s g-string.” This year’s bloom was just beginning, but, like cut flowers, the displays would quickly wilt. The magical realism portal was opening and closing at the same time.

I told my partner about a memory that the author Jack Fritscher, Mapplethorpe’s former partner, shared with me: When he took Mapplethorpe to see the calla lilies in his Sonoma garden, they towered over the artist like redwoods. “It was a real *Alice in Wonderland* moment,” Fritscher said. Mapplethorpe died in 1989 of AIDS-related complications; Fritscher compared the effects of the disease to a time-lapse sequence, one

that brought to mind a flower’s fleeting life. “An aging process that should take 50 years takes five months,” he said. “Robert worked fast because (the flower’s) beauty was brief.”

Our eyes were calmed by the all-consuming color as we watched whitecaps form on the ephemeral Soda Lake thousands of feet below us. A western meadowlark erupted from the swath of daisies with a *thworp*, her bright yellow chest making it look as if the flowers were suddenly turning into birds. She whistled as she traced a ridgeline toward the alkaline lake, and I thought about how quickly this emblazoned landscape would be scorched brown by the recurrent cruelty of its environment.

But the day was cool and colorful and daisy pollen carried by gusts of wind clung to my legs. I gathered it and smeared *The Yellow* on my face like eyeshadow. ✨

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*I felt like I was  
free-falling through an  
endless loop of daisies,  
the florets and yellow  
carpets recursively  
appearing within  
themselves.*



## NEW MEXICO

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a flapping, feathery, fluttering ... drone? If you happen to have a surplus of dead birds on hand, take heart: Those wings and feathers can be repurposed into useful airborne science experiments. *The Washington Post* reports that Mostafa Hassanalian, an engineering professor at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro, has taken upcycling to new heights, literally: Hassanalian researches the kinetics of bird drones during flight, with the goal of optimizing aviation technology. And that's where all the taxidermied birds come in: He attaches their wings, feathers and heads to something he calls *ornithopters* — which are not the long-lost cousins of velociraptors, but rather “small machines with mechanical wings that flap like those of birds and insects.” He's tested pigeon, crow and even hummingbird wings for their endurance and speed with hopes that his research “can create a revolution in the aviation industry” — though we can't help but worry that bird drones could also be used for surveillance, giving a sinister new meaning to the phrase “a bird's-eye view.”

## MONTANA

A freight train full of Coors Light and Blue Moon beer derailed just outside the aptly named town of Paradise, directly across from Quinn's Hot Springs Resort — and 25 rail cars carrying multiple cases of brew tumbled into the Clark Fork River. Talk about “bottoms up!” *Hungry Horse News* reported that the incident “brought back memories” of a similar calamity some 20 years ago, when Montana Rail Link jumped the track between Paradise and Plains; aside from liquid asphalt and corn syrup, the train was also carrying about

8,000 12-packs of Coors. Though the more recent derailment also involved a tank car carrying butane, a type of liquefied petroleum gas, no serious damage was done. Obviously, Bacchus and the other Beer Gods are smiling on Montana.

## IDAHO

Back in January, coyotes on the Schweitzer Mountain Ski Resort started “exhibiting highly unusual behavior” on the slopes, even chasing after skiers, according to *USA Today*. One woman was bitten, prompting Idaho Department of Fish and Game to warn the public that “patrons should be on guard and contact the agency if they spot coyotes,” even if the coyotes claim to have

legitimate ski passes. The usually shy nocturnal canines have even been seen prowling downtown Sandpoint in broad daylight, which the Department of Fish and Game said is “extremely rare activity.” Asked for comment about what was up with the coyotes, a Road Runner spokesbird simply shrugged and said, “Beep-beep.”

## WASHINGTON

The *Walla Walla*, part of the Washington State Ferries fleet, experienced technical difficulties during its regular Saturday night route to Seattle from Bremerton. Fortunately, none of the 596 passengers got hurt and everyone was safely offloaded, along with, eventually, their cars. *Seattle Met*

writer Haley Shapley and her cat, Kai, who were also aboard, published a timeline of events. “4:20 to 4:22 p.m.: ... lights on the ferry flicker. There's an ominous feeling in the air ... A message crackles over the loudspeaker: ‘We've lost steering and propulsion. Brace for impact.’

