High Country News

COLORADO WOLVES ON THE MOVE

THE IMPACTS OF LANDBACK

FINDING GIANT KANGAROO RATS

THE RECORDING ARTISTS

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High Country News

California's semi-arid Carrizo Plain has become a refuge for endangered wildlife, including the giant kangaroo rat. (*See story on page 14.*) **Chuck Graham**

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. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are $45 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.

Called to respond

AS A YOUNGER PERSON, I WAS AN ANSEL ADAMS SUPERFAN. For most of a decade, I used the annual spiral-bound Ansel Adams engagement calendars to keep track of meetings and activities. I'd pore over the beautifully reproduced images from my desk in New York City and pine for the faraway landscapes pictured therein — many of them in California, my home state.

I was reminded of this while attending the opening of "Beyond the Wilderness" at Westmont College's Ridley-Tree Museum in Santa Barbara. The exhibit focused primarily on photographs Adams took in Los Angeles on assignment for *Fortune* magazine during the lead-up to World War II. This is not a body of work that Adams is known for, nor one he favored. The image from the series he reportedly liked best framed a cemetery statue of an angelic figure against a forest of oil derricks. Judging by the images shown at Westmont, Adams seemed drawn to those derricks. In another photo, one looms large next to an amusement park called Children's Paradise.

Not included in the exhibition, though mentioned several times, was the work Adams produced at Manzanar, where more than 10,000 American citizens of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated during the war. Adams volunteered to document their lives and was granted access to the camp. The result is a stunning body of work that I only recently discovered. Published in a book titled *Born Free and Equal* and featured in an exhibit of the same name, the photographs were not well received at the time. Nevertheless, Adams believed them to be among his most important work, highlighting the dignity and ingenuity of the imprisoned, who were, in his words, "suffering under a great injustice."

During one of his trips to Manzanar, Adams took one of his most famous nature photos, *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada*, an iconic view of Mount Whitney and the surrounding peaks. The incarcerated Japanese Americans were living just miles away, in the shadow of razor wire and those same stunning peaks. Pondering that proximity is reminiscent of the kind of whiplash we experience today as the U.S. government harasses, bludgeons and imprisons our fellow citizens and we desperately look to nature to find solace and feel human again.

It is not wrong to seek solace in nature. But we cannot turn a blind eye to injustice, however far away it occurs. We have to figure out how to keep both things in view: the angels and the oil derricks. To get up each morning and meditate for a moment on beauty before diving into whatever fresh horrors the news of the day brings. The threats and the cruelty are unlikely to cease. Like Ansel Adams at Manzanar, we are called to bear witness, and to respond.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

Barron Bixler

Digging out in the Palisades Fire burn zone
Portraits of the workers shoring up a broken world.
By Barron Bixler

Ash Adams for *Bolts Magazine*

These Americans were prosecuted for voting
In a corner of Alaska, American Samoans are facing prosecution for participating in democracy in the only country they've ever known.
By Alex Burness

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FEATURES

REPORTAGE

BOOKS, CULTURE & COMMENTARY

OTHER MATTER

ON THE COVER

Images from the Albina Community Archive (*See story on page 20.*) **Collage by Dakarai Akil / High Country News; Source materials courtesy of Albina Music Trust; Map from Portland City Archives, M/4176**

Studio portrait of the Wapato Smithins Family, c. 1903-1913, by Frank Matsura. (*See story on page 45.*) **Okanogan County Historical Society**

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

DEEP DIVE INTO DEEP TIME

The "Deep Time in the West" special issue (January 2026) was an absolute winner! The variation of stories, the unusual story formats and the dedicated topic for the entire issue made it a real page-turner. This globe has a deep history to its core. The issue illustrated the volume of history in the globe's development with graphics and pictures that caused the reading to be engaging and digestible.

Ann Brach
Glade Park, Colorado

As a longtime subscriber to *High Country News*, I always enjoy seeing a new issue in my mailbox. As good as all the issues are, January 2026 was one of the best. In a time of impermanence in our national values and principles, it's refreshing to read such good articles about things — rocks, in particular — that will certainly outlast all the chaotic times we are living in. Awe is a popular topic lately, and having the perspective that humanity is just a "blip" in geologic time — that we are "small" compared to the planet but still connected to all of it — is empowering. One of the unique characteristics of the West is how visible the things that make up our planet are, largely thanks to the drier climate we have that exposes more of it than you can see in more vegetated regions.

Jerry Kilts
Billings, Montana

ALL THINGS MUST PASS …

Having visited the Snowy Range in the Medicine Bow Mountains of Wyoming and experienced the amazing geology of the area, I particularly enjoyed the article "10 Wyomings" (January 2026) by Marcia Bjornerud. It is reassuring to be reminded that our planet is incredibly old and resilient, and thus to realize that the current period is but a transient in the much larger scheme of things.

Dennis Wentz
Fort Collins, Colorado

NEVERTHELESS, SHE PERSISTED

I deeply enjoyed reading the story of Tanya Atwater and plate tectonics ("Continental shift," January 2026). The science of seafloor spreading and its relationship to geology is fascinating. But Tanya's personal story really gripped me.

I was born 16 years after she was, and thanks to people like her, I faced no serious obstacles getting a Ph.D. at Stanford.

Hats off to Tanya for her persistence, and for letting her love of her field and her growing expertise in it triumph over the jaw-dropping prejudice she encountered all along her trailblazing path through academia. Thanks for telling her riveting life story.

Ruth van Baak Griffioen
Beulah, Michigan

FAMILY MATTERS

Nina McConigley's article, "Weathering time," (January 2026) brought tears to my eyes. She was so fortunate to have parents who gave her gifts that truly resonated with her.

As parents, it's often easy to forget in the quotidian raising of a family that we stand as models to our children. While we may have the lofty goal of providing the best education we can for our children, I think that it can be the ordinary acts of everyday life that are more likely to remain with them throughout their lives.

I thank Ms. McConigley for reminding us that this is what is often most important.

Victor Gold
Berkeley, California

OUT WITH OUTDATED HISTORY

I teach Native American history and related subjects at Purdue University and challenge the author's suggestion that the Clovis-only, 12,000-year Bering theory holds a prime place anymore ("Our place in history," January 2026). Things have changed, though not enough yet. I teach about the peopling of the Americas and present both archaeological and Indigenous explanations. I also teach students about different Native origin stories and how science and culture can live together. The article on time immemorial is good and offers interesting insights, but from the front of a university classroom, it's a bit out of touch with what historians and archaeologists are teaching and researching these days.

Dawn Marsh
Lafayette, Indiana

BACK TO THE LAND

Thanks for the recent detailed articles about public-lands grazing ("Free Range," December 2025). It reminded me why I subscribed to *HCN* 30 years ago and is probably where I learned about this topic in the first place. Too bad not much has changed for the better. In recent years, I find myself skipping over more of your content. Stories like this remind me you can still grab my attention and what "the paper for people who care about the West" means to me. It's about the land. Please continue to embrace your roots.

David Morgan
Leavenworth, Washington

CORRECTIONS

In "Continental Shift" (January 2026), a photo of Tanya Atwater in the interior of a submersible was displayed flipped horizontally. Due to a production error in "10 Wyomings" (January 2026), we mislabeled the ages of two rock formations and the location of one. The Morrison Formation is about 150 million years old; the Tensleep Sandstone is about 310 million years old, from the late Carboniferous Period, and it's exposed in the Bighorn Mountains and Tensleep Canyon. In "Precious Metalheads" (November 2025), we misspelled Einar Selnik's last name. We regret the errors.

A gray wolf in British Columbia, Canada, last January, as Colorado Parks and Wildlife staff work to capture wolves for relocation to Colorado. **Colorado Parks and Wildlife**

REPORTAGE

Colorado wolves are on the move

Almost two years after reintroduction began, at least one wolf has ventured outside the state.

BY KYLIE MOHR

SINCE THEIR REINTRODUCTION to northwest Colorado in late 2023, wolves have roamed across much of the state. Now, at least one has ventured beyond it: In December, a Colorado wolf captured in New Mexico was re-released in north-central Colorado.

Canids don't care about state lines, but wildlife managers do. After Colorado voters approved a ballot measure in November 2020 mandating wolf reintroduction, Arizona and New Mexico's wildlife officials raised concerns about Colorado wolves entering their states and impacting the recovery of Mexican gray wolves, North America's rarest subspecies of gray wolf.

In 2023, wildlife managers from Colorado, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at keeping the Mexican wolf separate from its cousins. The signatories agreed to notify each other if wolves wandered outside their designated population areas — Colorado for gray wolves, south-central Arizona and New Mexico for Mexican wolves — and to capture and return any strays.

This created a theoretical wolf-free zone across northern Arizona and New Mexico. But wolves tend to wander, especially when pups mature and leave to find their own mates and territory.

THE FATE OF WOLVES, more than that of most animals, depends on artificial lines. Yellowstone wolves that step outside park boundaries can be hunted, as can Colorado wolves that enter Wyoming.

Eric Odell, wolf conservation program manager at Colorado Parks and Wildlife, said he's not aware of another multi-state agreement requiring the wolves' return: "It is very unique."

That's owing to Mexican gray wolves' special status. The wolves, which nearly went extinct in the 1970s, were reintroduced to the Southwest in 1998 and are currently confined to an experimental population area in south-central Arizona and New Mexico. Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah don't want Mexican wolves north of Interstate 40, a major east-west highway.

That hasn't kept some wolves from trying, though. A Mexican gray wolf known as Taylor was found between I-40 and the Colorado border this fall, outside the experimental population area. A few weeks after being captured and taken south, he was back on the wrong side of I-40.

With Colorado wolves heading south and the occasional Mexican gray slipping north, wildlife managers, scientists and environmental groups are asking: Would interbreeding help or harm Mexican gray wolves?

Odell predicted that gray wolves would "swamp" the genetics of the smaller Mexican subspecies, eventually erasing the distinction between the two. "It's definitely a concern," Odell said. "It was something we want to protect against happening."

Others argue that it could help Mexican wolves by diversifying their gene pool; Mexican gray wolves face low genetic diversity and show signs of inbreeding, like fused toes. "The bottom line is, we think it would be a good thing," said Bryan Bird, Southwest director of Defenders of Wildlife.

Doug Smith, a wildlife biologist and former leader of the Yellowstone Wolf Project, said the "age-old solution" for low genetic diversity is the arrival of new wolves. "Evolutionarily, ecologically, species didn't have boundaries," he said. "That's just an irrefutable fact. You can't put a line on the exchange of genes."

But interactions occur, despite multi-state agreements. Colorado's adult wolves are collared, but their current pups are not. As the population grows, biologists plan to collar two wolves in every pack. Odell considers this an "imperfect" way to keep track of their movements.

IN THE MEANTIME, Colorado's wolves face more pressing challenges. Ten of the 25 wolves reintroduced so far are dead. While the reasons aren't fully known, at least one was killed by mountain lions, another by a

Colorado Parks and Wildlife staff unload a gray wolf from a helicopter after it was captured in Canada. **Colorado Parks and Wildlife**

vehicle; one was caught in a foothold trap set for coyotes and another illegally shot. Wildlife managers killed two that were repeatedly preying on livestock.

Colorado and British Columbia had previously agreed to relocate 10 to 15 wolves, with the third and final release this winter. Canada translocated 15 wolves in January 2025, but on Oct. 10, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Brian Nesvik sent a letter to Jeff Davis, then-director of Colorado Parks and Wildlife, declaring that wolves now had to come from Northern Rocky Mountain states, which have denied Colorado's requests in the past. Nesvik alleged that importing Canadian wolves would violate federal guidelines for experimental populations of listed species.

"It's frustrating to the effort of trying to restore wolves," said Odell, though the search for another source continues. Yellowstone's Smith said that more wolves will give Colorado more flexibility to manage problematic individuals. "To stop them midway through recovery hurts more than it helps," Smith said.

Still, Odell argued that Colorado's recovery effort has been successful, with 20 collared wolves and at least 10 pups alive as of December. The effort has followed all appropriate rules and regulations. "I think it gets characterized as a failure in a lot of ways, but it's not." But Odell acknowledges that the recovery effort is in a "tenuous position right now," he said. "If we don't get another batch of reintroductions this year, is it a failure? I hope not."

Kylie Mohr is a correspondent for High Country News *writing from Montana.*

REPORTAGE

Are Mexican wolves ready for delisting?

Despite nine years of growth, the subspecies is still struggling.

BY APRIL REESE

2025 WAS AN EVENTFUL YEAR for Mexican wolves. The imperiled predators — a subspecies of gray wolf reintroduced to the Southwest in 1998 — appeared to be bounding toward recovery: According to the latest census, released last March, a minimum of 286 wolves roam Arizona and New Mexico, marking a nine-year growth streak. In response, Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., introduced a bill last summer to remove them from the list of federally endangered species.

But delisting the animals would be premature, say wolf advocates and some Indigenous land managers. The wild population still hasn't yet reached the threshold of 320 wolves averaged over eight years, the benchmark for delisting set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, nor have the agency's other criteria been met.

Removing federal protection could reverse decades of progress, said Bryan Bird, Southwest director for Defenders of Wildlife. In New Mexico, where they're also listed as endangered by the state, wolves would still be protected from hunting, but Arizona lacks such state-level protections.

"I think we're on the cusp of a real American wildlife success story," Bird said. "It would be extraordinarily unfortunate if the legislative branch was to step in now, when we really are making progress and this could be another bald eagle or American alligator."

Clark Tenakhongva, a Hopi rancher and artist who is a former vice-chairman of the Hopi Nation and former co-chairman of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, said that for the Hopi, delisting Mexican wolves would have cultural as well as ecological impacts. "The animals were here before humans, so we're encroaching onto their territory and their ancestral rights to roam the land," he said.

Successful legislative attempts to force delisting are few, and history suggests the bill's chances are slim. Gosar's attempt to pass a similar bill in 2015 failed. But with Republicans ruling Congress alongside an administration willing to break long-established norms, Gosar and other delisting proponents may see an opportunity to unravel the subspecies' federal safety net.

WHEN FISH AND WILDLIFE first released Mexican wolves into the ponderosa pine forests of eastern Arizona in the 1990s, even federal wildlife managers doubted that the

reintroduction would succeed. To preserve genetic diversity, managers needed to keep as many wolves alive as possible. But wolves that become habituated to preying on livestock are often removed or killed to appease livestock producers.

Despite these constraints, the population has grown over the last three decades. The Department of Agriculture created a compensation program for ranchers who lost livestock, and Fish and Wildlife began providing states and tribes with funding for deterrence methods designed to keep wolves away from rangelands. Meanwhile, adult captive-bred wolves were released to boost the wild population's diversity, and in 2016, managers began placing captive-born pups in dens to be raised by "adoptive" families, though only 21 of the 99 pups released through 2023 survived two years, long enough to reach breeding age.

If Gosar's bill succeeds, the costs of these efforts would fall more heavily on the states. The Fish and Wildlife Service, the Arizona Department of Game and Fish and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish declined to comment directly on Gosar's proposal, but recent statements from the agencies reflect newfound optimism about the animal's future. After nine years of growth, "we are knocking on the door of recovery," said Arizona Game and Fish Assistant Director Clay Crowder in a press release last March.

EVEN AS WOLF NUMBERS have risen, confirmed livestock depredations have fallen in four of the last six years. But some ranchers worry that as the U.S. population expands into new territory, livestock losses could multiply. New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association President Tom Paterson said he supports Gosar's delisting bill but wants the federal compensation program to not only continue but expand. With the right management, he added, "we can have sustainable recovery. I can do my business. We can have wolves out on the landscape."

For Sisto Hernandez, a former rangeland management specialist for the White Mountain Apache Tribe and currently Southwest resource coordinator for the Western Landowners Alliance, whether or not Mexican wolves are delisted is not the most important question. What ranchers really need, he said, "is to have the resources and technical assistance necessary to help us continue to steward the land that we operate on. Because we're not just taking care of livestock, we're also stewarding the land for all the wildlife species that we share the land with."

April Reese is a science and environment journalist and former HCN *staffer. Now based in Portugal, she lived in New Mexico for 17 years.*

These stories about wolf recovery in New Mexico and Colorado are part of our Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.

