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The Paper for People who Care about the West

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ORIGIN STORIES



A FLOWER'S FUTURE

FIGHTING MONEY IN POLITICS

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Helena, Montana, is at the center of a movement to curb election spending in the state. (See story on page 12.)
Louise Johns / HCN

Know The West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. *High Country News* (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *High Country News*, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to *HCN* are \$50 a year: 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.



The past is present

In 1996, *High Country News* ran a piece about Santa Fe's fading allure as a high-end tourist destination. The publication was still printed on newsprint like your local paper; above the fold, a classic Southwestern coyote howled and slowly disintegrated. Lower down, Santa Fe's outspoken new mayor, Debbie Jaramillo, blasted previous leaders' dedication to promoting tourism over people's needs.

"We don't need any more videos of people getting out of Porsches and women on ski slopes," she said.

This is the first piece of journalism I remember. I found it on the table in my parents' house on Colorado's Front Range. When I first began working at *HCN* in 2015, I spotted that shabby coyote on the wall in the production room. And in 2021, when I moved to Santa Fe to work at a local investigative outlet, I found a town still facing the issues *HCN* had explored in 1996. Not long before I arrived, the *Santa Fe Reporter* reinterviewed Jaramillo, whose single term was tarnished by accusations of nepotism.

That article, itself soon an iconic piece of local journalism, was titled "Was Debbie right?" Everyone knew who the headline meant. Jaramillo's fingerprints were all over town, from development targeted at the middle class to fury over economic inequality and the town's colonial past and present.

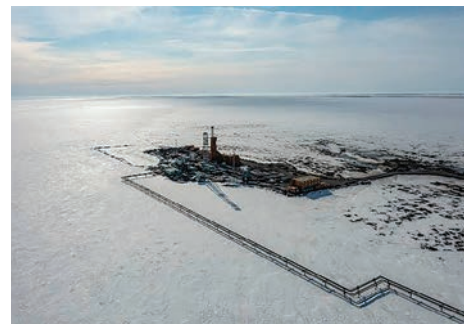
This is what reporting can do: Show us the moment we're in, where it came from and who played a part. It can reveal, at a human scale, where the world is in the midst of reshaping itself. It can show us, too, where things are ripe for reshaping.

In this issue, you'll find a handful of similar examples: Stories from our archives that have new insights to offer, from the battles over Utah's national monuments to the little-known backstories of Trump administration appointees.

My background is as a reporter, from local beat reporting and public radio to many corners of *HCN*, and reporting will remain my focus as editor-in-chief. Communities need better and more in-depth information, particularly here in the Western U.S., which still often exists at the fringes of the national conversation. A place like Santa Fe — or Malheur National Wildlife Refuge or Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument — may have its brief moment in the spotlight, when hundreds of journalists dedicate their intelligence, creativity and curiosity to understanding it. But their attention doesn't remain. Ours does.

The reality of the West's communities is far more complex than it appears in national media or even, at times, in the local papers. In digging through our archives, I was reminded how easy it is to see only the broad outlines and miss the nuances that complicate things. That is the task before *HCN* and my charge to you as readers: See the details clearly. We're on the hunt for those tricky little stories that say more than their bare facts. Tell us yours. Thank you for your trust.

Kate Schimel, editor-in-chief



Nathaniel Wilder

Arctic drilling in Alaska won't get environmental review in new proposal

The Interior Department will soon publish a "categorical exclusion" that will rubber-stamp oil and gas development in Alaska's remote National Petroleum Reserve.

By Adam Federman



Summer Esther Orr / HCN

The BLM may stop notifying landowners about drilling under private land.

Ranchers are alarmed

Western cattlemen are poised to lose almost all opportunity to comment on oil and gas development underneath their property.

By Teal Davis



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BY ANGIE SMITH

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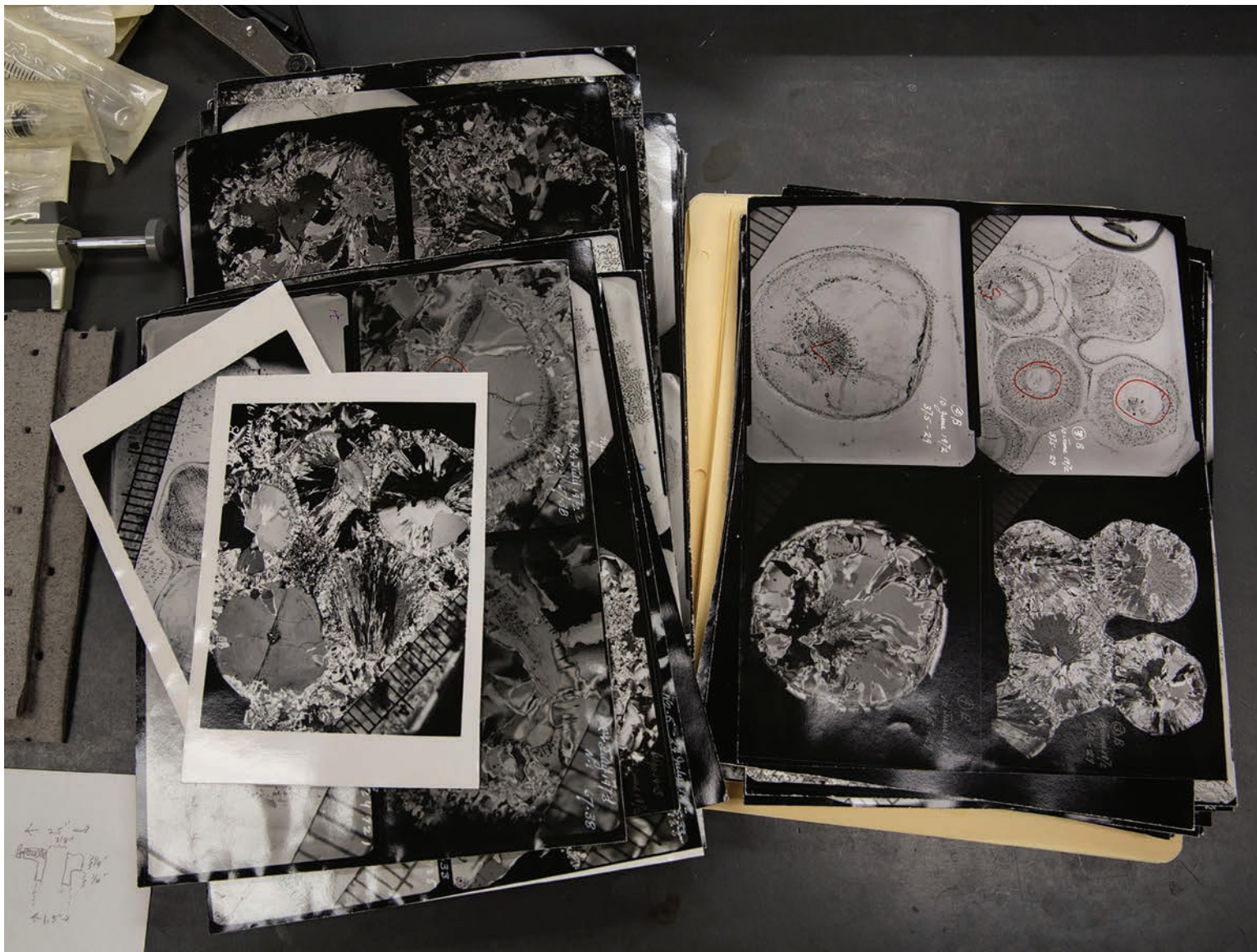
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ON THE COVER