“4:36 p.m.: We run aground.

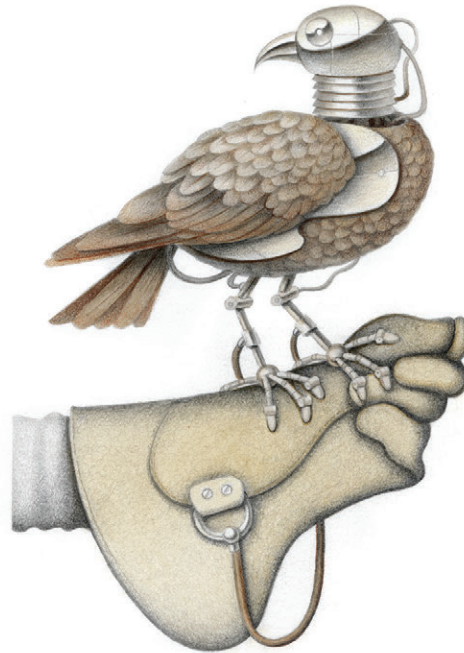
“4:37 p.m.: I text: ‘Okay we're okay. We crashed into the shore, but it was very soft.’”

Shapley described the fiasco with good humor. Life jackets were retrieved and donned: “kids are crying, babies are screaming, and one guy is 100 percent sure he's still making it to the Mariners game tonight. ... There's a sea of orange and confusion.

“5:10 p.m.: We're asked to raise our hands and not lower them until we've been counted. There are almost 600 of us. My arm falls asleep three times before I'm counted.” Not everyone cooperated, though: Kai — adhering to the Cat Code of Conduct — refused to raise his paw.

## WASHINGTON

Good news: Tokitae, also known as Lolita, the oldest killer whale in captivity, will return to her Salish Sea home waters after being held in Miami's Seaquarium since the early 1970s, when she was taken from her pod. KIRO7 contacted the Lummi Nation for a statement: Tokitae “has a strong relationship with our homeland and all the natural resources therein. We are happy to hear that our relative, Sk'aliCh'elh'tenaut (Tokitae), will have the opportunity to return home. She represents the story of all Native peoples that have experienced genocide and the bad policies that have been put in place to ‘kill the Indian and save the man.’ But more importantly, she represents our resilience and strength and our need for healing.” ✨



# Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write [heard@hcn.org](mailto:heard@hcn.org).

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY ARMANDO VEVE



# VICTORY FOR CASCADE-SISKIYOU NATIONAL MONUMENT

WELC and our partners recently won a huge victory for Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in Oregon and California. Rich in flora and wildlife, Cascade-Siskiyou is the only national monument established specifically to protect biodiversity.

More than 100 scientists, local, state, and federal leaders urged the Obama administration to grow the monument to better achieve its conservation goals.

President Obama heeded that advice by expanding the monument's borders in January 2017. With designs on logging in the expansion area, timber interests sued to reverse these needed protections.

WELC and our partners successfully defended Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument and its ecological treasures from this threat, which had loomed over this special area for decades.

Now, the expanded Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument is stronger than ever.

We are a nonprofit organization that uses the power of the law to safeguard the public lands, wildlife, and communities of the western U.S. in the face of a changing climate.

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# #IAM THE WEST

**PAUL KIMPLING**

**Community organizer, farmer,  
U.S. Forest Service employee  
Paonia, Colorado**

Last year, to celebrate Pride, we hung flags; this year, we're creating an interactive work of art made from recycled materials, including 4,000 aluminum cans. The rainbow trout is an important species to the North Fork Valley. It has "rainbow" in its name, of course, and it's beautiful. It's fun to play off that. Collaborating on a piece like this is exciting because it brings so many different people together. Every Saturday, cutting cans and building the fish is creating a community within the valley that wasn't here before. It's about supporting the queer community, uplifting people and bringing magic here. It's a different thing, being queer in the West — and in a small town — versus being queer in any large city. We're not always safe. There's so much weight to the things that we've done here. I'm excited to see this 40-foot rainbow trout puppet swim throughout the West.

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