WEB EXTRA Read extended versions of these stories at **hcn.org/wolves**

Six Mexican wolf pups born in the wild and two pups born in captivity are examined before they were all put in a wild pack's den in 2022 in Gila National Forest, New Mexico. **Matt McClain / The Washington Post via Getty Images**

Advances in LandBack

More ancestral lands are being returned to tribes, while other important sites remain at risk.

BY CHAD BRADLEY & ANNA V. SMITH

THE COLD, CRYSTALLINE waters of Blue Creek — a refuge for salmon and a place of cultural importance to the Yurok Tribe — cut through bedrock and over tumbled-smooth gray stones until they empty into the Klamath River in Northern California. Last summer, 14,000 acres encompassing the Blue Creek watershed were returned to the tribe. This transfer concluded the last phase of the largest tribal land return in California history, amounting to 47,100 acres of land previously used by timber companies. Twenty-three years in the making, it was achieved in partnership with Western Rivers Conservancy, which bought the land in phases and turned it over to the Yurok Tribe. The return more than doubles current landholdings for the tribe, which was dispossessed of more than 90% of its ancestral lands by colonizers.

"The impact of this project is enormous," said Yurok Tribal Chairman Joseph L. James. "We are forging a sustainable future for the fish, forests and our people that honors both ecological integrity and our cultural heritage."

The Blue Creek land return was one of multiple recent returns in the Western U.S. as tribal nations work to regain their ancestral lands. The dramatic political shifts at the federal level over the past year have highlighted the importance of state action in achieving the LandBack movement's goals. In California, for example, the state played a major role in providing funding for the roughly 32,000 acres of land returned to four tribal nations around the state in the last year, including Blue Creek.

"Restoring tribal lands is an acknowledgment of a harmful history of dispossession, a demonstration of accountability, and a commitment to a better future," California Gov. Gavin Newsom said in a statement to *High Country News*. "We will not forget our dark past, but we can write a brighter future by healing deep wounds and rebuilding trust across California."

The state's support for land return stems from Newsom's acknowledgement and apology in 2019 for the historic wrongs done to tribal nations, as well as California's efforts to meet its climate goals and protect 30% of its land for conservation by 2030.

California has helped fund other land returns, including nearly 900 acres bordering Yosemite National Park that were returned to the Southern Sierra Miwuk Tribe in December. In October, the Tule River Indian Tribe reclaimed 17,030 acres in the Central Valley, where the tribe is also working with the state to reintroduce tule elk.

And in November, the state approved financial support that would assist the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California in reacquiring 10,274 acres of former ranchland in the Northern Sierra Nevada. "Wá·šiw people were once forcefully removed from these lands," said Tribal Chairman Serrell Smokey. "Now the land is calling the Washoe people home, and we are answering that call."

Land returns also happened elsewhere in the West. In North Dakota, the Spirit Lake Nation welcomed the return of 680 acres located in the White Horse Hill National Game Preserve. Since the 1950s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had used the property for hay production to support buffalo populations at White Horse Hill, though not during the past decade. The returned land, which lies within the reservation's original boundaries, is home to native plants the tribe will work to preserve while also exploring the property's potential for economic development.

The NANA Regional Corporation, an Alaska Native corporation comprising 11 villages in Northwest Alaska, received nearly 28,000 acres from the Department of the Interior. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum said this will help further resource development in Alaska, though the land transfer actually began with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. Since then, over 700,000 acres have been returned to Alaska Natives. President Donald Trump also signed the Alaska Native Village Municipal Lands Restoration Act, which removes a requirement that some land be held in trust by the state government for a future village corporation. There have been no new village corporations in decades, however, and previously unused land can now be used by existing village corporations.

LandBack is about more than returning land; it's also about preserving places that have major historical, cultural and spiritual significance to communities. In the Southwest, some tribes and climate advocates are continuing to work to protect important areas from extraction, despite the Trump administration's determination to ramp up domestic energy and resource development.

Oak Flat, an area sacred to the San Carlos Apache Tribe of southern Arizona, remains under threat by a large-scale copper-mining effort. Newly elected Rep. Adelita Grijalva introduced the Save Oak Flat from Foreign Mining Act as her first piece of legislation. The proposed bill, which was first introduced by her late father, Raúl Grijalva, would repeal a land swap sought by foreign mining corporations that want to extract copper and other materials from the area. Earlier this year, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a case from the nonprofit advocacy group Apache Stronghold arguing that the land transfer violated Indigenous religious rights and treaty obligations.

Meanwhile, New Mexico Pueblo tribal leaders continue to work to preserve Chaco Canyon from further gas and oil development. The Biden administration enacted a 10-mile buffer zone around Chaco Culture National Historical Park where development was prohibited. But the Navajo Nation sued the federal government earlier this year, saying that the Biden administration failed to properly consult with the tribe and that the buffer zone should be revoked because it negatively impacted local residents who rely on oil and gas royalties from the area. New Mexico federal legislators — urging Burgum to conduct proper

tribal consultation and community outreach — reintroduced legislation to make the buffer zone permanent, but the federal government is now considering a full revocation.

Chad Bradley is an award-winning multimedia journalist and former High Country News *Indigenous Affairs fellow. They're a member of the Navajo Nation and report from the Southwest.*

Anna V. Smith is an associate editor of High Country News. *She writes and edits stories on tribal sovereignty and environmental justice for the Indigenous Affairs desk from Oregon.*

A river expedition at the confluence of Blue Creek and the Klamath River in Northern California in 2019. Last year, 14,000 acres encompassing the Blue Creek watershed were returned to the Yurok Tribe. **Paul Robert Wolf Wilson**

FACTS & FIGURES

As the planet heats, insurance premiums rise

Charting the extreme weather-driven insurance crisis.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON
ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPH LITTLEBIRD

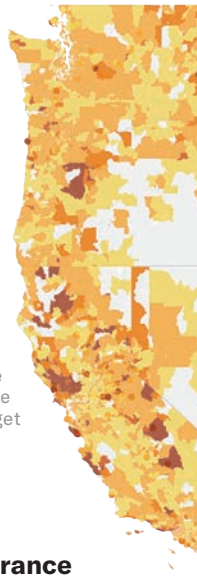
LAST NOVEMBER, two Washington residents filed a lawsuit accusing petroleum corporations of misleading the public for decades about fossil fuels' effect on climate change and how global warming is harming the planet and its inhabitants. Their lawsuit marks the latest addition to the growing number targeting Big Oil.

The case, however, was novel, given the plaintiffs' damage claims: That increased carbon emissions from fossil fuel burning have intensified extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, wildfires, floods and heat waves, and thereby led to rising insurance premiums and "precipitated a homeowners' insurance crisis."

The number of climate-related disasters has surged in recent years and caused billions of dollars' worth of damage, undeniably triggering a spike in insurance. This has eaten into insurance companies' profits, prompting them to raise their premiums at a much higher rate than inflation — especially in disaster-prone areas. Many insurers are simply abandoning homeowners in areas with a high wildfire risk by canceling or refusing to renew their policies.

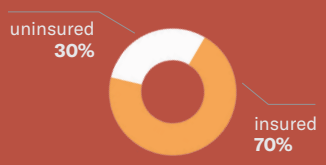
This has effectively increased housing costs in places that were already facing an affordability crunch, hitting lower-income families the hardest. And the housing market could be further hampered as insurance becomes prohibitively expensive or impossible to obtain. On the other hand, however, higher premiums in higher-risk areas could discourage building in, say, the wildland-urban interface.

It will be up to the courts to decide whether to hold Big Oil accountable, but the data makes it clear that as the planet heats up, so do insurance costs. "One thing is certain: Unless the United States and the world rapidly transition to clean energy, climate-related extreme weather events will become both more frequent and more violent, resulting in ever-scarcer insurance and ever-higher premiums," according to a 2024 Senate Budget Committee report. "Climate change is no longer just an environmental problem. It is a looming economic threat."

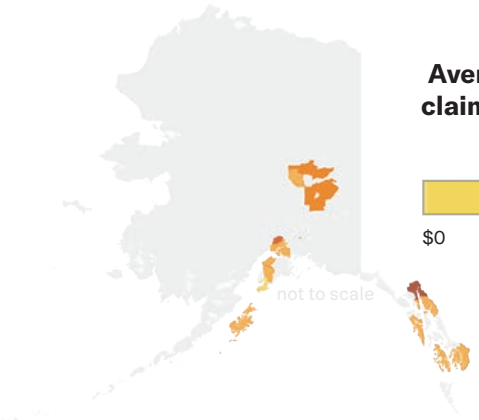


SOURCES: Policygenius, Climate Power, First Street, U.S. Department of the Treasury's Federal Insurance Office, Equitable & Just Insurance Initiative, U.S. Senate Budget Committee, Insurify, ZestyAI.

$114 billion; $80 billion
Amount of damage caused by climate-related disasters between 2018 and 2022 and the portion of that damage that was insured. Early last year, a Treasury Department analysis of climate change's effects on the homeowners insurance market found that the number of disaster declarations for climate-related incidents during that five-year period was double the national 50-year average.



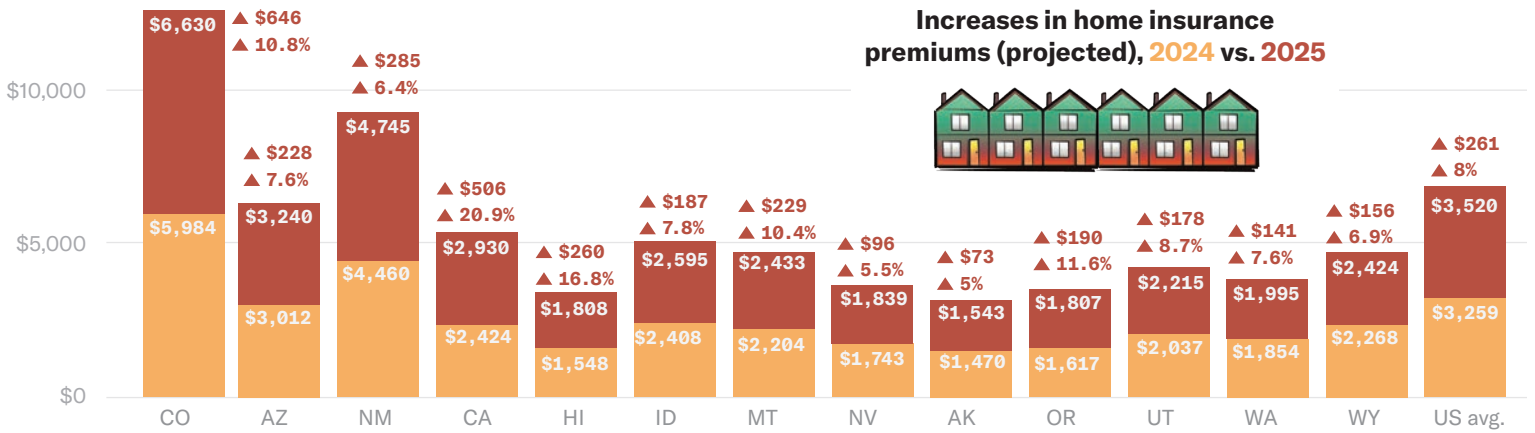
8.7%
Amount by which average homeowners insurance premiums rose faster than inflation nationwide during the 2018-2022 period. Residents of disaster-prone areas saw much larger increases — assuming they still had insurance.



Average home insurance claim amount by zip code, 2018-2022

$0 — $500,000 - $4,076,826

Increases in home insurance premiums (projected), 2024 vs. 2025



16,251; 2,046
Number of homes destroyed and damaged respectively by the Los Angeles-area Eaton and Palisades fires in January 2025.

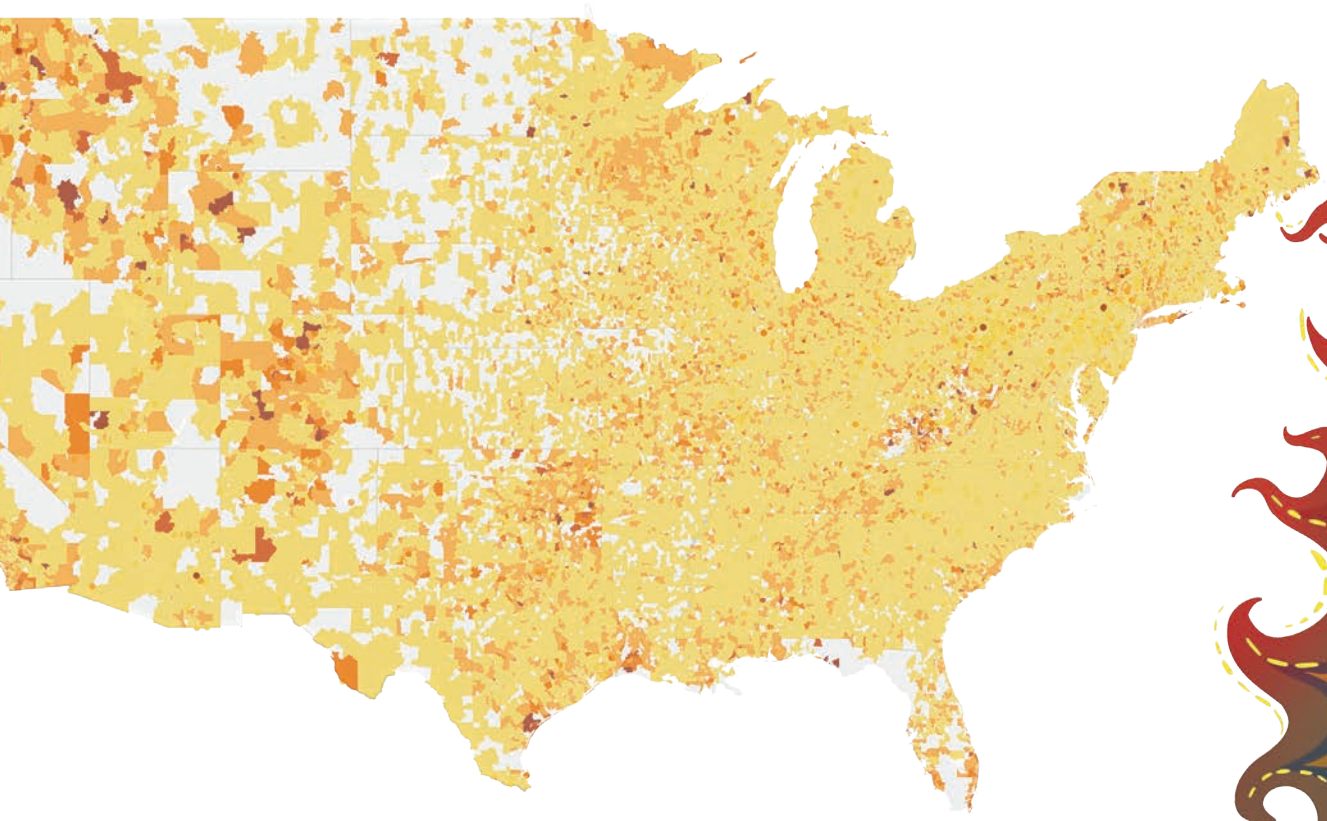
72,000
Number of homeowners, rental dwelling, commercial apartment and other property insurance policies canceled by State Farm in California due to "catastrophe exposure" in 2024. Carriers have canceled a total of nearly 400,000 policies in the state since 2021.

$40 billion
Estimated insured losses from the Eaton and Palisades fires — four times the cost of the 2018 Butte Camp Fire, which caused $10 billion in insured losses.

13,500; $5 billion
Number and value of claims State Farm reported paying out related to the Eaton and Palisades fires, prompting it to ask state insurance regulators for an emergency 22% rate hike.

States with highest exposures to wildfires

At-risk properties
Median home value
Total exposure



Wyoming
31,177
$335,000
$10.4 billion

Oklahoma
102,877
$200,000
$21 billion

Florida
170,764
$400,000
$68 billion

Washington
151,231
$592,000
$89 billion

Montana
99,572
$485,000
$48 billion

Arizona
225,918
$432,000
$98 billion

Utah
182,426
$615,000
$112 billion

Texas
344,454
$297,000
$102 billion

Colorado
317,425
$621,000
$197 billion

California
1,544,015
$785,000
$1.21 trillion

$1.25 trillion | $1 billion | $750 billion | $500 billion | $250 billion | $0 | Total exposure

$36 billion; $220 million

Combined profits and CEO compensation respectively for 22 publicly traded insurance companies in 2024.