This issue’s cover art features a selection of printed material from issues of *Camping News Weekly* and *High Country News* from the 1970s through the 1990s. Many ran without credit, except for the following: Botanical illustration by Jeff Clack, 1990. Goat HCN.org illustration and map by Diane Sylvain. Cresson Mine in Vietor, Colorado, photo by Barry Noreen, 1992. Butterfly illustration by Carol Snow, 1976.

Cover collage art by J.D. Reeves



Photographs made in the 1970s by researchers Nancy Knight and Charles Knight at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) show the detailed crystalline structure of a hailstone. The Boulder, Colorado, lab has a new project underway to study hail, one of the costliest and least understood weather hazards currently facing the Western U.S. (See story on page 7). **Luna Anna Archey / HCN**

LETTERS

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

FULL HEART, FAITHFUL READER

Ruben Martinez painted a heart-felt tribute to his mentor and friend, Gary Paul Nabhan, with prose that carried me into the very heart of the troubled landscape of the Arizona Borderlands (“Desert Sage,” September 2026). He described Nabhan as vividly as he presented the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge, with its great interloper, the misguided *wall*. It is writing of this caliber that keeps me renewing my subscription.

Linda Paul
Boise, Idaho

A PLAGUE OF PROPAGANDA

It was a matter of time before it was exposed (“Inside Standing Rock’s propaganda war,” August 2026), but this tactic has been used over and over again. I’m not sure if other Natives were waiting for any fallout, but it does not bode well for anyone — not even the bad actors.

Cheryl Frost
Via social

It’s already happening again. They’re infiltrating our communities, going to town halls and singing the praises of AI and data centers. It’s just like what the oil

and gas companies did regarding fracking to get local people to buy into it.

Gail Dee
Via social

Ten years later, we’re still learning more about the terrifying counterinsurgency tactics that Energy Transfer’s contractors used to win the public opinion war against Dakota Access Pipeline protesters. An important investigation.

Sammy Roth
Via social

MAKING HAY WHILE A LAKE DIES

In the op-ed “Utah is Killing the Great Salt Lake” (August 11, 2026), Wade Graham’s writing is eloquent, and the issues he raises are real, but the article fundamentally fails to inform people of the most pressing issue regarding the lake: alfalfa and other hay farming.

The article rightly criticized Gov. Spencer Cox, R, for his inaction. The governor owns a farm in Fairview, Utah, that produces alfalfa. Not only is alfalfa the main cause of the Great Salt Lake’s issues, the governor is directly involved. This op-ed failed to mention that.

As a lifelong Utah resident who wants this state to continue being a good place for me, my family and my friends to live, I believe it’s important to be honest about how we got here and how we can get out of it. That process doesn’t end with alfalfa farming, but it certainly starts with it.

Jack Setzer
Midvale, Utah

Another example of elected politicians turning a blind and greedy eye to their constituents. Many people have been fighting for years to preserve the lake. Responsible development is not a pipe dream, but it does take the right kind of leadership to rise up and put the Great Salt Lake first before power and money.

Michelle Breinholt
Via social

GENUINELY GRASSROOTS

Articles like “On the corn pollen trail with Deb Haaland” (August 2026) are why I love *HCN*! To read about such a visionary/change-maker, written by a Laguna and Jemez Pueblo relative of hers, is so beautiful and personal. Staying grounded in these times is not easy, but I get so renewed when I read of another human being with real Earth values, living their vision.

Richard Baruc
Orange, Massachusetts

EVERYTHING IS GLOBAL

I’m often impressed with how thoughtful *HCN* is when reporting on issues, especially more niche topics as in “First the glacier retreated, then came the landslide and tsunami” (July 2026) — issues that are less well-known but still have the potential to be so impactful and devastating. When news broke of the tragic flooding in Nepal, I immediately thought of this

article — how timely it was and how the stories that play out in the Western U.S. have parallels across the world. I’m grateful that *HCN* helps us make sense of global events in this way.

Elliot Baglini
Durango, Colorado

RECYCLED BEAUTY

I love *HCN* and look forward to Jennifer Sahn’s lovely framing editor’s notes.

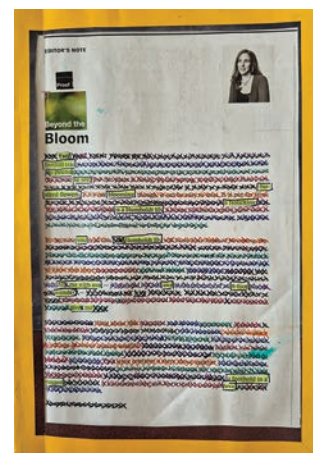
I’ve been a subscriber since the mid-1990s. Because it’s my only surviving print subscription, I try to work hard, after Reading them, to Recirculate the issues to friends, or Recycle them in free libraries.

On a blustery day at the table of a vacation rental, my beloved, poet Jami Macarty, found the best “R” thus far. See the following blend of erasure and collage from a recent editor’s note.

John Welch
Tucson, Arizona

“Proof Beyond the Bloom”

*The foothill trail
I pound to see
Fist-sized flowers blooming
Afrolicking is a Humboldt lily
You, a Humboldt lily
Fill me with awe
Awe
8-foot wonder
Give me a foothold in a rugged
love*



CORRECTION

In our August 2026 story “Treaty talks,” we described Chinook Jargon as a 50-word trading language. Some scholars, however, estimate that it included up to 1,000 words. The vocabulary is limited, but because the term is so broad, it is difficult to determine an exact number. We regret the error.