REPORTAGE

Where giant kangaroo rats thrive

On California's hidden plain, endangered wildlife is making a comeback.

BY SHI EN KIM

IT WAS A RACE against nightfall. As he hurried across the sandy, bristling landscape of California's Carrizo Plain, ecologist Ian Axsom stopped every 10 yards to place an aluminum live trap on the ground, eventually distributing traps over an area the size of two baseball fields. Against the rolling playas and tawny mountains, the traps glinted with golden remnants of the September dusk.

Axsom had no time to admire the view. Then again, as a land steward at the Sequoia Riverlands Trust, he'd already seen plenty of striking skies. "If you spend enough time out here, you will inevitably end up trying to take pictures of amazing sunsets on your phone, and it never quite captures it the way the colors look," he said.

Three of his teammates trailed behind him, pausing at each trap to insert a fistful of bird seed mix and set its trigger. Finally, the traps were ready for their target: the nocturnal giant kangaroo rat, *Dipodomys ingens*, a keystone species of the Carrizo Plain.

The trapping was part of the trust's ongoing effort to monitor kangaroo rats on the Carrizo Plain, located at the southwesternmost edge of the San Joaquin Valley, which stretches 250 miles from Stockton southeast to Bakersfield. The valley is a geographical palimpsest marked by urbanization, drilling and, most of all, agriculture. But the Carrizo Plain is still relatively undeveloped — a time capsule, a remnant of the ecosystem that predated European settlement.

Regular surveys of the giant kangaroo rat — named for its two-legged hopping gait — indicate how the species and its habitat are faring. In particular, they provide a baseline for measuring the effects of the plain's development, which now includes two solar farms.

By the time Axsom's team set up the last trap, the sun had set behind the mountains, and the group used cellphone flashlights to return to their vehicles. The day's scorching temperatures had fallen, a prelude to the night's chill. It was time to drive away and wait.

THE CARRIZO PLAIN is one of Central California's best-kept secrets. The semi-arid grassland lies more than 1500 feet above the San Joaquin Valley floor, sandwiched between the Caliente Range to the southwest and the Temblor Range to the northeast. It's best known for the weeks-long spectacular superblooms that occur when droughts are followed by unusually heavy rainfall. But most of the time, the Carrizo sees little human presence. As one frequent visitor noted in his blog, "In all the trips I've taken to the Carrizo, I still have seen far more pronghorn than I have other people."

Axsom, who grew up in San Luis Obispo, less than two hours' drive away, said he didn't even know about the plain until he was an adult.

The Carrizo Plain's scarce precipitation has long limited human activities. The Chumash, Yokuts and other Indigenous peoples lived on and around the plain for millennia and still have cultural ties to the landscape. In the 1800s, after European colonists had decimated California's Indigenous population through introduced disease and forced labor, settlers on the plain began to practice dryland grain farming and livestock grazing. California's state and federal irrigation projects, built in the 19th and 20th centuries, never made it here, so the plain largely avoided intensive agricultural development. Mid-20th-century plans to build more than 7,000 homes never took off, though the area saw a boom in marijuana cultivation and the construction of two solar farms in the 2010s. Today, the few thousand people who live in the area still rely on wells and bottled water.

Since humans have largely stayed away, the plain — especially its southern portion — has become a refuge for native species. It is currently home to one of the highest concentrations of vulnerable species in the state, including more than 36 rare and endangered plants. Blunt-nosed leopard lizards and San Joaquin antelope squirrels emerge from their burrows during the day, and San Joaquin kit foxes and American badgers awaken at night. In winter, migratory birds take refuge at the ephemeral Soda Lake at the north end of Carrizo Plain National Monument, where fairy and brine shrimp provide a vital food source. Tule elk graze on the plain year-round.

The Carrizo Plain and the surrounding San Joaquin Desert "is not the prettiest place on Earth," acknowledged Tim Bean, an ecologist at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. "But the thing that makes it really special is the animals that live here that are found nowhere else."

Undergirding the ecosystem are the giant kangaroo rats, whose burrows blanket the landscape. To better spot approaching predators, they industriously clip the grass

Mostly nocturnal, giant kangaroo rats are a keystone species of the Carrizo Plain *(left)*. **Chuck Graham**

Puffy cumulonimbus clouds drift above the Carrizo Plain, the last large remnant of California's semi-arid grasslands *(below)*. **Chuck Graham**

around their burrows, creating bare "crop circles" that are visible from outer space. Studies have shown that this "gardening" increases plant biodiversity, keeps invasive grasses at bay, and helps other animals move more easily through the grassland.

"When you step back and look at what makes the San Joaquin Desert function, giant kangaroo rats just keep coming up over and over," Bean said. Plus, they're cute: "Our state mascot should be the kangaroo rat."

THE METAL TRAP thrummed with barely contained energy. It was around midnight, and by the light of her headlamp, one of the volunteers, a wildlife biologist named Courtney Tuskan, tipped the trap's occupant into a cloth sack. As Tuskan reached in to fish out the squirming rodent, her colleague, Sequoia Riverlands Trust biologist Lindsay Peria, reminded her to weigh the bag first so that the rat's heft could be calculated later. "Man, I forget everything when I'm with an animal," Tuskan replied.

The captive was a feisty young male slightly bigger than a clenched fist. Its oversized, neckless noggin gave it a hunched posture, and its tufted tail whipped about saucily. The rat's brindle fur was silky and warm, and its cheek pouches were so stuffed with seed bait that it seemed to be grinning.

Working as quickly as she could, Tuskan measured the rat's head size and foot length, then marked her subject on the belly with a Sharpie to avoid measuring it twice over the next few nights. Upon release, the indignant captive calmed, and its first lazy hop brought it smack into the tip of Axsom's boot. He couldn't resist stroking the rat with a finger before it retreated into the shadows.

Today, giant kangaroo rats occupy less than 5% of their historic range, which spanned the length of the San Joaquin Valley. After the California State Water Project accelerated agricultural expansion in the 1960s, the species' numbers plummeted. In the 1980s, the giant kangaroo rat was listed as a state and federally endangered species. And two decades later, in 2001, the animal's protected status helped spur the establishment of the national monument on the southern part of the plain.

Environmental groups raced to translocate some of the species' remaining populations to its former habitats. One such recolonization effort occurred on the Carrizo Plain in 1989. Over the years that followed, environmental groups also restored habitats degraded by trash and rodenticide use, especially on abandoned marijuana farms. Landowners and land

"In all the trips I've taken to the Carrizo, I have seen far more pronghorn than I have other people."

Sequoia Riverlands Trust conservation biologist Camdilla Wirth (left) PIT tags a giant kangaroo rat during a nighttime survey on the Carrizo Plain. **Courtesy of Camdilla Wirth / Sequoia Riverlands Trust**

managers grazed cattle in an effort to create more habitat for imperiled species. Around 2010, after two energy companies proposed building solar farms on the monument's doorstep, the federal government required them to fund habitat mitigation efforts and monitor their ecological impact through regular wildlife surveys.

On the Carrizo Plain, the number of giant kangaroo rats has rebounded from an estimated few thousand in the 1990s to millions today — a healthy population now protected by the national monument. "The monument is working and doing its job," Bean said.

The Carrizo Plain is isolated in a sea of development. But that may change: The San Andreas Corridor initiative, led by The Nature Conservancy, would connect the Carrizo with other conservation lands to create a 600,000-acre passage for wildlife. A loose coalition of environmental groups, including The Nature Conservancy and Sequoia Riverlands Trust, has been acquiring parcels of private land from willing sellers and working with ranchers and other landowners to establish conservation easements, binding agreements that protect habitat by limiting development on private land.

It was past 1 a.m. when Axsom's group finished checking the traps, and they gathered in a circle of headlamps to tally the numbers. They had caught eight, fewer than Axsom had predicted. But he wasn't too worried. All around them were signs of giant kangaroo rat activity: black droppings, grass clippings next to burrow entrances, piles of seed heads picked clean, and the chalky poop of the San Joaquin kit foxes that prey on the species. The entire landscape was a checkerboard of hole-dotted burrow mounds among dried clumps of fiddlenecks and invasive red brome.

Coyotes caroled in the distance, and the screeches of a pallid bat shattered the peace of the night. Under the riot of stars, the group headed home, eager for sleep.

Shi En Kim is a former fellow at HCN *and a current environmental fellow at the* Arizona Republic.

This story is part of High Country News' *Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.*

POEM

Cote

By Vanessa Stauffer

Before the hunt, a photograph.
Ballcap crooked on the brow—
green field with yellow deer in crest—
and clenched between elbow and rib

the rifle's stock. I am eight
in my brother's hand-me-downs,
hair still blond and babyish.
It slips from every rubber band.

I walk the fencerow with the men,
blaze-orange vest draped like a gown.
I am too young to have the gun
in season when we are afield

and watch the dog in her own orange
tack through stalks cut at the shins.
Between the rows, scattered gold
kernels gleam hard as teeth.

On the ground, they're hard to see
picking through the combine's waste
until they scatter like the shot
fanned out in its sudden spray.

Two or three contract like hearts
and sink like stones in downy heaps
the dog knows it must softly grasp
and drop unpunctured at our feet

except they are already sieved:
little nodes the tongue will find
and drop bright against the plate.
Lead or steel, zinc or tin—

the string of pearls the wounds can make.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Vanessa Stauffer read her poem at **hcn.org/cote**

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Thank-yous and farewells

We want to thank everyone who pitched in to support *High Country News*' year-end fund drive. It was a great success. Your subscriptions and donations comprise three-quarters of *HCN*'s operating revenue, compensating our writers and editors and keeping the lights on in our Paonia, Colorado, office. We're humbled by your generosity and more grateful than we can say.

Like nonprofits and news organizations across the country, however, *HCN* is not immune to the forces at work in the world today. Rising staff costs and a challenging economic climate forced us to say farewell to three employees in late 2025.

Michael Leveton was *HCN*'s community outreach manager. With a background in corporate communications, he helped *HCN* build partnerships with social media "influencers" who put our work in front of audiences that seldom spend much time reading magazines. We miss his sense of humor and are sorry that we never got to see him wrestle: By night, Michael is a luchador in the Lucha Libre tradition.

Carol Newman was a dedicated member of our fundraising team who sent out thousands of thank-you notes that many of you received in the mail over her six-plus years at *HCN*. An accomplished artist whose work can be seen in local galleries, she often shared her latest vibrant mosaics on Zoom calls with fellow staffers.

And we will miss **Jess Kiernan**, who worked on our customer service team, processing checks from readers, renewing subscriptions and handling new and gift subscriptions to support our nonprofit journalism. Jess is a former pastry chef and mother to an adorable toddler, Sunny.

Betty Reid Soskin. **Luther Bailey / NPS**

A WEST-WIDE REPORTING COLLABORATIVE

Working collaboratively is a cornerstone of *HCN*'s journalistic philosophy. Our reporters and editors regularly partner with other publications to share resources and write dynamic stories that empower communities to act on behalf of the Western U.S.

Now, *HCN* is teaming up with the national nonprofit Report for America to create a West-wide corps of environmental reporters who will work in local newsrooms and concentrate on serving rural and Indigenous communities. *High Country News* will serve as the hub, working with partner newsrooms and reporters, providing workshops and other educational opportunities to those who are just starting out and coordinating collaborations between newsrooms.

We're calling it the Western Environmental Reporting Collaborative, or WERC (with apologies to WORC, the storied Western Organization of Resource Councils). It's a way for *HCN* to deepen our roots and build and rebuild a network of reporters focused on communities that are often overlooked by urban and national media outlets.

We'll be announcing our first cohort of partners in the coming months and hope to have collaborators in all 12 Western states by 2028, with additional reporters watchdogging Congress and federal agencies. Everything produced by our WERC reporters will be available for publication by all the newsrooms in the collaborative.

Watch this space for more details. And an extra-hearty thank-you to the supporters who have already pitched in to help get this project off the ground!

REMEMBERING AN INSPIRING AMERICAN

We were saddened to hear of the passing of **Betty Reid Soskin**, who taught about the Black experience during World War II at the Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, California.

At 104, she was the oldest ranger serving at the National Park Service. But she was much more than that, according to **Wayne Hare**, a former park ranger himself who served on *HCN*'s board of directors. Soskin was a "living historian," Wayne wrote in an email newsletter for his Civil Conversations Project.

"Betty was raised in the South by her father and great grandmother who was born into slavery in the 1840s. ... So this one family lived, worked, experienced, and discussed history that ran from the Dred Scott decision — where the Supreme Court decided that slaves had no standing to take part in the court system because they were not citizens, nor even human, through slavery; the Civil War; the Emancipation Proclamation," all the way to "the swearing in of America's first Black president in the shadow of the Lincoln memorial where the cycle all began.

"History is not only informative, but it's just downright interesting," Wayne concludes. "But from a first-person account? Someone who was there? It's amazing."

— Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

THE SOUND OF BLACK HISTORY IN PORTLAND

A COMMUNITY ARCHIVE AMPLIFIES THE CITY'S LONGSTANDING BLACK MUSIC CULTURE

BY JACLYN MOYER

Shades Of Brown performing at Clyde's Prime Rib to celebrate the release of their self-titled album, recorded in the '70s and released on vinyl by AMT in 2024. L-R: Gregg A. Smith, Wilbert Antoine. *Photo by Sam Slater. Courtesy of Albina Music Trust.*

THE SOUND OF BLACK HISTORY IN PORTLAND

WHEN NORMAN SYLVESTER

was 12, long before he garnered the nickname "The Boogie Cat" or shared a stage with B.B. King, he boarded a train in Louisiana and headed west, toward the distant city of Portland, Oregon. He'd lived all his life in the rural South, eating wild muscadine grapes from his family's farm, fishing in the bayou and churning butter at the kitchen table to the tune of his grandmother's gospel singing. When his father, who'd gone to Portland in search of better job opportunities, sent for him, Sylvester felt he was being pulled from paradise.

It was the fall of 1957, and Oregon had a long-standing reputation as a hostile place for Black families like Sylvester's. From 1844 until 1926, Oregon enacted a series of exclusion laws aimed at barring Black people from residing in the territory. The Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850 granted white settlers up to 640 free acres while prohibiting Black people from claiming any land at all. Oregon declined to ratify the 15th Amendment, and, in 1917, the state's Supreme Court sanctioned racial discrimination in public places. By the 1920s, Oregon was home to the largest Ku Klux Klan chapter in the West.

Despite all this, Black people were among the earliest settlers to arrive in Oregon, where they carved out lives and sought equality amid these hostilities — the Portland chapter of the NAACP, formed in 1914, is the oldest operating chapter west of the Mississippi. But the state's anti-Black policies were powerful deterrents: By the time Sylvester arrived, fewer than 1% of Oregon residents were African American, and Portland's Black population was the smallest among major West Coast cities. This was in stark contrast to Sylvester's hometown, and he stepped out of Portland's Union Station into culture shock.

The corner of North Williams Avenue and North Russell Street was once the heart of the Albina community (*top*).

Norman Sylvester and Rated "X" performing in concert in 1969 (*bottom left*).

Portrait of KBTS Community Radio Station staff in 1974 (*bottom right*).

All photos courtesy of Albina Music Trust.

Sylvester would soon start seventh grade at his first integrated school, and he needed a haircut. So the first place he ventured in his new city was a barbershop near the crossing of Williams Avenue and Russell Street in North Portland. When he reached the intersection, he found it bustling. A handsome brick building capped with an onion-shaped cupola stood on one corner, homes and businesses lined the others: a cafe, a drugstore, a produce market. And everywhere he looked, he saw just what he'd seen in Louisiana: "African American people — in charge of businesses, driving nice cars up and down the street, strutting their stuff." Later, he'd compare the scene to Harlem, but that day it only reminded him of the place he'd left behind. Despite the thousands of miles stretching between him and the muscadine grapes twining his grandmother's fence lines, standing on the corner that day he felt at home. Even the air was familiar, laced with the scents of Southern cooking and carrying riffs of gospel and jazz. "The place just embraced me," Sylvester recalled recently. "Everybody was singing the same song, if you know what I mean."

This intersection was the heart of a neighborhood called Albina. In the early 1900s, Black Portlanders, most of whom then worked as railcar attendants, began settling here because of its proximity to Union Station. In the ensuing decades, landlord discrimination and institutionalized policies (including a 1919 Portland Realty Board ruling that declared it unethical to sell a home in a white neighborhood to a non-white buyer) excluded Black people from other parts of the city and further concentrated the community here. By 1940, over half of Portland's Black population — at the time, just under 2,000 people — lived in Albina.

Then, the outbreak of World War II brought more than a hundred thousand newcomers — some 20,000 of them African American — to the city to work its booming shipyards. Among these migrants were Sylvester's parents, aunt and uncle. They lived in a defense housing development called Vanport. Built behind a railroad embankment in the floodplain of the Columbia River, Vanport was the largest wartime housing project in the country. Around a quarter of its over 40,000 residents were African American, making it home to Oregon's largest Black community, by a long shot.


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After the war, workers began leaving Vanport. Sylvester's mother returned to Louisiana, but his uncle found work at a local hospital and the rest of the family decided to stay in the area. Barred from most neighborhoods because of their race, they remained living in Vanport. Which is where they were on Memorial Day in 1948, when the Columbia River, swollen with spring rain and snowmelt, breached the embankment and poured toward the city. Within 40 minutes, Vanport was underwater. At least 15 people died, and more than 18,000 others, a third of them Black, lost their homes.

Sylvester's family, like most African Americans displaced by the flood, found refuge in the only Portland neighborhood where they were welcome: Albina. By the time Sylvester got settled in the city, four out of five Black Portlanders lived in the district. Redlining, lack of public investment and negligent landlords meant that housing here was sometimes overcrowded and dilapidated, but the neighborhood was close-knit and vibrant. Black-owned businesses, churches and gathering places flourished. "Everything you needed in a community was right there," Sylvester told me.

One of those things, he said, was music. And in Albina, during the decades after Sylvester arrived, there was no shortage of this. Gospel choirs sang in churches, while soul bands packed the Cotton Club, then the Pacific Northwest's preeminent soul music destination. Nearly every night, jazz, blues and funk bands could be heard in the neighborhood's many venues, including teen clubs and all-ages spaces. Bands formed in basements, backyards, schoolrooms and churches.

When Sylvester was 13, his father used wages earned working two jobs — the hospital by day, the foundry at night — to buy him a guitar. It wasn't the shiny red electric he wanted, but an $11.95 pawnshop acoustic. If Sylvester learned three songs, his dad promised, he'd buy him the electric. It wasn't hard to find teachers in Albina: Sylvester learned his first licks from an old Creole man who owned the house his family lived in. Later, a fellow high school student mentored him in the blues. Sylvester was a quick learner, and soon the guitar became a kind of superpower for him. A country kid from the South, he often felt overcome with shyness among Portland's urban youth. When he spoke, he stuttered. "But with my guitar in front of me, I could express myself," he said.

Now 80 years old, Sylvester has been expressing himself through music ever since. His first band, Rated "X", was among Portland earliest soul groups. They recorded a 45 in 1972 and were riding the momentum of its local success when the trucking company Sylvester worked for put him on graveyard shift, and he had to quit the band. But he kept playing, and before long established himself as a standout blues musician. The Norman Sylvester Blues Band has now been performing for 40 years. He's shared bills with B.B. King, Buddy Guy and Mavis Staples, and, in 2011, he was inducted into the Oregon Music Hall of Fame.

Sylvester's achievements are impressive, but he's far from the only remarkable musician to emerge from Albina. To the contrary, he's part of a wide-ranging and deeply connected community of Black musicians, educators and arts advocates who converged here during the second half of the 20th century and made the region a hotbed for music in the West, creating a legacy that endures today. Until recently, however, the story of Albina's musical history resided mostly inside the memories — and closets — of those who lived it, a generation of musicians now nearing the end of their lives.

THE SOUND OF BLACK HISTORY IN PORTLAND

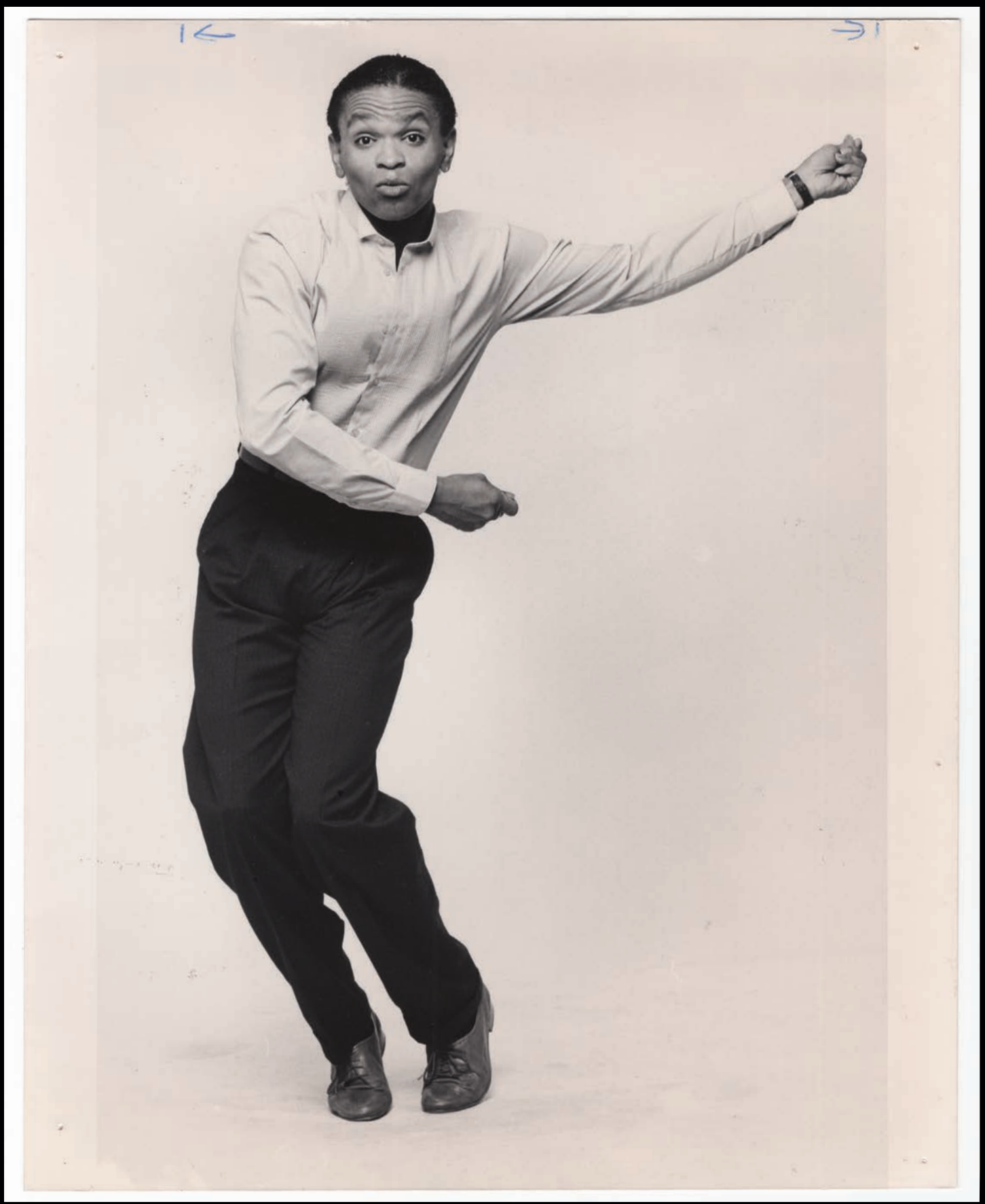
A 1985 promotional photo of Calvin Walker, drummer, bandleader, producer and musicians' union representative.

Photo courtesy of Albina Music Trust.

BY THE TIME BOBBY SMITH moved to Albina in the early 2000s, the place bore scant resemblance to the predominantly Black neighborhood of Sylvester's youth. Smith was a young white schoolteacher who occasionally freelanced as a music journalist. He knew a lively jazz scene had existed here in the 1940s and '50s — an era highlighted in Robert Dietsche's 2005 book *Jumptown* — but the public narrative of Black music in Portland ended there, in 1957, and he wondered: What happened next? An avid record collector, Smith sought albums that could help answer this question. For years, he scoured used record stores and consignment shops, but few commercial recordings of Portland's Black musicians from the '60s, '70s and '80s seemed to exist. One day he stumbled upon the 45 that Sylvester recorded with Rated "X" in the early '70s, one of the only records from those decades he could find. Meanwhile, he talked with neighbors, lingered at the park anytime he heard music, and hung around Clyde's Prime Rib, one of the city's only venues regularly featuring elder Black performers.

In 2014, Smith began to DJ for XRAY-FM, a recently launched community radio station broadcasting from Albina. By then, he'd compiled a small collection of recordings from the region's past and began inviting local musicians into the station to discuss them on air. One of his first guests was Calvin Walker. Drummer, bandleader and self-described "child of Albina," Walker came for a 30-minute interview and left three hours later. He shared his own life story and, in the process, mapped out an entire ecosystem of musicians and educators who had shaped — and been shaped by — Albina. "If you're really curious about this, here's a list of people you need to start talking to," he told Smith. "And I'll help you."

Soon, Smith's weekly radio show became a turnstile where elder Black musicians came to share their stories. Despite the barriers that had limited their access to the recording industry, Albina's musicians had been diligently documenting their own work. A plethora of unreleased recordings survived in their hands: demos, reel-to-reels, cassettes, VCR tapes. The ever-growing cache of music and memorabilia pouring into the station revealed an extraordinary legacy of Black arts and culture in Portland and an untold chapter of Oregon history.



In 2015, Walker, Smith and Ken Berry — another local musician and community leader — founded Albina Music Trust (AMT) with a colossal task in mind: preserving thousands of obsolete and decaying media items and making them accessible to all. Elder engineers donated equipment and taught volunteers how to use the archaic machines. Each item was digitized and uploaded into a categorized database. After a decade of work, in 2024, AMT publicly launched the Albina Community Archive, believed to be the only community archive in the United States dedicated to the restoration of a Black community's music culture.

The online repository contains over 13,000 items from 180 sources. There's music, of course — live recordings, out-of-circulation albums, unreleased demos — plus film, newsprint, posters, handbills and oral histories. This massive collection is the backbone of the archive, but it functions more like a seedbank than a museum, providing safekeeping for historical artifacts that are then brought to life in projects extending far beyond the website. An art installation called *Wall to Wall Soul* combines restored and recolored posters and photography in a series of striking images that have been exhibited around the city and now hang permanently in the dining room of Clyde's Prime Rib. Under a record label by the same name, AMT issues vinyl albums of never-before-released music from Albina's past as well as new work from the community's contemporary artists. An audio tour, *The Albina Soul Walk*, takes listeners on a mile-long, music-infused stroll through Albina to visit the sites of former venues and gathering places while a chorus of musicians and club owners describe the neighborhood's past. Listening feels like putting on 3D glasses: An unseen dimension is suddenly brought into focus. Even after I slipped my earbuds out and the present-day sounds of the city rushed in — wind through maple leaves, cyclists pedaling past — the voices of the tour lingered. Though I walked out of the neighborhood the same way I'd come, nothing looked the same.

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ONE MORNING LAST SUMMER, I MET SMITH, Walker and Berry at AMT's office in northeast Portland. Just a few hundred square feet, the space called to mind a walk-in closet. Shelves filled with neatly labeled boxes lined one wall and audio equipment spanning eras — turntables, reel-to-reel machines, cassette players, CD drives — crammed under and atop desks. A grid of framed record sleeves decorated a lime-green wall, and jazz floated through the room.

Settling into one of the four mismatched chairs puzzled into this space felt more like joining a family around a snug kitchen table than meeting with a board of directors in their office. That day, I had an experience not unlike Smith's first meeting with Walker: I expected we'd talk for an hour, but one story led to another until it was well past lunchtime and hunger drove us to a taqueria across the street where we did, in fact, sit around a table and eat a meal together.

Ken Berry was 4 when he came to Oregon from Kansas in 1953. His family settled into a house in southeast Portland near Laurelhurst elementary, where he became the school's first Black student. But two years later, after anti-integration neighbors complained, their landlord tore the house down and Berry's family moved to Albina.

There, he began playing piano during Sunday school at the New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, earning 75 cents a day. He joined the choir at Jefferson High, and, after graduating, began playing a Hammond B3 organ at what was then Albina's most prominent jazz club, The Upstairs Lounge, where he met the late Thara Memory. Memory, a trumpeter from Florida who'd played with the likes of James Brown, was traveling with his band en route to Seattle when they stopped in Portland to play The Upstairs Lounge. But Albina — the big trees, the lively community — captivated him, and when his band continued north, Memory stayed. He and Berry later started a group called Shades Of Brown, one of several collaborations that would shape Albina's music culture for decades to come.

Around the same time and not far from The Upstairs Lounge, Walker met Memory at another of Albina's vital community hubs, the Albina Arts Center. As a teenager, Walker often played here with his jazz-infused funk band, The Gangsters. "Thara comes in one night and says, 'Can I play your trumpet?'" Walker recalled. He passed the instrument over and listened, dumbfounded. "I never played trumpet again!" Instead, Walker continued on drums, and Memory joined on trumpet.

In the summer of 1970, the American Legion held its annual convention in Portland. Hoping to distract potential war protesters from disrupting the event, the city planned the only state-sponsored rock concert in U.S. history: Vortex 1. The Gangsters weren't invited to play, but they loaded their gear into the Albina Arts Center truck and drove to the festival anyway, right up to the stage. When the manager told them he'd already booked the bands, Memory retorted: "But you don't have any all-Black bands." Thirty minutes later, they were onstage. "We played for an hour and a half, and I think they even paid us!" Walker said, grinning.

Despite its noteworthiness, most retrospective coverage of this event — including a book and television documentary — omitted this story. When AMT asked why, the answer was simple: The researchers didn't know about it. Like much of Albina's history, the story was held in the community, not in institutions. "The public library and the Oregon Historical Society have existed for over a hundred years," Smith told me. "But in the 10 years we've been around, we've become the largest digital repository of Black arts and culture in the entire state of Oregon." Walker nodded. "People are putting

THE SOUND OF BLACK HISTORY IN PORTLAND

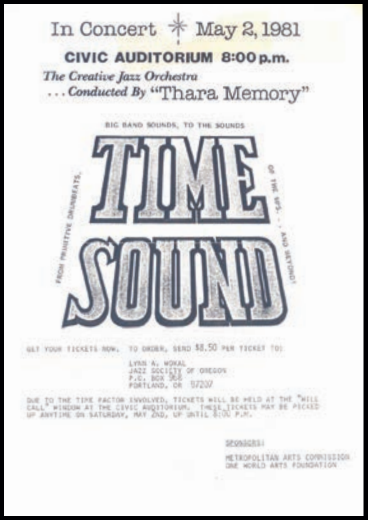
Legendary pianist and beloved educator Janice Scroggins, performing live in concert in 1982 (*top*).

Thara Memory and Danny Osborne during a rehearsal at Jefferson High School in 1974 (*bottom left*).

Choir director, musician and arts advocate Ken Berry performing with his mother, Mary Jean Berry (*bottom center*).

A flyer for a TimeSound concert in 1981 (*bottom right*).

All photos courtesy of Albina Music Trust.



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their lives in our hands because they *trust* that their story will be told accurately," he said.

AMT is part of a growing nationwide network of community archives working to preserve collective histories left out of mainstream repositories. More than 300 have been mapped across the country, each documenting a distinct slice of American life: LGBTQ people in the Deep South; radical Indigenous women activists; communities impacted by the death penalty. As control over historical narratives becomes an increasingly exploited political tool — as evidenced by the Trump administration's attacks on the National Museum of African American History and Culture — community-based archives like AMT broaden the spectrum of voices authoring history, creating a story of America that is less like a monologue, more like a choir.

The Gangsters lasted a few years, during which they recorded some tracks at a studio in Vancouver, Washington. After they disbanded, several members found success elsewhere: Two toured with B.B. King, another played with jazz icons the Crusaders, and Memory won a Grammy. But The Gangsters' recordings were never released. Instead, the tape sat in a closet for 40 years. Even Memory's own daughter, Tahirah Memory, didn't know about the recordings until AMT rediscovered them in 2017.