REPORTAGE

Hail Alley meets climate change

Hail is a multibillion-dollar problem — and could get worse in a warming world.

BY HANNAH COVINGTON

AT A SPECIALIZED COLD LAB in Boulder, Colorado, where indoor temperatures hover around minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 20 degrees Celsius), atmospheric researcher Anthony Bernal Ayala slices hailstones with a band saw, revealing layers of icy growth like the rings of a tree. These frozen rings — clear or cloudy, thick or thin — indicate the conditions in which the hail formed: A clear layer signals the water froze slowly, while a cloudy layer means it happened quickly, trapping air bubbles. Bernal Ayala then analyzes the crystalline structures, particles and isotopes preserved in these layers. “All that information can tell you a wonderful story of how the hailstone was growing, but nobody — not until now — was able to tap into that history,” said Bernal Ayala, who works for

The rings in a cross-section sample of a large hailstone reveal the environmental conditions in which it formed. **Courtesy of ICECHIP**

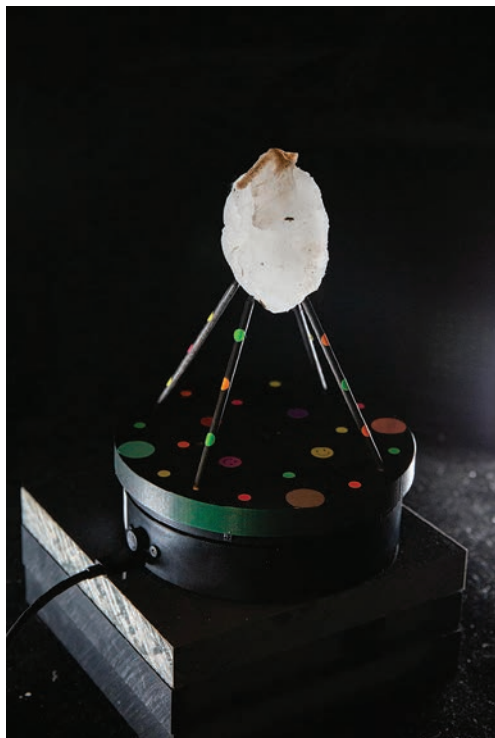
Atmospheric and Environmental Research, part of the JANUS Research Group.

Bernal Ayala's research, conducted at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), is part of a historic effort to study one of the costliest weather hazards. Researchers hope their findings will help protect lives and property from the stones that careen to Earth, battering roofs, pummeling crops and pock-marking cars.

From 2023 to 2025, annual severe thunderstorm losses exceeded \$50 billion

Atmospheric researcher Anthony Bernal Ayala works in the cold lab at NCAR (opposite). A hail sample sits on a tripod to be photographed for 3D rendering (below). Bernal Ayala holds a 3D-printed replica of one of the largest hailstones in the ICECHIP archive (bottom).

Luna Anna Archey / HCN



nationwide, according to the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety — more than double the losses seen just a decade earlier. Hail accounted for 60 to 80% of the damage.

In Colorado, one of the country's most hail-prone states, hail — not wildfire — is the main factor driving up insurance premiums. And researchers expect larger, more damaging hailstones to become more common with climate change.

"It's going to just keep getting costlier and costlier," Bernal Ayala said.

EVEN BASIC QUESTIONS about hail have been notoriously hard to study. But a long-awaited resurgence in research, including the first major U.S. field campaign to study hail in more than 40 years, could help change that.

ICECHIP — the "In-situ Collaborative Experiment for the Collection of Hail In the Plains" — aims to improve forecasts, make warnings more precise and help communities better prepare. It received \$11 million in funding from the National Science Foundation in 2024, just before deep cuts hit the foundation in 2025.

For six weeks in spring 2025, about 100 scientists and university students chased hailstorms across the Central Plains and Front Range, from the Canadian to the Mexican border, using radar trucks to track storms and drones to take aerial footage. Researchers photographed hail with high-speed cameras, measured its impact with a tool called a disdrometer, recorded hail's distribution and size based on its imprints on foam pads, captured it in specialized funnels and crushed it to test its strength.

Scientists from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology also used balloons to release golf ball-sized sensors into storms. Once aloft, each hail-like probe collected data on how fast it was traveling and whether ice was growing on it; a microphone even recorded water droplets and hailstones hitting it.

"This has really been the first time where we've been able to do a real comprehensive look at hail on the ground, hail aloft, the storm itself, the environment around the storm — just everything all at once," said Becky Adams-Selin, ICECHIP's lead investigator and a principal scientist at Atmospheric and Environmental Research, JANUS Research Group.

ICECHIP'S SAMPLES were packed into 26 cooler-sized boxes and brought to NCAR. This internationally renowned hub for weather and climate research has been used to study hail for decades. In one of its last major campaigns, in the 1970s, the U.S. investigated Soviet claims that it could suppress hail.

Researchers say there's no other U.S. lab like it; the backup plan to store ICECHIP's samples involved using a walk-in freezer from a fast-food restaurant.

Now NCAR's own future is uncertain: In late 2025, the Trump administration said it would dissolve the center and transfer its work out of state. The University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR), which manages NCAR, sued the administration in March, alleging that it's targeting NCAR to punish Colorado for retaining its mail-in voting system and because Gov. Jared Polis initially refused to release former Mesa County clerk Tina Peters, a 2020 election denier imprisoned for breaching election security and undermining election integrity.

In June, a federal judge temporarily blocked the White House from dismantling NCAR. The government has until Sept. 30 to respond to the lawsuit.

"I can't even quantify the impact that it would have to our community if we lost NCAR," Victor Gensini, professor of meteorology at Northern Illinois University, told HCN. "They are the beating heart."

PREVIOUS RESEARCH HAS PREDICTED climate change's effects on hail, noting that warmer temperatures could melt smaller hailstones before they land but also fuel stronger updrafts, keeping hailstones airborne longer and allowing them to grow bigger, enabling the most damaging hail to become more common.

A record-setting stone recovered in Yuma County, Colorado, in 2023 measured more than 5 inches across. That year, the state logged 176 reports of hail 2 inches or greater, surpassing the previous record of 91 reports in 2018, according to the Colorado Climate Center.

Scientists say it's difficult to know how much of the rise in damage is due to the increase in large hail versus the increased development in hail hotspots.