Tahirah herself is an acclaimed Portland-based vocalist and songwriter who sings melodic, lyrical songs influenced by jazz and soul traditions at some 90 shows a year. Though she grew up immersed in Albina's music community — "at our house, musicians were always coming and going, Mel Brown, Ron Steen, Janice Scroggins" — she didn't fully understand all the obstacles they faced, or the extent of their perseverance. "The archive fills in a lot of gaps," she told me, both personally and publicly. "In this country, there hasn't been a huge invitation for Black folks to have a history." In 2018, AMT released The Gangsters' album on vinyl, accompanied by a booklet of oral histories and photographs telling the band's story. To celebrate, the trust hosted an album-release concert that reunited historic groups alongside contemporary musicians and sold out the 300-seat Alberta Rose Theatre within hours.

Watching the story of Albina's past emerge through AMT, Tahirah told me, has been healing. "The archive is as much about social change as it is about music. It's a record of how Black people have leaned on art to make a way." When faced with hardship, she said, "this is what people with brilliance and light and determination do. Some of the best magic has come out of Albina because it was a place where not-great things happened."

By the time The Gangsters recorded those tracks in the 1970s, major changes had come to Albina. Following WWII, Portland, like cities around the country, embarked on something called "urban renewal." Using federal dollars allocated for clearing "slums," local governments tore down neighborhoods and repurposed the land for commercial and institutional uses, displacing hundreds of thousands of people. Black and minority neighborhoods were disproportionately deemed "blighted" and razed under the banner of renewal. In a 1963 interview, James Baldwin laid bare the reality behind the euphemism: "Cities now are engaged in something called urban renewal, which means moving the Negros out. It means Negro removal; that is what it means." Portland was no exception.

In the late 1950s, the city demolished hundreds of homes in Albina to make way for Interstate 5 and Memorial Coliseum. Then, in the late 1960s, Portland applied for federal funds to bulldoze 76 acres for the expansion of Legacy Emanuel Hospital. The land contained hundreds of residences, gathering places, including a teen club called the Seven of Diamonds, and the commercial heart of Albina: the intersection of Williams and Russell.

Black leaders organized to resist the city-sponsored destruction of their neighborhoods. Even where housing was rough, "the community was thriving," Walker told me. Advocating for repair rather than clearance, organizers formed the Albina Neighborhood Improvement Project in 1961 and successfully halted the destruction of some areas slated for demolition, rehabilitating hundreds of homes and building a park instead.

But other projects continued regardless. Neighborhoods in lower Albina were razed and replaced with the Portland Public School District's headquarters and the Water Bureau. Then, in the early 1970s, the city approved the hospital expansion. The intersection of Williams and Russell was condemned and bulldozed to the ground. A single physical remnant survived: The onion-shaped cupola was relocated to a gazebo in Dawson Park a few blocks north. The project displaced 171 households, three-quarters of them Black. But the hospital expansion never happened. Instead, the land lay vacant for the next 50 years. Altogether, more than 1,100 housing units in Albina were destroyed through "urban renewal," along with dozens of businesses and community hubs.

Soon after, banks further redlined what remained of the neighborhood, denying residents access to mortgage and home improvement loans. Those seeking to buy a house or invest in a business could either leave Albina or borrow from private, often predatory, lenders. This drove more people out, and by the '80s, vacant buildings had begun to proliferate. One neighborhood activist, calling on the city to intervene, counted 900 abandoned structures.

As Albina's businesses and clubs were shutting down or being demolished, racial tensions rippled across Portland in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination. Downtown venues excluded Black bands for fear of alienating white audiences. Competition from other forms of entertainment — late-night TV, disco — and new drunk driving laws paired with

THE SOUND OF BLACK HISTORY IN PORTLAND

Ken Berry performs during the *Shades Of Brown* album-release party at Clyde's Prime Rib in 2024 (*top*). *Photo by Sam Slater.*

Aaron Spriggs, one of AMT's archive staff, working to digitize and preserve archaic media formats (*bottom left*). *Photo by Jason Hill.*

Tahirah Memory sings at the TimeSound concert at Albina's Pioneer Courthouse Square in 2024 (*bottom right*). *Photo by Jason Hill.*

All photos courtesy of Albina Music Trust.

police brutality meant that fewer people were going out to see live music. All this converged to make it harder for musicians to earn a living playing gigs, and problems caused by chronic disinvestment grew — unemployment, gang violence, the drug trade. Still, music remained vital: "It was a way of maintaining camaraderie, a connecting piece for people's spirits," Berry told me. During these years, Albina's musicians, educators and community leaders doubled down on efforts to keep Black music culture alive in Portland.

In 1976, Berry co-founded the World Arts Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to celebrating African American culture through community choirs, orchestras, marching bands and after-school programs. An annual event called "Keep Alive the Dream" showcased these ensembles and is now among the nation's longest-running tributes to Martin Luther King. Endeavoring to bring musicians who'd lost their way back to the stage while exposing new audiences to Black music traditions, Thara Memory helped establish a concert series called TimeSound. The first show, in 1981, was performed by a 24-piece ensemble at the Civic Auditorium in downtown Portland, transcending the color line that often restricted access to downtown venues.

Inspired by TimeSound, Albina's musicians started a similar big band and choir program for kids. YouthSound brought together hundreds of students for weekly practices at the New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. Many were Black, but the program was inclusive and spanned genres from jazz to classical. For many white kids, it marked their first experience of gospel music. The project led to a series of programs providing music education to Portland children who otherwise had no access. Several alumni of these programs have since become internationally acclaimed musicians, including Domo Branch, Charlie Brown III and five-time Grammy winner Esperanza Spalding, widely considered the most accomplished female jazz bassist alive.

Though developing musical skills was the focus — and often the outcome — of these projects, their creators had a greater end in mind. As Berry recounts in an oral history included with *YouthSound,* an AMT album of the ensemble's 1982 performance at Jefferson High, "Each person in the choir is an individual, and when we sing, we're making sure to let one another know that, even though we're different individuals, we're all connected. We have to deal with the same things together. I'm talking about social justice. I'm talking about peace, joy, happiness. That's what the music did for all of us that were in the choir."

That day in AMT's narrow office, Walker, Smith and Berry wove together the Trust's story with the kind of intimate rapport born from long hours spent dreaming and problem-solving together over the course of years. Despite their differences in age and race, the respect each held for the others was palpable, evident in the way the conversation flowed seamlessly between them: one man recounting an anecdote, another clarifying the timeline, the third offering context. Only later did I realize what the experience reminded me of — music, of course. Listening to these three converse felt like watching a great band jam: Each player contributing a distinct element without overstepping, creating a whole much greater than the sum of its parts.

Before I left, Berry handed me a copy of *YouthSound*, then asked me to text him when I got home so he'd know I'd arrived safely. That evening, I put the album on my turntable and flipped through the liner notes while a cascade of voices — dozens of children and adults, singing together in a high school auditorium four decades ago — tumbled into my living room. "It was all about listening," one student recalled. "Anybody could put out a tune. But your tune gotta match the person standing next to you. This was about teamwork. We needed to sound as one."

THE SOUND OF BLACK HISTORY IN PORTLAND

Singer and bassist Marianne Mayfield with her electric bass *(top left). Photo by Jack Hasbrouck.*

Advertisement for the Cotton Club. Located on North Vancouver Avenue in Albina, it was the Pacific Northwest's preeminent soul music destination throughout the 1960s (*top right*).

Norman Sylvester Band promotional photo from 1987 (*middle*).

The Esquires, a Portland jazz-infused R&B unit, photographed in 1981 (*bottom left*). *Photo by Beth Keegan.*

Nationally acclaimed vocalist Shirley Nanette singing in 1988 (*bottom right*).

All photos courtesy of Albina Music Trust.

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THOUGH THEIR WORK OFTEN INVOLVES the literal preservation of the past, AMT's true focus is on the future. "In another 50 years, we don't want a couple of guys like me and Ken sitting around talking about the good old days," Walker said. To this end, the Trust is partnering with Portland schools and nonprofits to expand access to arts education while connecting students with Albina's Black music legacy.

Last June, I drove to the school district headquarters for "Rhythms of Tomorrow," one of 38 public events AMT hosted in 2025 alone. A collaboration between AMT and Portland Public Schools, it marked the first district-wide celebration of Black Music Month. On the way, I stopped for lunch on Mississippi Avenue, in historic Albina. There, I stood in line for tacos among throngs of lunch-goers wearing Blundstone boots and fine-line tattoos, mostly 30- and 40-somethings, mostly white. Nearby, a cafe advertised boba tea and handcrafted donuts. A boutique nursery sold mounted ferns for $150 each. Yoga studios and brewpubs abounded.

Decades after city bulldozers tore through Albina, another wave of displacement struck what remained of the neighborhood. In the 1990s, the area's cheap housing began to attract white people priced out of other districts. The city began investing previously withheld resources into Albina, cracking down on predatory lending and housing abandonment. These changes primarily benefited middle-class white newcomers, and soon gentrification pushed housing prices out of reach for many longtime residents. By 2000, less than a third of Black Portlanders lived in Albina and, for the first time since the 1960s, the area no longer had a Black majority. "A lot of folks are out in The Numbers now," Sylvester told me, referring to the far reaches of East Portland. "I used to cruise around in my 1974 Dodge Charger — it had a sunroof and an 8-track," he said. "I could wave at 50 people, stop and talk to 30. Now, I can drive from my house in Kenton, all through Albina, and never wave once."

A mile south of Mississippi, the school

district's headquarters sits on a sprawling 10.5-acre campus. One of the "urban renewal" projects that displaced residents in the 1960s, it's a drab industrial building, brick-pink and resembling a parking garage. But the day I visited, the banal exterior stood in sharp contrast to the scene inside: Kids raced around, eating watermelon slices and salami from a long table heaped with snacks. Adults exchanged hugs and handshakes. A DJ stood behind a spread of turntables and mixers, catching the eyes of many 11-year-olds and filling the room with buoyant tracks.

Norman Sylvester started off the event, the first in a line-up of musicians and speakers that spanned genres and generations: blues to hip-hop, high-schoolers to elders. He stepped onstage carrying his guitar more like an extension of his body than an object in hand. Though Sylvester has played across many genres in his career, he remains rooted in the blues. When I asked what drew him to that music, he told me, "I can only imagine a man like Muddy Waters or Son House, plowing a field, driving a tractor all day, and still being able to play a guitar and sing at that quality. Where did that come from?" Before I could wager a guess, he answered: "From the dedication they had to doing something better. Those journeys just mean something to me, so I want to keep that going."

Listening to him play that afternoon, bending notes into riffs equal parts aching and sweet, I thought of his words and their implication: A song is not only a thing to be archived, but a kind of archive in itself. Here, preserved in melody and lyric, rhythm and pitch, a record of life is stored for future access.

After Sylvester's set, four women — MaryEtta Callier, Arietta Ward, Nafisaria Mathews and LaRhonda Steele — took the stage to sing a set of gospel songs. Ward and Mathews are sisters. Their mother, the late Janice Scroggins, who died in 2014, was another Albina music legend. Best known as a virtuoso pianist, Scroggins was also a beloved educator and composer.

"My mother started playing when she was 2 or 3," Ward told me. According to family lore, Scroggins was thought to be a sickly child, always crying. Then one day someone found her staring at a piano, silent. They lifted her up to the instrument and placed her hands on the keys. After that, her ceaseless crying stopped. A few years later, Scroggins was playing at church

in Idabel, Oklahoma, when a wealthy parishioner noticed her talent and offered to sponsor formal lessons. Her teacher explained the fundamentals — scales, notation — but more importantly, Ward said, "she showed my mother that music was something a woman could do."

When Scroggins came to Albina in the '70s, she became one of many exceptional female musicians central to the community. Some have passed on — such as the acclaimed singer Linda Hornbuckle and bassist Marianne Mayfield — while many others, including Steele, Callier and Shirley Nanette, are still performing today. But the music industry was largely dominated by men, a reality that can't be missed when browsing the archive where male faces far outnumber those of females. Underrepresentation of women in the music industry is certainly not unique to Albina, nor is it confined to history: According to USC Annenberg's study of 2024's chart-topping songs, 62.3% of recording artists — and more than 94% of producers — were male. "Making it as a musician has always been more difficult for women," Ward told me. They often handled the administrative and domestic responsibilities that supported their male partners' music careers and many faced discrimination, something that remains prevalent. "I've been offered way less money than a male performer for the exact same show," Tahirah Memory told me, an experience Ward shares. "It takes tenacity," Ward said. "But it makes you stronger."

Performing as Mz. Etta, Ward has built a dynamic music career in Portland as a genre-fluid singer and bandleader. Her powerhouse vocals brim with joy and an easeful muscularity, drawing crowds to shows around the city. Ward credits her perseverance to the Albina community. "People talk about the Great American Songbook," she said. "Well, my great American songbook looks a lot different, because growing up I was exposed to all these Black composers. I was shown that we can do anything in a time when other people said we couldn't." Her mentors — Ken Berry, Linda Hornbuckle, Norman Sylvester, LaRhonda Steele, her mother — gave their students more than the skills needed to master difficult compositions. "We were taught to honor the music, but also to honor ourselves," she said. "It's freedom that was instilled." Ward continues that tradition of mentorship today, collaborating with AMT on programs like this public school event as well as jam sessions and community concerts that amplify the legacy of Albina's female musicians. "They may not have been at the forefront, but their imprint was very poignant."

In the school auditorium, Ward and the gospel quartet began with Walter Hawkins' song "Be Grateful." Their voices twined around one another, building a sound so full and layered it felt thick enough to touch. A young girl eating a cookie a few seats down stopped mid-bite and stared at the singers, mouth agape. The song filled the room the way water floods a vessel, immersing us.

The event closed with Portland-based producers Tony Ozier and Jumbo, two of the five artists who remixed recordings from the archive to create contemporary, beat-based tracks for AMT's 2025 album *Soul Assembly*. "We figured we could be the bridge, not just to take the old to the now, but to pass the torch so the youngsters can take it from us and walk forward," Jumbo told the crowd.

Soul Assembly takes its name from a 1968 musical theatre production created by the Black Student Union at Jefferson High in response to the rising racial tensions surrounding MLK's assassination. Performed around the city, the show illuminated African American history while celebrating the culture and creativity of Portland's Black community.

When Ozier encountered this story in the archive, he was struck. Portland doesn't have a great reputation for Black culture, he told me, and when he moved to the city 19 years ago as a young funk musician, he was not expecting to find a deep-rooted Black music scene. But before long, he met Janice Scroggins, who introduced him to a wealth of local funk musicians. "I thought I was funkin'," Ozier told me laughing. "She said, 'You *are* funkin' — but Portland ain't new to funk.'" Ozier now teaches youth music classes for the Bodecker Foundation and hopes AMT projects like the *Soul Assembly* album can help connect young people to the music and stories of Albina's past. "This is Black history in Portland — where else do you hear that?" Culture is shaped by the music youth engage with, Ozier told me. "Listening to 'say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud,' when you're 15 is different than listening to 'you used to call me on your cellphone.' Those words, they get stuck in your head whether you want them to or not."

That day, Ozier and Jumbo played two tracks. The first, "Searchin' for Love" was recorded in the '70s by Shades Of Brown and released in 2024 on AMT's label. With a laid-back groove and piercing vocals, the song is irresistibly catchy and, at the same time, shot through with anguish. Described in the liner notes as a "cry for decency," the track reflects the Albina community's dismay at the city's disregard for their neighborhoods. Next, Jumbo played a remixed version in which he layered samples of music from his own coming-of-age years over the original track. A thumping beat and electronic torque lend fresh potency to the original vocals, which reverberate relentlessly throughout.

The song seemed to collapse time, and the crowd listened, head-nodding and mesmerized. Its effect, perhaps, was especially powerful here — inside a building constructed atop the razed homes of a once-thriving neighborhood, now filled with members of that displaced community who had returned to the same ground to celebrate the fruits of their still-flourishing culture. The place mirrored the sonic landscape Jumbo had created, where histories layered atop one another and ghosts mingled with

THE SOUND OF BLACK HISTORY IN PORTLAND

MUSIC OF ALBINA

Scan the QR code below to listen to a playlist of some of Albina's historic and contemporary musicians.

Searchin' For Love
Shades Of Brown

Give And Take
Shirley Nanette

Gimme Some Ice Cream
Ural Thomas & The Pain

just free ft. Domo Branch
greaterkind

City Of Roses
esperanza spalding

Portland Ain't Dead
TROX

Near & Dear Ones
Arietta Ward

The Bridge
Tony Ozier, JW Friday, Easy McCoy, Illmaculate, Jae Lava, Mighty, Donte Thomas, DJ O.G.ONE

Fight or Flight
Tahirah Memory

Lester's Theme
The Gangsters

As Long As I'm Moving
Linda Hornbuckle with the No Delay Band

Disco Fantasy Land
Transport

Be Grateful ft. Traci Clay and Dennis Springer
YouthSound

A Memory
Domo Branch

Arietta Ward, Nafisaria Mathews, Amy LeSage and MaryEtta Callier perform at the TimeSound concert held last summer as part of the grand reopening celebration for the Albina Library. *Photo by Albert Woods, courtesy of Albina Music Trust.*

dreams. Like the song, the event was both tribute to the enduring impact of history, and, simultaneously, testament to a person's capacity to create something new from all that they've been given.

• • •

BEFORE THE END OF SUMMER, I attended one more AMT event: the latest performance of TimeSound, Albina's historic concert series, recently revived by AMT after a three-decade hiatus. It was part of the grand reopening celebration for the expanded Albina Library. Located on Russell Street, the library sits just a block east of the intersection where Norman Sylvester found himself that fall day in 1957, a young boy in search of a haircut. Before the show, I walked over to the crossing.

There, afternoon sun pooled atop asphalt, cut by the shade of street trees. Cars passed. A woman carried a toddler down the sidewalk. I imagined Sylvester standing here all those years ago. If that 12-year-old kid returned today, I wondered, would he recognize anything? Apartments occupied two corners, and a commercial complex on the third housed a civil rights nonprofit, the Urban League of Portland. On the fourth corner, where the brick building with the onion-shaped cupola once stood, a chain-link fence enclosed a rectangle of bare land.

The space has sat vacant since it was bulldozed in the '70s. Now, a half-century later, that's finally changing. Last February, a collaboration guided by a Black-led nonprofit, the Williams and Russell CDC, broke ground on a residential and commercial development that will prioritize access for people with generational ties to the neighborhood. The city council — which, last June, agreed to a settlement that will pay $8.5 million to 26 descendants of displaced Black families — is among the partners. The project is funded in part by the 1803 Fund, an organization that invests in Black Portland and has supported several restorative development efforts underway in Albina. 1803 also funds AMT's work, because, as Juma Sei, the organization's community partnership manager, told me, "You can have a bunch of buildings, but it doesn't matter if there isn't a culture to put people into those buildings."

Sei first encountered AMT soon after he moved back to Portland in 2024. He'd grown up in the area, but his parents immigrated from Sierra Leone, so he lacked generational connections to Portland's Black community. Seeking to better understand local Black history, he began looking into archives and stumbled upon AMT. He was stunned. Sei has lived in Atlanta, D.C. and Detroit, all places lauded for Black culture. "Portland isn't on that list," he told me. "But here was this living, breathing thing — the largest archive of its kind in the U.S. — right here in Portland. To me, it was a treasure trove."

Demographically, Sei said, Albina is no longer the center of Black life in Portland. Most Black Portlanders now live farther east or outside the city. At the library celebration events thus far — puppet theatre, 3D printing demos — Sei couldn't help but notice that there weren't many Black people present. But at the TimeSound concert, the scene was quite the opposite.

In a large meeting room, a dreamy mural backlit a stage and glass doors opened to a courtyard where people stood in the sun licking complimentary horchata oat-milk popsicles. The space was flooded with light and filled to near capacity with predominantly Black families, though plenty of others were also present in a crowd that spanned generations: seniors, 40-somethings, babies in arms.

Calvin Walker stepped to the mic first. "Is this not a miracle?" he said. "To have this beautiful facility, the second-largest library in Portland, *right here*?" The room swelled with applause. "There was a time when nobody wanted to live in Albina," he said. "After Vanport, this is where we landed, and we made it vibrant. Now, it's going to come back, and it's going to come back with all of us."

The concert was directed by Ward, who, in the TimeSound tradition, led an intergenerational ensemble performing work by Albina's Black composers. When Berry asked her to direct, Ward felt some trepidation. "It's hard not to get imposter syndrome. These musicians are my heroes, my teachers. They'll always be legendary to me." But on stage that afternoon, no trace of her worries could be seen, only her admiration for Albina's musicians — past and present — resounded. To showcase the community's female artists, she'd selected a set composed primarily by women and began with a song by her mother. The crowd fell silent. Some, like me, had never before heard this particular composition. Others had listened to it many times, even played it themselves. For them, perhaps, the song unlocked a chest of memories, evoking people and places of years past. The courtyard doors hung open, and I wondered: If a young boy were standing on the corner of Williams and Russell just now, might he catch a riff drifting on the wind?

Near the end of the show, Ward invited Berry onstage to sing. He approached the mic, shaking his head with mystified delight. "I was just having a flashback," he said, and described an evening some 35 years ago. He was on stage at another Portland library, performing another community concert. Ward and her sister Nafisaria were there, just children. "Arietta was right here," he said, glancing down at his ribs where he held a hand to indicate her height. When he looked up, his eyes were wet with tears, but he was smiling. "It's just so good to see that we are still whole when there's been so much to break us apart." He started to say more, then turned to the band, signaled them to begin, and let the music speak for itself.

Jaclyn Moyer lives in Corvallis, Oregon. She's the author of On Gold Hill, *which won the 2025 Oregon Book Award for Creative Nonfiction.*

THE BIRD & THE HERD

With government efforts to save sage grouse failing, two tribes model a way forward — by challenging the dominance of cattle on Western landscapes.

BY JOSEPHINE WOOLINGTON | ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRETT SAM

AS A CHILD, LYTLE DENNY learned where blue grouse, ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse and greater sage grouse lived. A member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, he scouted the high-desert landscape during family hunting trips on the tribes' ancestral homelands in southeastern Idaho. His dad preferred hunting deer and elk, but Denny developed an affinity for grouse.

The family hunted together as a group. Denny moved quietly through the silver-green sagebrush, hoping to hear the sudden heavy wingbeats of a startled bird. His family watched, waiting for a flush, not just of grouse but of mammals, too. "So it worked together," he said. "We'd get birds and big game."

As Denny got older, though, he saw fewer sage grouse. These distinctive, chicken-sized birds with their thick white chest feathers and brown, sunbeam-shaped tail feathers are culturally significant to the Shoshone-Bannock people, a rich source of song, dance, stories and nourishment. Denny noticed that other animals, including ground squirrels and mule deer, were declining as well. More farms were replacing the sagebrush that covered the foothills near the reservation. More cattle grazed the area, too. As their numbers increased, so did drought and wildfires.

By his late teens, Denny knew he wanted to pursue a career in fish and wildlife biology. He learned about the conflicts between sage grouse and cattle. The birds return faithfully to their open mating grounds, or leks, every spring to perform one of North America's most striking mating displays: Males gulp a gallon of air and strut, strumming their stiffened chest feathers with their wings to create two loud swishes, then inflating and contracting the two yellow air sacs on their chests with a couple of inimitable popping sounds. But livestock grazing disturbed this yearly ritual; in some areas, Denny saw ranchers drive out onto open leks in their ATVs and throw salt licks out for cows. Sharp-tailed grouse continued to perform their mating dances in the area, but sage grouse left. "I started asking questions like, 'Why are we letting this happen?'" Denny said. "I didn't have any stake in livestock. I had value in the land, in plants and animals."

Sage grouse have become a rare and special sight. Denny doesn't hunt them anymore. Whenever he sees one, he'll stop and watch.

Today, at 46, Denny is the deputy executive director of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes' Natural Resources Division. Both the Shoshone-Bannock and the Burns Paiute Tribe of southeastern Oregon are confronting

cattle grazing's impact on native plants and animals, including sage grouse, in the high-desert sagebrush steppe that covers much of the West. This vast landscape is the ancestral territory of the Shoshone-Bannock, a confederation of the Eastern and Western bands of the Northern Shoshone and the Bannock tribes, or Northern Paiute.

Since 1965, sage grouse populations in the West have declined by 80%, with birds in the Great Basin — which spans Nevada and parts of Idaho, Oregon and Utah — experiencing the most dramatic declines. The birds, considered a keystone species that indicate the overall health of their ecosystem, have been the subject of litigation and land-use battles for decades, and advocates have attempted, unsuccessfully, to place them on the federal endangered species list numerous times. It's estimated that there may have been 16 million sage grouse living in 13 states and three Canadian provinces before non-Native settlers arrived in the mid-1800s. Now, about 350,000 remain, according to an estimate by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Half of the species' original habitat is gone, replaced by farms, cow pastures, invasive grasses, mines and oil and gas fields.

The Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency responsible for overseeing the majority of sage grouse habitat, blames the decline on habitat loss and degradation from drought, wildfire and invasive grasses. But federal officials often fail to mention livestock grazing — the most widespread commercial land use in the West by acreage — as an underlying factor. Ranching interests, largely concentrated among corporations like multinational conglomerate J.R. Simplot Co., which also grows potatoes for McDonald's, have a powerful hold on federal land-management policy — even though cattle that graze on public land account for less than 2% of the nation's beef supply. Nearly all the remaining sage grouse habitat is open to grazing.

Some tribal members and scientists, including Denny, as well as non-Native advocacy organizations like the Western Watersheds Project, have urged a reckoning with extensive public-lands grazing, which they say threatens not just sage grouse, but the entire sagebrush steppe ecosystem and the many other significant species it supports, including sagebrush, mule deer and jackrabbits. Settler-colonial notions of the West may have framed the sagebrush steppe as cattle country, but "cows are an invasive species," said Diane Teeman, a Burns Paiute tribal elder and former manager of the tribe's Culture and Heritage Department. Grazing, Teeman

said, is causing "permanent damage to a lot of things here."

The threat grazing poses to sage grouse has become even more dire under the current Trump administration. Last July, the administration rescinded a BLM policy that required prioritizing environmental reviews of grazing in areas critical for at-risk species like sage grouse, and in October, the U.S. departments of the Interior and Agriculture released a plan that called for expanding the number of acres open to grazing on BLM and Forest Service lands. In December, the BLM finalized new sage grouse management plans for several Western states, including Idaho, Nevada and Wyoming, that ease restrictions on oil, gas and mining and lift a previous requirement that ranchers in Idaho, California and Nevada keep grasses at least 7 inches tall to protect grouse nests from predators.

Both the Burns Paiute and Shoshone-Bannock tribes, meanwhile, are modeling ways to reduce grazing on the landscape. The Burns Paiute Tribe has significantly cut the number of cows that are allowed to graze on tribal lands, while the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes plan to reevaluate herd size on reservation lands. The results are promising, revealing how restricting cattle could benefit native wildlife, including sage grouse. But applying such efforts to public lands would require undoing generations of deeply ingrained beliefs about grazing's place in the West. Cows are woven into the very fabric of Western colonial identity, Denny said. To tug at the threads in any way "is to go straight against settler-colonial values."

"That's the real battle," he said, "whose values are getting precedence over whose."

> "Cows are an invasive species."

THE SAGEBRUSH STEPPE is not a showy place with towering trees like the Pacific Northwest's coastal forests. The landscape is often seen from behind the wheel on a two-lane highway, a pastel-green filler passing alongside blurred white road lines and fence posts. Juniper trees grow sparsely; mule deer rest in their shade. Sagebrush itself — a branching, fragrant shrub with narrow lobed leaves — rarely exceeds five feet in height. The ecosystem's diversity flourishes closer to the ground, where the understory is colored by the blossoms of yellow hawksbeard and purple sagebrush mariposa lilies, interspersed with the black, green, gold and white flecks of biological soil crusts.

These miniscule crusts, made up of lichens, mosses, green algae and cyanobacteria, are key to the ecosystem's health. The crust functions like organic armor, retaining moisture, cycling nutrients and preventing non-native plant invasions. When the crusts break apart, other plant communities fall apart. "I used the word 'fragile' talking about our soils," Teeman said. "There is a delicate balance."

In a healthy high-desert landscape, soil crusts cover the ground in clumps. Sagebrush grows scattered and bunchgrasses fill the space between. Sage grouse rest under the modest canopy and lay speckled eggs in ground nests surrounded by tall grasses that protect the brood against predators like ravens and coyotes. Insects crawl on the abundant wildflowers, and both feed sage grouse and their chicks.

But over generations, extensive cattle grazing has transformed this vast landscape. Herds compacted the fragile soils, making the ground hard and dry. The land can no longer hold as much water, exacerbating drought and fueling the wildfire cycle. "You walk across a grazed area, and it's like walking on a parking lot," said Boone Kauffman, an Oregon State University ecologist. In an ungrazed area, he said, it's like "walking on a marshmallow."

Cattle also spread invasive cheatgrass, which chokes out native grasses and turns entire hillsides maroon in the spring. Sage grouse and most other wildlife avoid areas heavily infested with cheatgrass, which began to spread across the West in the late 1800s, in part due to livestock: Seeds stick to the animals' hooves and hides, and when those hooves break the soil crusts in areas that are also overgrazed and depleted of native grasses, it can create openings for them to germinate.

Cows devour bunchgrasses, exposing sage grouse nests to predators. They congregate near water, trampling streambanks and chomping on wildflowers, willows and aspens. These riparian areas normally serve as critical oases in the desert, providing food and shade and supporting the region's plant and animal life. "Every riparian area in the West has been hammered," said Roger Rosentreter, a retired BLM Idaho state botanist.

Water troughs built for cows create hazards where sage grouse and other birds can drown. Barbed-wire fences injure grouse by snagging their wings and sometimes severing

their heads, and insecticides aimed at protecting plants for cattle kill the grasshoppers and crickets that are critical food for grouse chicks.

"Those cumulative effects of grazing," Rosentreter said, "are sealing the coffin on so many of our native wildlife."

Ranching's dominion over the West began in the mid-1800s, when cattle barons — aided by the federal government's westward-expansion policies and the forcible removal of the region's Indigenous peoples — built vast ranching empires on tribal lands. Hundreds of thousands of cows grazed on the tall bunchgrasses of the sagebrush steppe, which the newcomers and government dubbed "the range," a term that later morphed into "rangeland" and is now widely used to describe the sagebrush steppe. Rangeland scientists like Karen Launchbaugh, a professor at the University of Idaho, consider it an ecological term, not a commodity term. But other scholars say it is by nature colonial. "Rangelands are inescapably implicated in the conquest and settlement of North America," wrote Nathan Sayre, a geography professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in a 2023 book about rangeland history.

Rangeland science developed hand-in-hand with the livestock industry. By the early 1900s, livestock herds had decimated native vegetation in the West, and ranchers needed help. Only 16% of public rangeland was in good condition, according to a 1934 report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. USDA scientists began studying non-native grasses and forage crops that could grow in the high desert, and universities across the West developed range-management programs to help the livestock industry survive. The research, supported by the federal government, informed many of the laws and policies that still govern the Western rangelands.

A major component of the government's early range-management programs involved seeding the depleted lands with non-native crested wheatgrass, which ranchers favored for its agreeable taste to livestock and ability to withstand heavy grazing. The federal government also killed sagebrush on several million acres in Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Colorado, Nevada, California, Utah and Wyoming, spraying the shrubs with herbicide and then seeding the ground with crested wheatgrass and turning the silver-green landscape gold. As a result, grazing capacity skyrocketed across the region — by 800% in Elko, Nevada, alone, according to a 1954 USDA report.

While rangeland science has shifted in recent years to become more attuned to ecological needs, the work remains rooted in livestock economics. Oregon State University's rangeland science extension center in Burns, for example, "helps maintain a robust and sustainable cattle industry in Oregon," according to its university web page. Both Rosentreter and Kauffman said that it's difficult to find funding for studies that investigate grazing's ecological impacts. In 2022, after Kauffman published two studies that found that grazing degraded public land, local cattle industry leaders called for his removal from Oregon State University, he said. "There's a real pressure, and probably unprecedented pressure at the moment, on state and federally funded scientists to not go against the cattle industry."