The connection between a rapidly growing human footprint and higher insured losses has been dubbed the “expanding bull’s-eye effect.”

Gensini, a principal ICECHIP investigator, cites the development boom east of the Front Range, along Colorado’s Interstate 25 corridor, which has grown explosively in recent decades. The population of the Fort Collins metro area alone has doubled since 1990 to around 375,000 residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

This is happening across the Western U.S., as previously rural or open areas become densely populated, increasingly expensive targets for hail.

“Colorado is the poster child for what I expect the next 25 years to look like for hail,” Gensini said.

IN 2019, FORT COLLINS became one of the first cities to adopt hail-specific roofing requirements for new builds and remodels. Marcus Coldiron, the city’s chief building official, said it was partly in response to all the shingles and roofing materials taken to the landfill after a catastrophic hailstorm in 2018.

It’s still unclear how well the requirements are working: Coldiron said fewer

*“I can’t even quantify
the impact that it
would have to our
community if we lost
NCAR. They are the
beating heart.”*

permits were being issued for roof replacements and fewer shingles were going to the dump. However, Fort Collins also hasn’t experienced a hailstorm as devastating as the one that hit in 2018.

A growing number of Front Range communities now require impact-resistant shingles in their building codes, and Colorado legislators recently passed a law offering grants to residents who install more resilient roofing.

ICECHIP’s researchers are also investigating how they can improve building materials as billion-dollar losses from single storms become more common.

“The dollars are simply piling up so fast,” said Ian Giammanco, a lead research meteorologist at the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety, one of ICECHIP’s key partners. “We’re still trying to understand how do we get the best materials onto roofs, onto people’s homes, onto businesses to actually start shaving off these losses.” ☀

Hannah Covington is an Oklahoma-based journalist and educator. In 2024, she helped launch a community newspaper at a women’s prison in Oklahoma and now serves as its newsroom advisor. Bluesky: @hannahcov

Get to know the scarlet monkeyflower

The plant proves that some can out-evolve climate change.

BY SARAH TRENT
ILLUSTRATIONS BY EMILY POOLE

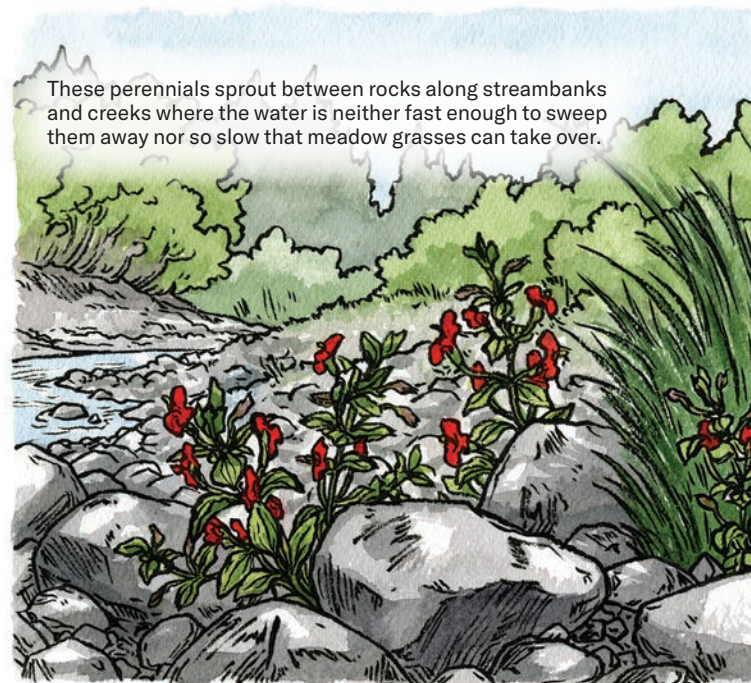
ALL SUMMER, ALONG streambanks from Washington to Northern Mexico, hummingbirds whirl between red, face-shaped flowers that have evolved almost exclusively to suit them. As fall approaches, those blooms dry into long brown capsules filled with thousands of dust-like seeds — and then it is scientists who dart from pod to pod, collecting genetic material that, though not exactly meant for them, has become a key tool for studying evolutionary biology and the ways that climate change will reshape ecosystems across the West.

Earlier this year, a group of those researchers, led by University of British Columbia ecologist Amy Angert, published a groundbreaking paper using this species — the scarlet monkeyflower (*Mimulus cardinalis*) — to prove, for the first time, that some plants can evolve fast enough in the wild to rescue themselves from the effects of climate change. It was the latest in a string of discoveries based on this thumb-length trumpet of a flower, showing how pollinators

shape speciation, that plants' capacities to evolve can vary across their geographic range and how a floral version of intergenerational trauma can help them adjust to climatic changes even without genetic mutations.

It will probably not be the last big discovery for this species, or for Angert's lab, which is now working on monkeyflower-based models that could eventually predict the ability of *other* species to adapt or evolve to outpace worsening drought, heat, fire and other climate-related stressors. Angert hopes to help conservationists understand which species or populations need their attention — and which ones, like many of her monkeyflowers, “can hold themselves up by their own bootstraps.”

Sarah Trent is a freelance journalist who covers people and ecosystems affected by climate change and environmental degradation, especially in California and the Pacific Northwest. She lives in Vancouver, Washington. Instagram: @sftrent



These perennials sprout between rocks along streambanks and creeks where the water is neither fast enough to sweep them away nor so slow that meadow grasses can take over.

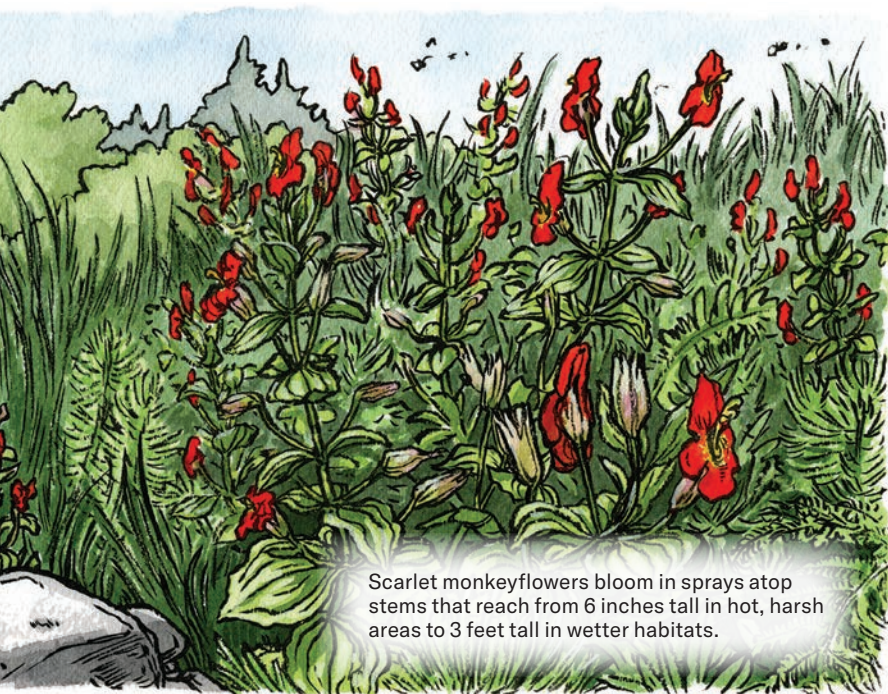
From streambank to lab

Every year since 2010, Angert's team has visited dozens to hundreds of monkeyflower sites, recording observations and collecting seeds to bring back to the lab. In several studies, her team “resurrected” multiple generations of seeds in the same greenhouse, showing that over time, the lineages that experienced drought evolved drought-tolerant traits, such as modified leaf thickness and blooming times.



A supermodel for science

Monkeyflowers are “model species” in evolutionary biology, providing insights applicable to many organisms. These plants are useful for many reasons: They’ve been studied for a particularly long time (since the early 1800s); they have a short lifecycle and grow well in the lab; and they produce enough seeds — more than 2,000 per pod — to make collection efficient. Monkeyflowers also have a small genome, though that’s becoming less important as gene-sequencing costs fall and computing tools improve.



Scarlet monkeyflowers bloom in sprays atop stems that reach from 6 inches tall in hot, harsh areas to 3 feet tall in wetter habitats.



Their fuzzy leaves secrete a sticky resin with a distinct smell: "It's a little sweet, a little pungent. I've never been able to hit on the right word," Angert said, "but I smell that scent and I'm immediately transported."



Climate toolkit

Southern scarlet monkeyflower populations have more adaptive genetic variation than Northern ones, according to research out of Angert's lab: They can evolve more rapidly in response to the same stressors. That means researchers and conservationists can't make species-wide generalizations from what's known about just a few populations.

Many plants have "stress memory," in which compounds or markers that alter gene expression but aren't actual genetic mutations are passed from grandparent to parent to offspring — an ability that may also vary across a species' range. Angert's team hypothesizes that even populations that can't evolve fast enough may still be able to use this "memory" to adapt to a changing climate.



The house special

The scarlet monkeyflower has evolved to entice hummingbirds: It is bright red, tube-shaped, filled with nectar, and has a long stamen perfectly positioned to deposit two stripes of pollen on each hummer's forehead. A very close relative, Lewis' monkeyflower (*Mimulus lewisii*), specialized to suit bumblebees instead: Its pink blossoms produce less nectar and its petals offer a nice little landing pad for pollen collection. These two species, which overlap in range, can easily hybridize but rarely do, thanks to their pollinators' different preferences. Evolutionary biologists have shown that the flowers owe their divergent shapes to changes in just a few regions of their genomes, meaning that evolving to suit a new pollinator can happen relatively fast, on the scale of millennia.





REPORTAGE

Montanans rise up against big money

A novel approach to curb political spending heads to the ballot.

BY GABRIEL FURSHONG | PHOTOS BY LOUISE JOHNS

MASSIVE AMOUNTS of private money have poured into Montana's elections for years. In 2020, the Steve Daines-Steve Bullock race for the U.S. Senate became the most expensive in state history. Four years later, the Jon Tester-Tim Sheehy race shattered that record, becoming the most expensive Senate contest per vote in American history.

But this year, big money began flowing into the state even earlier than usual, flooding primary races that haven't historically attracted national attention. Before summer even started, three PACs — Americans for Prosperity, Accountability in State Government and the School Freedom Fund — had already spent over \$2 million in Republican legislative

primaries to unseat more moderate lawmakers, including some who isolated the far right during the 2025 legislative session. This spring, the Progressive Vet PAC also spent nearly \$3 million in a five-person Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate. The PAC then exited the race, saying the state was unwinnable for Democrats.

For Jeff Mangan, founder and president

of Montana's Transparent Election Initiative, this latest round of unprecedented spending offers yet another reminder of the need for limits. "Montana just saw the most expensive primary election in state history," he told me. "We've all realized there's too much money, and we've lost control of our politics."

Mangan created the nonprofit Transparent Election Initiative, a 501(c)(4) organization, and used it to launch a statutory ballot measure last summer that he dubbed "The Montana Plan." Officially titled Initiative 194, it aims to strip political spending power from "artificial persons" — including corporations and 501(c)(4) organizations — unless they're registered as political committees under state or federal law. After spending six years overseeing elections as Montana's commissioner of political practices, he believes the initiative represents the most serious attempt nationwide to push back against *Citizens United v. FEC*, the 2010 decision by five U.S. Supreme Court justices that made unlimited political spending by corporations a First Amendment right.

Mangan's measure currently has some wind in its sails. In June, he announced I-194 had gathered at least 20,000 more signatures than required to qualify for the ballot, and Montana Secretary of State Christi Jacobsen officially certified the measure in August. But questions remain. Will voters in this deep red state approve it? If they do, will it survive the inevitable legal and political challenges to come? And if it is finally implemented, will it be as effective as its supporters claim?

MONTANANS HAVE A HISTORY of popular resistance to corporate influence in public elections. In 1912, voters approved four citizens' initiatives, including the Corrupt Practices Act, which curtailed political spending by candidates and corporations. It was the first time Montana voters — almost entirely white men at the time — had exercised a new right to pass laws by direct vote, and the upshot was a dramatic reduction in the power of political parties and their financial backers.

Nearly a century later, *Citizens United* abolished those spending limits along with campaign finance reforms in 23 other states, creating durable legal protections for unlimited spending that can only be overturned through a constitutional amendment or a reverse ruling. Because neither outcome is

imminent, Thomas Moore, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, developed the "Corporate Power Reset," a strategy to moderate spending by limiting the powers that states grant to corporations. Two years ago, Moore sent a white paper on the strategy to Mangan, and soon after, Mangan launched the nonprofit that became the Transparent Election Initiative.