The livestock industry has also funded rangeland science. A June 2025 report by the U.S. Geological Survey and the University of Idaho's Rangeland Center found that livestock grazing on federal land in Idaho did not negatively impact sage grouse nesting success. Among the report's biggest funders were two ranching advocacy groups, the Public Lands Council and Idaho Cattle Association, which provided in-kind donations of trucks, ATVs, camper trailers, laptops and other equipment, according to an email from Courtney Conway, a USGS wildlife biologist and a co-author of the report.

In March 2024, well before the report was published, the Public Lands Council and National Cattlemen's Beef Association released a statement urging the BLM to incorporate its findings in its sage grouse management plans, which the agency did, in plans finalized in December. In an emailed statement, BLM press secretary Brian Hires wrote that the agency "does not rely solely on any single publication" for habitat management decisions, though he declined to say whether or not pressure from industry groups factored into the BLM's inclusion of the report.

In an interview on the rural community network RFD-TV, Kaitlynn Glover, an executive director of government affairs for both industry groups, said that the report confirms what ranchers have known for generations: Grazing has made landscapes healthier and sustained sage grouse populations. "But we needed the science to prove it," she said.

TODAY, MORE THAN 200 MILLION acres — 85% — of Western public lands are grazed by livestock, mainly beef cows. Livestock industry leaders have long argued that ranchers are key to sage grouse conservation, since cows need open land to forage, just like sage grouse do. Prominent Oregon rancher Tom Sharp coined a popular tagline, "What's good for the bird is good for the herd," and some scientists agree. "Generally, we think of livestock grazing as being very compatible with sage grouse conservation," said Skyler Vold, sage grouse biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Some rangeland scientists and the BLM say that modern grazing practices have improved to the point that they no longer degrade the landscape. "Well-managed livestock grazing is not considered a threat to greater sage-grouse habitat or survival," Hires, the BLM's press secretary, wrote in an emailed statement.

But the definition of "well-managed" grazing depends on who you ask. "There is so little well-managed livestock grazing in the American West, I don't even know why we're talking about it," said Erik Molvar, executive director of the Western Watersheds Project, a nonprofit that focuses on grazing's ecological impact on public lands.

Land managers and scientists classify grazing levels as light, moderate or heavy, depending on the amount of vegetation that livestock eat each year on a BLM grazing allotment. But this is hard to measure at large scales; some federal allotments can span 250,000 acres or more. To measure plant consumption, the BLM typically conducts "ocular assessments," Molvar said — basically, eyeballing the landscape. "In science, we call that a wild guess." (The BLM wrote that the agency "employs multiple data collection and assessment methods" to measure livestock plant consumption. The method used depends on several factors, including "the resources available to collect the information.")

The BLM permits cows to eat 50% of native plants annually on the majority of federal allotments and 60% of non-native plants like crested wheatgrass. An oft-cited 1999 paper, which scientists like Rosentreter say is still relevant, concluded that a 50% utilization rate may

“There is so little well-managed livestock grazing in the American West, I don’t even know why we’re talking about it.”

classify as "moderate," meaning it maintains landscape conditions, for areas that see more precipitation, like the Southern pine forests of Georgia. But in semi-arid ecosystems like the sagebrush steppe, this level of consumption degrades the land. The study defined moderate grazing in dry areas as being 35% to 45% of the vegetation. To improve rangeland conditions in these environments, cows would have to eat even less — 30% to 35% — of the vegetation, or about 40% less than the BLM currently permits. In the recent University of Idaho study that concluded that grazing did not harm sage grouse — the report ranching interests supported — cows ate on average just 22% of plants, a level that's considered light grazing and is practiced by few ranchers on public land.

Research from Oregon State University's extension center in Burns has found that targeted grazing can reduce invasive grasses. This kind of grazing, however, requires ranchers to isolate cows in small fenced pastures and move them frequently, a practice common on private land but difficult to execute on large public allotments. "Sometimes the research is pointing to or identifying tools that are, under our current system, almost impossible to implement," said Mark Salvo, program director for the Oregon Natural Desert Association, a conservation nonprofit.

For grazing to reduce invasive grasses, it has to be carefully managed, said Austin Smith, natural resources director and a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs in central Oregon. The tribe leases some of its land to local ranchers in the John Day Valley, allowing cows to eat invasive grasses as they grow in the early spring. "But then you get them off the landscape and with enough time for these other plants to come in and grow," he said. On BLM lands, he added, "they just hammer the heck out of it."

Science has found that grazing can both harm and help sage grouse habitat, but "it's a question of how it's managed," said Nada Wolff Culver, the BLM's former principal deputy director during the Biden administration. But for decades, the BLM has lacked the staffing to adequately manage its grazing allotments. BLM data obtained by the nonprofit watchdog group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) showed that 56.7 million acres — about 37% — of federal grazing allotments failed to meet BLM land-health standards from 1997 through 2023, primarily because of livestock grazing. In a 2023 federal lawsuit against the BLM, PEER and the Western Watersheds Project alleged that the agency had not conducted environmental reviews for nearly two-thirds of its grazing permits.

"I think it's a failed system," said Teeman, the Burns Paiute tribal elder.

COLLIN WILLIAMS STEPPED OUT of his white truck in camouflage rubber boots, surprised by the dry ground. "It's been just like mud-bogging up here every time because of all the snowmelt," said Williams, a non-Native wildlife biologist who works for the Burns Paiute Tribe.

It was dawn in April on BLM land east of the small town of Burns, in southeastern Oregon. Water had been so abundant recently that in late March, snowmelt from the Strawberry Mountains inundated the tribe's reservation north of Burns, flooding and damaging homes. But the above-average snowpack was welcome news for sage grouse. Good water years in the arid high desert bring more wildflowers and insects for grouse and their chicks to eat.

With a clipboard in hand, Williams and his colleague, Matthew Hanneman, the tribe's wildlife program manager, who is also non-Native, walked quietly to a vantage point where they could tally sage grouse. The first hint of sunrise burned the horizon orange as Williams and Hanneman scanned the area's several leks with binoculars. About 60 males were performing their signature mating dance. They appeared spherical from afar as they strutted in the near-freezing air, their white and brown feathers prominent against the beige bunchgrasses.

Biologists working for the Burns Paiute Tribe have counted sage grouse in the area since the early 2000s as part of a collaborative effort to track the populations with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The leks are roughly five miles away from a tribally owned property known as Jonesboro, a former ranch where some sage grouse spend their summer. In 2000, the tribe reacquired these 6,385 acres of unceded ancestral lands along with a 1,760-acre property called Logan Valley. Tribal officials have worked to restore both properties for wildlife such as grouse, mule deer and elk, giving tribal members access for hunting and gathering.

"We don't just consider the management of things in terms of their value to us," Teeman said, speaking of the Paiute approach to ecosystem stewardship. "The management is really about how to give everything its due rights and personhood," she continued, "as opposed to how BLM or any of the other Western-oriented management systems work where everything is a resource."

Before the tribe purchased the Jonesboro site, livestock had grazed it for decades. Weeds choked out native vegetation. Federal fire-suppression policies and overgrazing led to an expansion of juniper trees.

Since reacquiring the property, the tribe has worked to undo this colonial legacy in ways that could also be applied to federal lands.

In the early 2000s, the tribe removed some fencing at Jonesboro. Tribal staff, like Williams and Hanneman, have overseen projects to cut junipers to clear space for grouse, which avoid forested areas. They've planted sagebrush, yarrow, rabbitbrush and buckwheat. But weed removal has required the most intensive work: To remove cheatgrass and medusahead, the tribe mows, burns, sprays herbicide — and grazes.

The Jonesboro site came with 21,242 acres of BLM allotments as well as 4,154 acres of state grazing allotments overseen by the Oregon Department of State Lands. The tribe subleases these grazing permits to local ranchers for some income, but its priority is not beef production. "Our focus is definitely wildlife and wildlife conservation," Williams said. Grazing is used to target weeds and clear thatch when native grasses are dormant, but the tribe allows just one-third of the cattle that it could graze under its BLM permit. Only so many acres are good for grazing, Williams said, typically places near streams or springs that are critical habitat for sage grouse and other wildlife. With fewer cows, the native animals have more plants to eat.

The tribe also gives the Jonesboro pastures regular rest from cattle. Cows spend 10 days grazing in small, 40- to 60-acre fenced pastures on tribal land and are then typically removed. On larger, 3,000- to 13,000-acre federal pastures subleased to local ranchers, the tribe requires ranchers remove the animals after one to two months.

These efforts are slowly transforming the property. Photographs taken by tribal biologists from 2007 until 2018 to track restoration progress show a greener landscape. Riparian vegetation is taking over an abandoned road;

more bunchgrasses are growing.

In southeastern Idaho, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes are also evaluating ways to reduce grazing's impact. Led by Denny, the tribes' Natural Resources Division is studying 320,000 acres of rangeland on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation to reassess the number of cows allowed. Much of the reservation is grazed by cattle, though only a third of the animals are owned by tribal members, some of whom grew up in ranching families. About 20,500 acres of the reservation's rangelands are off-limits to grazing. The tribes also own another 33,000 acres of conservation land where grazing is prohibited, said Preston Buckskin, the tribes' land-use director and a tribal member. They have also considered barring cattle from some sage grouse mating sites.

Buckskin has struggled over the years to find a compromise between traditional tribal values that prioritize conservation and the business of ranching, which keeps some families afloat. Tribal cattlemen have influenced land-management decisions on the reservation for generations. The tribes' Office of Public Affairs said in a written statement that, while it's important to not minimize grazing's impact on sage grouse habitat, "effective conservation outcomes depend on collaboration among producers, land managers, and tribes rather than placing responsibility on any single group."

As one potential compromise, the tribal land-use department is considering a program that would pay landowners to quit grazing. Non-Native conservation organizations like the Western Watersheds Project have pushed a similar approach on federal lands for years. Most recently, in October, Democratic Reps. Adam Smith, Jared Huffman and Eleanor Holmes Norton reintroduced legislation that would allow ranchers to relinquish their grazing privileges in exchange for buyouts by private individuals or groups.

Additionally, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes are working on a land-use plan that would reclassify some areas zoned as "rangelands" on the reservation as "wildlands" instead, ensuring that the land is valued for wildlife and tribal hunting. "Words shape expectations," Denny said. "'Rangeland'" implies that the land is for livestock. "It carries a meaning imposed by a different way of thinking," he said. "I prefer the term 'sagebrush steppe.'"

Rare bird

SAGE GROUSE ARE BOTH UNIQUE AND IMPERILED

Much of sage grouse physiology and behavior — from the yellow air sacs that males inflate during mating displays to the species' preference for eating plants — is unusual for a bird.

Avian evolution has favored light weight for easier flight, leading to hollow bones and small organs. But sage grouse evolved "heavy machinery," as Boise State University researcher Jennifer Forbey described it — large organs and specialized guts — to digest sagebrush leaves, which are toxic to most animals.

From September to February, sage grouse eat sagebrush almost exclusively, preferring the tiny, silver-green leaves of low-growing species like early and mountain big sage. Scientists have found that these species fluoresce under ultraviolet light due to chemical properties in their leaves. Sage grouse have photoreceptors in their eyes that allow them to see UV light, and researchers like Forbey think that this glow may help the birds locate the plants. Female grouse teach their chicks where to find food, passing on what Forbey called "nutritional wisdom." Both males and females return to the same breeding, nesting and chick-rearing sites every year, generation after generation.

But the birds' loyalty and diet are no longer well-suited for today's landscape, transformed since settlers arrived.

Every year, 1.3 million acres of sagebrush steppe is lost, primarily to wildfires fueled by cheatgrass that has spread, in part, by way of extensive livestock grazing. Unfortunately, animals that rely heavily on one food source — like koalas, pandas and sage grouse — "tend to be the most vulnerable to extinction," Forbey said. — *Josephine Woolington*

IN THE EARLY 1990S, HART Mountain National Antelope Refuge in southern Oregon was severely overgrazed. When then-manager Barry Reiswig made the controversial decision to prohibit cattle on the property, he was characterized by some locals as the "epitome of evil," according to *Rewilding a Mountain*, a 2019 documentary about the project. "We were under a lot of pressure to compromise, to kind of look the other way," Reiswig said, speaking of grazing's impact on the refuge, in the film.

But it didn't take long for a landscape that had been grazed for 120 years to repair itself. In 12 years, aspen increased by 64% and wildflowers multiplied by 68%. In 23 years, bare soil decreased by 90%. Rushes and willows quadrupled, a 2015 study by Forest Service and Oregon State University researchers found.

Today, the refuge is one of the largest ungrazed areas in the Great Basin and one of the largest sage grouse breeding grounds in the West. Female grouse are commonly seen with chicks in tow, scurrying across gravel roads and foraging in wet meadows. "Simply removing cattle from areas may be all that is required to restore many degraded riparian areas in the American West," the 2015 study concluded.

Grazing's highly politicized nature makes it difficult for scientists and state and federal agency officials to even broach the subject, Denny said. "We've got to get uncomfortable talking about the truth." Tribes, he said, can lead the conversation, as well as show the way. "We can use our homelands as, like, 'This is the model for how you navigate this.'"

But progress ultimately relies on the federal government's willingness to reform its policies, as a spring day on Burns Paiute land demonstrated.

Just north of the headwaters of the Malheur River, in a forest clearing below the snowy Strawberry Mountains, a few sage grouse have found an unexpected summer home in a portion of Logan Valley that once again belongs to the tribe. The birds' preferred species of sage, mountain big sage, grows on a gentle slope that rises above a nearby creek. Last year, by mid-May, bluebells and yellow groundsels — wildflowers favored by grouse — were starting to bloom in the mountain meadow.

It's a mystery where the grouse come from, Hanneman said. The open valley is surrounded by lodgepole and ponderosa pines. "It's pretty dangerous for a sage grouse to be moving through a forest with Cooper's hawks and goshawks and everything else." The closest known lek is 10 miles away.

To understand the birds' movements, the tribe received a grant from the Oregon Wildlife Foundation to purchase transmitters to place on grouse this summer. The data will help tribal biologists understand where the birds travel, informing efforts to conserve their migration corridor. Since cultural burning was prohibited by the federal government more than a century ago, trees have encroached on the area. The tribe has hand-cut 60 acres of pines to keep the sagebrush open for grouse and other wildlife. They also hope to return fire to the meadows.

Most of the 1,760-acre Logan Valley property has been ungrazed since the tribe reacquired it in 2000. Officials permit cattle only on a 300-acre meadow to control a non-native grass that settlers introduced as a source of hay and forage for cows.

But the tribe's property borders federal land: It forms a "Y" shape, following creeks that merge to form the Malheur River, and the Forest Service, which owns the land in between the water, allows cows to graze from June to October.

Trespassing cattle have been an issue for years. The fencing is old, and cows get through. The tribe puts up a temporary fence at the end of May to keep the cattle off its land once the animals return to the neighboring federal property in June.

On a site visit in mid-May, Hanneman drove a dirt road that cuts through the property. He slowed down. "I did not know they put cattle out already," he said. A dozen black cows stared at him.

It was two weeks early, and the temporary fence had yet to be erected. Despite the tribe's best efforts, cows had gotten in.

Josephine Woolington is a writer and musician in her hometown, Portland, Oregon. She is the author of Where We Call Home: Lands, Seas, and Skies of the Pacific Northwest, *which won a 2024 Oregon Book Award for Nonfiction.*

Brett Sam is an illustrator, member of the Burns Paiute Tribe and works as an archaeologist technician for the tribe. He is based in Burns, Oregon.

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REVIEW

Chronicler of a community

A new documentary profiles a beloved photographer a century after his death.

BY TAYLOR ROSEWEEDS

IN 2002, filmmaker Beth Harrington visited Tacoma's Washington State History Museum during a road trip and saw an exhibit of Edward S. Curtis' photographs. It included work by some of his lesser-known contemporaries, and one, Frank Matsura, "just leapt out at me," Harrington said. His work "had a completely different character."

Matsura's charisma and deep connection to his subjects illuminates his black-and-white photographs. A Japanese immigrant, Matsura created images of people he knew, even posing playfully alongside his subjects, a varied mix of white settlers in Okanogan, Washington, and Indigenous people on the Colville Indian Reservation.

From 1903 to 1913, Matsura lived and worked in Okanogan County, dying there at age 39 from tuberculosis. Beyond those details and the thousands of images he left behind, little of his life was documented. But over a century later, the communities he photographed still remember him fondly.