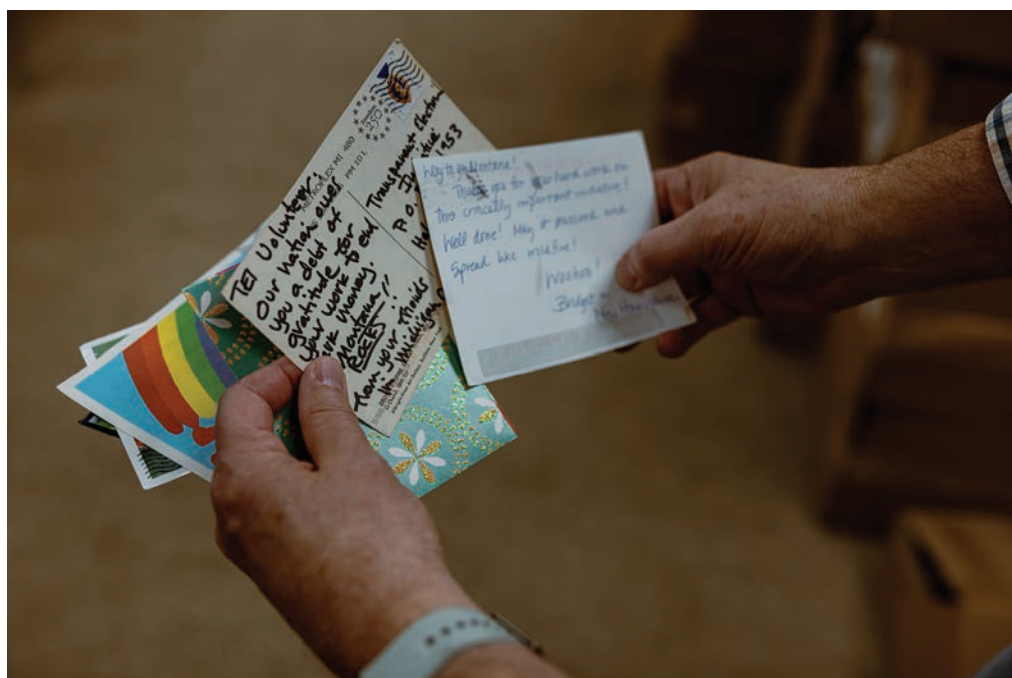
The Montana Plan's all-volunteer canvassing effort — unusual in an era when many signature gatherers are paid by private firms — is one indication of the proposal's public support. Though Mangan has not polled the specific ballot language in I-194, an Issue One poll from last October found that 74% of Montanans supported a hypothetical ballot measure to limit political spending.

But sizable challenges lie ahead. The Montana Chamber of Commerce and other industry groups oppose the initiative, and the Montana Republican Party recently passed a resolution against it, an influential partisan signal in a red state that Donald Trump won by an average of 19 points in the past three presidential elections.

TO SUCCEED, MANGAN has to convince around 10% of Republican voters to ignore the opposition, and even if he succeeds, other challenges await. The measure is statutory, not constitutional, so Republican legislators, who recently made it more difficult to qualify

"We've all realized there's too much money, and we've lost control of our politics."

Jeff Mangan, founder of the Transparent Election Initiative, assembles signs promoting the ballot initiative I-194 in his office in Helena, Montana, this August (opposite). Mangan holds thank-you postcards sent to volunteers who collected signatures for the ballot initiative. The organization has been run entirely by volunteers since its beginning (below).





Helena, Montana, is at the center of a movement to curb election spending in the state.

and pass citizens initiatives, could use their legislative majorities to overturn it in 2027. Its implementation could also be hindered by Jacobsen, who sought to disqualify valid signatures on initiative petitions in 2024, or Attorney General Austin Knudsen, who tried unsuccessfully to rewrite two ballot initiatives last year.

It will also likely face new lawsuits from industry groups that could reach the U.S. Supreme Court. “I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it passed,” said Rob Saldin, a political science professor at the University of Montana. “The bigger question in a *Citizens United* era is ‘Does this thing pass constitutional muster?’”

Mangan and Moore believe it will because it depends on the 10th Amendment, which allows states to regulate the powers of corporations and political organizations, rather than the First Amendment, which was the legal basis for *Citizens United*. The Supreme Court’s conservative majority, however, seems likely to reject attempts to restrict anyone’s political spending powers for any reason. In July, the court issued a 6-3 ruling that removed limits on the amount political parties can spend to support their

candidates, a last vestige of the pre-*Citizens United* era.

Even if The Montana Plan manages to leap all these hurdles, some opponents have argued that large loopholes for political spending will persist, such as a law that allows organizations to register as “incidental committees” without being required to disclose their donors — a workaround that Mangan himself has used.

Regardless, advocates for reform see potential. “For opponents of unregulated campaign spending, there may still be some reasons to do this,” Saldin said. “Taking on *Citizens United* is a long-term project, and relatively small-scale things like this can help build momentum.”

That momentum is apparent in at least 19 states where lawmakers are considering similar proposals, including Hawai‘i, where legislators have already passed a measure modeled on The Montana Plan. That law, though, was immediately challenged by the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii, a politically conservative think tank based in Honolulu.

Tiffany Muller, president of End Citizens United, a national nonprofit fighting big money in politics, expects similar resistance

to The Montana Plan. “We know this is going to be challenged when it passes,” she said. Still, she thinks there’s too much at stake not to try.

“When you have billionaires and corporations spending unlimited amounts of money in our elections, then you end up seeing public officials and candidates that are more responsive to the needs and wants of those corporations and billionaires rather than the needs of the people,” she said. As evidence, she pointed to the record-breaking \$275 million that was spent to reach 600,000 voters in Montana’s 2024 U.S. Senate election and the role that well-connected billionaires played in that race.

In the absence of congressional action, Muller argued that it makes sense for Montana voters to take matters into their own hands. “In this moment we are in, it’s important that states continue to be the laboratories of democracy.” ☀

Gabriel Furshong writes from Helena, Montana, for The Nation, The New Republic and other magazines. His poetry collection Surrounding the Country a Chasm won the 2025 Slapering Hol Press Chapbook Prize. His writing can be found at gabrielfurshong.com.

Tribes sue over ‘harm’

The Trump administration’s narrowed protections for endangered species threaten tribal conservation efforts.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

THE SMOKEHOUSE TIDAL Marsh project on the Swinomish Indian Reservation, which began in 2022, will turn 250 acres of former agricultural land into estuaries and wetlands. It’s one of many tribal community projects aimed at restoring endangered and threatened populations of Puget Sound chinook salmon, Puget Sound steelhead, bull trout and southern resident killer whales in the Skagit River Watershed. A primary cause of decline for each of these species is habitat loss and degradation caused by development and agriculture.