"Frank Matsura is just somebody that you fall in love with," Harrington said. The documentarian moved to the Northwest from Boston in the early 2000s, but it was nearly two decades before she could tackle Matsura's enigmatic legacy. In 2025, she completed a feature-length documentary, *Our Mr. Matsura*.

"The idea behind the title is that everybody has a point of entry," Harrington said. "Everyone thinks they have a little window into who he is. And there's a collective sense of who he is because of those little impressions."

Last September, Douglas Woodrow was one of about 300 people who gathered at the restored Omak Theater for a screening of the film.

"I grew up in Okanogan," Woodrow told *High Country News*, "and the local newspaper would post pictures of the past, usually by Frank Matsura." As a kid in the late 1950s, Woodrow biked to the locations of these old photos and was "astounded" by the changes, imagining the majestic three-story Bureau Hotel, which burned down in 1924, as having provided "a bit of elegance in an otherwise dusty little town."

When Woodrow returned to Okanogan decades later, he reconnected with "Frank." (Matsura's contemporary fans almost always call him by his first name.) While volunteering with the Okanogan County Historical Society, Woodrow found "a literal shoebox" of unprocessed Matsura photographs that, when sequenced, depicted the 1910 construction of the Conconully Dam, an early Bureau of Reclamation project on Salmon Creek. "That just lit me up," he said. Presenting those photos to community groups became Woodrow's first Matsura project.

His fascination led him to Tokyo, where he visited Matsura's birthplace with his friend and fellow enthusiast Tetsuo Kurihara, a Japanese photographer who originally met Woodrow in Okanogan on a research trip. Back home, Woodrow worked hard to preserve Matsura's legacy, erecting an interpretive site near his former studio and spearheading a walking tour of 21 mural-sized photographs.

"His social mobility was extraordinary," Woodrow said. Matsura photographed everyone in town: "He was included in just about everything that happened in town, by all the social strata" — tribal members, newly arrived white businessmen, miners and saloon-goers.

Randy Lewis, a Wenatchi (P'Squosa) elder and member of the Confederated Tribes of Colville Reservation, is one of the many descendants of Matsura's subjects who appear on-screen in *Our Mr. Matsura*.

Frank Matsura poses with his photography equipment in Okanogan, Washington, circa 1903-1913. **Okanogan County Historical Society**

Four Indigenous women, including Josephine Carden and Camille Marchand, and a baby pose on horseback in front of Okanogan's Bureau Hotel, circa 1909 *(above)*.

Sam George family driving near Okanogan, circa 1911-1913 *(left)*.

Self-portrait of Frank Matsura at the site of Conconully Dam construction, circa 1910 *(opposite)*. **Okanogan County Historical Society**

Lewis has been a part of community efforts to screen the film regionally, helping host one "barn screening" in Winthrop, Washington, that was followed by a salmon bake. His family story illustrates how the world Matsura captured endures today.

The film features a photo of Lewis's great-uncle, Sam George, with his family in a buckboard wagon — "the F-250 of the time." Lewis told *High Country News* that the photo hung in the family house when he served as caretaker in George's final years.

"He'd be sitting there staring at that picture," he said. Looking at the photo, he told Lewis, "kept his mind going": He'd use it to recall the name and birthday of everyone in the wagon.

Sam George was 108 when he died. His birth in 1860 predated the 1872 formation of the Colville Indian Reservation, and during his long lifetime he witnessed its reduction, the allotment era and arrival of gold-seekers and homesteaders. He and his family, including Lewis, followed traditional seasonal fishing, maintaining a platform at Celilo Falls until The Dalles Dam's construction inundated the site in 1957, destroying one of richest fishing grounds on the continent.

Matsura came to the reservation during a cultural shift, when, Lewis said, "both cultures," Native and settler, were evolving. "We were into a new century, and he was capturing that. It wasn't the death toll of the Indians. It was life going on."

Our Mr. Matsura is as much about Okanogan County as it is about Matsura. Harrington shows the isolated, rugged nature of a landscape that remains, much as it was when Matsura arrived.

"It is a beautiful country," said Jean Berney, a longtime rancher and farmer just outside Conconully, a place she describes as "off the beaten track for a lot of people." An enrolled member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, Berney married into a non-Native cattle-ranching family and soon built up her own herd, gaining a national reputation as a conservation-minded rancher dedicated to the 4-H program.

Her land was once the site of The Conconully Naturpathy (*sic*) Institute, locally known as Casselmann's Sanitarium. Casselmann, a German immigrant, treated tuberculosis patients starting in 1906. Many believe that Matsura was a patient; the dry climate may have been part of what drew him to the region.

Berney often wonders about Matsura's journeys across this rocky landscape. "Did he ever talk to Dr. Casselmann about his condition? How long was he sick? We wonder about Frank and everything that happened a long time ago, and we can't ask," she said.

Our Mr. Matsura joins a growing body of literature about the photographer, including the work of dedicated volunteers at the Okanogan County Historical Society as well as Michael Holloman, a tenured art professor at Washington State University. In 2023, Holloman co-curated an exhibition of Matsura's work for Spokane's Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture and, in 2025, published the book, *Frank S. Matsura: Iconoclast Photographer of the American West*.

"We need people to be like Frank right now," Holloman, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation, said, "to engage multiple communities and be able to find life, vibrancy, in a world that is in transformation and change."

Wide release of *Our Mr. Matsura* was slated for *The American Experience* until last summer, when federal funding cuts ended the long-running PBS show. Still, Harrington believes the film will find its audience through festivals, streaming and special screenings, like the one last fall in Omak — though the road will be much harder.

"There's a lot of worthy things that we can't put a dollar value to," she said, "These stories ... we're poorer for them when we don't have them."

In Omak, Harrington was thanked for "mirroring" the kind of trust Matsura built with his subjects in the community over a century earlier. But the filmmaker was quick to return the compliment.

"The story is not just about Frank and his charisma and his incredible body of work," she said. "It's about the way people uphold his memory and still talk about him 112 years after his death."

Taylor Roseweeds is a writer and artist living in Palouse, Washington, who now writes prose, poetry and a regular email newsletter. She writes toward a deeper sense of place and connection to the landscapes she loves.

"We need people to be like Frank right now, to engage multiple communities and be able to find life, vibrancy, in a world that is in transformation."

CONFETTI WESTERNS

Exploring the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.

Shadow dancing

Learning to two-step at a queer country bar.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS

A PINEAPPLE EXPRESS was reaching its climax when my husband, Aaron, and I entered Stud Country.

As we trotted inside, we slipped on white N95 masks and peeled off our raincoats, revealing wet T-shirts tucked into our respective jeans and cargo pants, cinched with belts that matched our cowboy boots.

This was our usual get-up, but it wasn't our usual routine. It was just after 8 p.m. on a Thursday (a school night!) and we'd come to Los Globos — home to Stud Country, tonight's country dance event— to boogie. In my early 20s, I spent many evenings at this club in Los Angeles' historic Silver Lake neighborhood, dancing at late-night techno-house DJ sets and taking weekday salsa lessons. Tonight, we were here for a beginner's two-step class.

Aaron and I had gotten married at a courthouse a few weeks earlier, before the Supreme Court could take on a case that might overturn same-sex marriage. (In a rare win, the court declined it. Take the L, Kim Davis!) We wanted to celebrate our marriage with family and friends at a small desert reception in the spring — meaning that we needed to practice for our "first dance." What could be better than a two-step?

Stud Country is best known for parties featuring classic and '90s country dances to Western and modern pop songs. Over the last few years, its events have gained popularity across California, continuing LA's half-century tradition of queer line dancing and LGBTQ+ cowboy culture. (The phenomenon has become bicoastal, reaching to New York City; they sell muscle tees that read "I'm Bi for Stud Country.")

The dance floor was nearly empty. Then the steely twang of a dobro spilled over the loudspeakers, the lights dropped, a disco ball spun, and we were treated to a handsome two-step by Stud Country co-founder Sean Monaghan and Los Angeles queer country sage Anthony Ivancich. They embraced each other in looping twirls and elegant holds. Like that iconic Western avian dancer, the greater sage grouse, they demanded the room's attention, though instead of a mating dance on a lek, this was a whir of intergenerational camaraderie.

Scenes from Stud Country dances in Los Angeles, 2024-2025. **Chiara Alexa**

Stud Country started in 2021 shortly after Oil Can Harry's, a legendary gay country-western bar, shut down. (Ivancich danced at Oil Can Harry's for over 50 years.) Located in Studio City, the venue was one of the oldest queer bars, not only in the LA area but in the entire U.S., operating since 1968, a safe haven for all types of expression over the decades, from disco to leather. It survived the targeted police raids on LA's queer spaces in the late 1960s and the AIDS crisis that swept the city in the 1980s, becoming a mutual aid hotspot where queer fundraisers ignited and community members showed up for one another. But it did not survive the COVID-19 pandemic.

My right hand held his left, and my left rested on his hip as we moved counterclockwise around the dance floor.

Today, the building that hosted Oil Can Harry's — alongside other important LA queer sites like The Black Cat, where some of the first LGBTQ+ protests in the U.S. took place, pre-Stonewall — is listed as a historic-cultural monument by the Los Angeles Conservancy. Stud Country has taken on the queer country mantle by hosting events at venues across the city and now the country. Similar pop-up parties have become more common over the years as rising rents and gentrification shutter LGBTQ+ bars around the country.

"Remembering that the elders that come to Stud Country now literally got arrested for trying to create this culture is remarkable," Monaghan said in a short *Los Angeles Times* documentary. "They laid the foundation for what we do now."

Upstairs at the class, Aaron took the lead and I followed. My right hand held his left, and my left rested on his hip; he laid his right on my shoulder, and we slowly moved counterclockwise around the dance floor with over 20 other dancing pairs. A two-step features two quick steps, followed by two slow steps over a repeating six-count pattern. "*Quick, quick, slow, slow!*" our instructor shouted over the music. My feet tangled as I worked on the odd rhythm, but when I closed my eyes, we grew as confident as sage grouse. Like all good relationships, pair dancing is built on trust.

Two-stepping is a nuanced dance with many local variations, including queer-specific traditions; one of these is called "shadow dancing," an intimate variation where partners face the same direction and save *no* room for Jesus. Our instructor told us that two-stepping was more than a partner dance; it brought people of different age groups together to strengthen bonds in the community. "It's a way to cross generational divides," he said.

Just when Aaron and I were flying, our instructor commanded everyone to switch partners. Suddenly I was paired with purple-lipsticked Ariella, then bedazzled-boots Bri, then crop-top Jorge, as we practiced adding twirls and reverse spins to the basic step. Each partner led in a different way; it was fun being spun by people of different genders and heights as we figured out the new steps together.

Afterward, we walked back to our car in the pouring rain, continuing to move with the beat of the two-step. *Quick, quick, slow, slow.* I dreamed of our first dance, wondering if we could two-step to The Chicks' "Cowboy Take Me Away," the song our friend Taylor sang and strummed at our courthouse ceremony. (No eye was left dry.) For two queer cowboys like us, the song had deep meaning: We blared it on road trips across the Southwest to see desert blooms, cross seas of sage and sleep under sheets of stars, just like the lyrics say.

One thing was for sure: We had our work cut out for us. We needed to oil our weaves and shadow dance in order to do the song justice, especially if we wanted to extend the legacy of our queer ancestors on this dusty desert dance floor.

Miles W. Griffis is a writer and journalist based in Southern California. He is the executive editor of The Sick Times, *a nonprofit newsroom that covers long COVID.*

Heard Around the West

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

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Are wolves getting smarter before our eyes? The scientific community wants to know. Sometime back in 2023, the Heiltsuk Nation in British Columbia noticed that the traps tribal members had been setting to control invasive European green crabs were getting mangled and sometimes destroyed, with the bait inside always thoroughly removed. Initially, the tribe's environmental wardens, known as Guardians, suspected otters or seals. But after installing remote cameras, they discovered that gray wolves were responsible, *Smithsonian Magazine* reported. The footage recorded a female wolf emerging from the water, carrying a buoy attached to a trap line in her mouth, then carefully pulling at the line until she hauled the entire trap onto the beach. Then she chewed through the netting, removed the bait cup, and, um, "wolfed down" the herring and sea lion snack before trotting happily away.

The video — along with another one showing a different wolf — has sparked debate among scientists: Does this cunning activity constitute intentional tool use by wild canids or just clever problem solving? Nobody doubts that wolves are intelligent, but the footage seems to indicate that they're even smarter than we suspected. No surprise there, really: Anyone who has ever given a dog a treat-filled Kong knows exactly how determined a canine can be, given the right motivation.

CALIFORNIA

A GoFundMe campaign has raised over a million dollars for eight BIPOC and queer nonprofits and other organizations that are working to make the outdoors and environmental spaces more inclusive and diverse. Drag activist Pattie Gonia set out on a 100-mile hike — in glorious drag — starting at Point Reyes National Seashore and heading down the coast, camping out every night, reapplying makeup in the morning and finally crossing Golden Gate Bridge a week later for her grand finale in San Francisco. She posted updates on social media, lgbtqnation.com reported: "Follow along to watch my drag slowly decompose in front of your eyes, and help us raise $1 million for outdoor nonprofits that absolutely deserve it." And her long walk paid off, raising $1,167,000 for the eight nonprofits. If you break it down, that's over $10,000 per mile, well worth a few chipped nails and lost eyelashes.

COLORADO

You've heard of Rosie the Riveter, the famous World War II figure. But have you heard of Rosie the tarantula? Well, you should — *eeek, she's crawling up your arm!* But don't run away: Rosie, a Chilean rose hair tarantula, has devoted her hairy eight-legged life to curing arachnophobia, working in the invertebrate zoo at the Butterfly Pavilion in Westminster, a suburb of Denver, since 1995. And by "working," we mean clambering onto people's hands for creepy-crawly "meet and greets." Nearly 3 million people have handled her, kdvr.com reported. But after 28 years in the business, Rosie and her tarantula colleague, Goldie the Chaco golden knee, are going to retire. It's not easy balancing yourself on sweaty, trembling human hands while voices around you shriek *"EWWW!"* all day long. Realizing the stress that such public handling causes, the pavilion decided that the spiders' health had to come first. "The science around ambassador animal care has evolved, and Butterfly Pavilion is evolving with it," Sarah Stevens, director of animal collections, explained. Rosie won't be completely taken off her detail; instead, she'll move into her dedicated exhibit — public display only, no handling allowed. The pavilion said that Rosie has helped people understand and appreciate spiders, not as creatures to fear, but as "vital members of our ecosystems." Let's hope Rosie enjoys her retirement and has a good pension. She deserves it.

OREGON

Long before Bigfoot entered American popular culture, Indigenous people regarded the cryptid as a relative and protector, *OPB News* reported. Many Indigenous cultures see Bigfoot — also known as "Sasquatch," "Istiyehe" or "Stiyahamas," among other names — as a spiritual being who teaches people how to care for the land. In the short film *Guardian of the Land,* produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting, oral histories and stories about Bigfoot are told from the perspective of four prominent Indigenous artists and thought leaders. The documentary grew out of "Sensing Sasquatch," an exhibit at the Oregon High Desert Museum in Bend, Oregon. In it, several Indigenous artists from the Pacific Northwest explore the cultural function and meaning of this mythical spirit and protector. "Bigfoot is a relative that reminds us of our responsibility to take care of the land," film director LaRonn Katchia said. You can stream *Guardian of the Land* on YouTube and on the PBS app.

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#IAM THE WEST

CASSANDRA BEGAY (SHE/HER)
(MEMBER OF THE DINÉ TRIBE)
Diné activist and advocate
Salt Lake City, Utah

Many of the world's problems could be resolved by Indigenous women. We have been resilient for 500 years, sustaining our languages and keeping ecosystems intact. When land is stewarded through colonial frameworks, it falls apart; it's not sustainable. It's a different thing to actually identify yourself through your connection to the land — to see it as a relative. In this way, rural areas are very powerful — and often underestimated. In rural communities, there is a strong ecosystem of people who have lived there for generations, committed to that area, to that land. In a capitalist society where so many things are convenient, living in rural areas can be very difficult and expensive. But people choose that way of life. When you have a combination of deep connection and care, these communities should be invested in. People want to stay — and make sure those areas are taken care of — for a long time.

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