“Over the past 150 years or so, there’s been significant damage to the habitat, and (the habitat is) what salmon needs,” said Swinomish Tribal Indian Community Chairman Steve Edwards, who has fished in the area for over 50 years.

In July, the Trump administration dealt a massive blow to tribal efforts when it finalized changes to the federal government’s interpretation of the 1973 Endangered Species Act. Previously, the definition of “harm” to a species included the habitat and resources a species needs to survive. Now, agencies will interpret “harm” to mean only the intentional killing or harming of an *individual* of a species, dramatically narrowing the reach and scope of the law formerly focused on ecosystem-wide protection.

On July 14, the same day the rule change was finalized, the Swinomish and Squaxin Island tribes sued the federal government over its “radical reinterpretation” of the law, arguing that the Trump administration’s changes ignored over 50 years of congressional intent and Supreme Court case law.

“Squaxin’s cultural and economic well-being depend upon the health and sustainability of Pacific Salmon and other freshwater and marine resources, which play a central role in the daily lives of Tribal members,” the tribes wrote in the lawsuit.

Chairman Edwards told *High Country News* that federal agencies never responded to the Swinomish Tribe’s request for government-to-government consultation, despite the United States’ trust obligation to Native nations.

“It feels almost like we’ve been betrayed by our federal trustees,” Edwards said of the change, which he said diminishes their treaty rights. “It’s super disturbing that we had to fight this fight.”

Many Native nations opposed the changes in public comments when they were proposed in 2025. They highlighted the lack of tribal consultation, as well as the devastating impacts the new interpretation could have on the recovery of imperiled species, many of which have cultural, spiritual and relational meaning and importance to tribal citizens.

The change could also disrupt fishing communities’ economies and deprive those

who rely on salmon for subsistence.

While the majority of the comments came from Native nations in the Pacific Northwest and were related to salmon, others came from tribes like the Pueblo of San Felipe, which cited impacts on the monarch butterfly and Suckley’s cuckoo bumblebee. The Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe voiced concern for the Dixie Valley toad, which the tribe considers a relative.

“It is obvious that removing water from a species that needs water to survive harms both individual members of the species and the species’ population,” wrote Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe Chairwoman Cathi Williams-Tuni, about the change and the potential impacts of a nearby proposed geothermal project.

That geothermal project was halted in 2022 after the toad was listed as endangered, but the Trump administration’s changes could allow it to resume.

“These harms in Dixie Valley would be catastrophic, permanently ruining the Tribe’s sacred site and ending the ability to use the springs for medicine and ceremonies,” said Williams-Tuni in public comments.

The tribes asked the court to prevent the regulatory changes from moving forward, which took effect Sept. 14, and requested a decision declaring the changes unlawful and reverting to the previous definitions of “harm.” Although they hope for a timely



Steve Edwards, chairman of the Swinomish Tribal Community at Lone Tree Point, on the Swinomish Reservation in Washington. **Jovelle Tamayo**

response, the tribes are prepared for the lawsuit to take months to resolve.

The rule change is advantageous for developers and industry, who may no longer need to consider or mitigate broader habitat impacts of their actions. Previously, if an activity would destroy habitat in a way that harmed a protected species, the business responsible would have to go through a permit process that normally triggered tribal consultation. Under the new changes, such permits would be required much less frequently, effectively cutting tribes out of the process. The changed definition will also require proof that the harm was intentional, which is something difficult to prove in the legal system, according to Bob Anderson, Oneida Indian Nation visiting professor of law at the Harvard Law School and a member of the Bois Forte Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe.

“Companies won’t have any incentives to negotiate with the government or environmental groups or tribes about how their activities are going to affect the listed species,” Anderson told *HCN*.

The change could also impact large-scale agreements on rivers with ESA-listed

species, according to Anderson. Currently, river systems like the Klamath, Elwha and Columbia all require water to be released from their dams at certain times of year to support the migration and spawning cycles of endangered or threatened salmon, in accordance with the ESA. The new interpretation throws existing agreements and laws into question and would make salmon recovery exponentially harder.

“We’re not even close to delisting these species,” said Kayeloni Scott (Nez Perce and Spokane), executive director of the Columbia River Snake Campaign, a coalition of conservation groups, businesses and the Nez Perce Tribe. “Our goal is abundance — healthy and abundant populations — that’s a whole other level, a whole other tier. Even getting to delisting, we’re pretty far off.”

Anderson believes that the tribes and environmental groups’ legal arguments are strong but added that they involve a level of political risk, given the administration’s reputation for being highly retaliatory. One striking example is that of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, which joined a lawsuit against the administration in July 2025 over the construction of an immigration

detention center in the Everglades. That December, President Donald Trump vetoed an unrelated bipartisan bill that would have returned land to the tribe, citing the tribe’s opposition to the detention center as his reasoning for the veto, calling the Miccosukee Tribe “unaligned with my Administration’s policy of removing violent criminal illegal aliens from the country.”

“That’s a real message there to plaintiffs that they’re going to retaliate against you,” Anderson said. “You’re locking horns with the federal government.”

Despite the latest development, Edwards’ priority is upholding the nation’s sovereign rights for future generations. He says the tribe will not stop its restoration work.

“It does impact our sovereignty,” Edwards said of the change to species protections. “Generations down the road, I want (Swinomish citizens) to be able to exercise their treaty rights like I have done in the past.” ☀

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.



Nookachamps Creek in the Barney Lake Conservation Area, Washington. A native vegetation planting project by the Skagit River System Cooperative aims to improve water quality and restore salmon habitat along the Lower Skagit tributary. **Jovelle Tamayo**

■ DEAR FRIENDS

New leadership for HCN

LAST MONTH, we shared the news that our editor-in-chief, Jennifer Sahn, was leaving *HCN*. This month, we present the dynamic duo who'll lead *HCN*'s editorial staff for the next leg of the journey: **Kate Schimel**, our new editor-in-chief, and **Gretchen King**, who has taken on new, expanded duties in her role as executive editor.

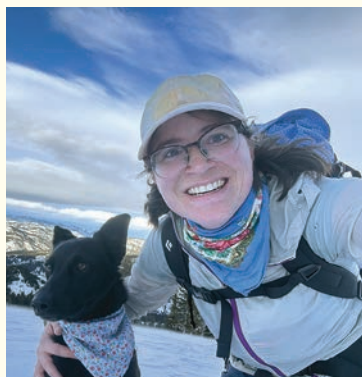
Kate is on her third tour with *HCN*. She started as an intern back in 2015 and became an assistant editor later that year. For the next four years, she helped *HCN* build out our Indigenous affairs team, cover grazing and public-land use, interrogate the idea of wilderness and prioritize investigative work. Do you remember our special issue on recreation's power — and perils (May 14, 2018)? Kate was the force behind that.

Ready to return to her roots in local news, Kate then took a job at Colorado Public Radio, where she edited a national award-winning investigation of teen suicide and led CPR's coverage of COVID-19. From there, she hopped to the investigative news nonprofit *Searchlight New Mexico* and the Southern New Mexico News Collaborative before returning to *HCN* in 2022 as our news and investigations editor.

Born and raised on Colorado's Front Range, Kate attended Reed College in Portland and has since lived in Washington and New Mexico. She and her husband, **Ethan Linck**, now live in Bozeman, Montana, with their daughter and a badly behaved border collie.

Gretchen has been a quiet force behind *HCN* for years now (quiet, that is, unless you're late turning in copy for an upcoming issue of the magazine, as this writer often is). She and her husband, **Mike**, and son, **Riley**, moved to Paonia, Colorado, in 2007 and started a microbrewery a few blocks from *HCN*'s office. The writing was on the wall, however: She had a master's degree in communications from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and had spent several years as a journalism instructor.

It took us a few years, but we finally lured Gretchen down the street to become our community engagement coordinator in 2014. Since then, she's filled roles across the organization, from spearheading website redesigns to overseeing our intern and fellowship programs. Raised in Grand Junction, Colorado, she now lives in Gunnison, where she enjoys all the great recreation that



Kate Schimel



Gretchen King, right

comes with life at one of the largest tributaries of the Colorado River.

Kate and Gretchen make a great team. Kate has a clear vision for *HCN*'s future, one founded on rigorous reporting and built around community needs and real-world impact. And Gretchen, the master of our editorial processes, always keeps the trains — and the copy — running on time. In other words, Kate focuses on the “what” and Gretchen is all about the “how.”

We're delighted to welcome them into their new roles!

BILLY ARNOLD, our new partnerships editor, traveled to New Orleans in August for the annual gathering of Report for America, our national partner in the Western Environmental Reporting Collaborative. There, he met our first four WERC reporters: **Stephanie Casanova** (*Arizona Luminaria*), **Teal Davis** (*Wyoming Public Media*), **Nick Mott** (*Mountain Journal/Montana Free Press*) and **Chart Riggall** (*Ouray County Plaindealer*), noting that “none of us lives in a place where getting to and from the Big Easy is all that easy.”

Still, they had plenty of fun, sharing meals, enjoying live music, zipping around on rental bikes — oh, and discussing their aspirations for WERC and the topics they've been covering, ranging from gray wolves, grazing in burn scars and the continuing conflict over border wall construction to the ongoing disagreements between the Colorado River Basin states. You can find their reporting on the websites of their home publications, or read them here: **hcn.org/werc**.

— Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

HCN HITS THE ROAD

At a time when our communities are experiencing rapid and often unprecedented change, and the news industry undergoes its own tumultuous transformation, the *High Country News* staff and board want to hear from you — the people who live and work in the West — about the most pressing issues you're facing, and how *HCN* can support you in your efforts to drive positive change.

And so we're embarking on a year-long “listening tour” — a series of road trips that will take us to the near and far corners of the region to visit local community halls, watering holes, parks and other gathering places. We'll meet with readers and community leaders, partnering with local nonprofit and news organizations to discuss how this place is changing and how we can step up and be of service.

Watch for more information in upcoming issues, and check for updates on our website at **hcn.org/listen**. If you want to help organize a community event, or if you have suggestions for places we should visit or groups we should partner with, please send us a postcard or email **dearfriends@hcn.org**. We're looking forward to spending some time together!

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DEXTER O'CONNEL
HIGH COUNTRY NEWS READER
LOS ANGELES

I love the online content, but there's nothing like experiencing the photography and the infographics in the physical issue. I deeply appreciate the work you do to highlight the confluence of urban and rural issues, and I especially appreciate, as someone professionally in the homeless services field, the work you do on housing insecurity and homelessness. I have lived all over the country, in places small and medium and very large, and in each of those places I've found news sources that felt like they were meaningfully of and for where I was. I think that in looking to better understand places I've never lived, I trust news sources that carry the same vibe, and HCN has always been right at the top of the list for me.

ORIGIN STORIES

How old battles over land, power and identity continue to shape the West.

INTRODUCTION BY ZOË CARPENTER | ILLUSTRATION BY J.D. REEVES

IN 1980, *HCN* WRITER JOAN NICE reported on a convention of “sagebrush rebels,” a group of legislators, industry representatives and local citizens united by the desire to wrest control of millions of acres of Western public lands from the federal government. The event was “part celebration, part show,” Nice wrote, capturing the rapid elevation of what had been a fringe regional movement to the national stage. Ronald Reagan, a self-proclaimed sagebrush rebel, had been elected president weeks earlier, and the movement was optimistic about its legislative prospects.

“They want to lock up 700,000 acres for 600 birds,” one Idaho resident at the convention complained regarding federal land managers. Ultimately, the Reagan administration did not usher in the kind of sweeping changes to land ownership that many of the rebels wanted, and the movement’s resentments continued to simmer throughout the following decades, occasionally boiling over. By 2016, when Ammon Bundy led an occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, the struggle over public lands had become entangled in a broader right-wing movement animated by a belligerent anti-government ideology, which eventually found its champion in Donald Trump. This July, when Trump gutted protections for more than 2.9 million acres of land in the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments, he echoed Nice’s unnamed Idahoan, describing the land as locked up, off-limits, closed. “You can’t go hunting, you can’t go fishing, you can’t do anything, you can virtually not even walk on it,” Trump claimed, inaccurately.

Nice’s dispatch is one of three features we’re republishing this month from the *HCN* archives. These stories illuminate the roots of our current

political moment, offering essential context for the movements and people shaping the West today. In “Beauty and the Beast,” originally published in 1997, Paul Larmer reports from the communities that border Grand Staircase-Escalante, which had been designated by President Bill Clinton the previous year. Many locals initially fought the monument, which crushed a proposal to mine 62 billion tons of coal, but Larmer found that even some opponents quickly recognized that it “solidifies two facts of life: Southern Utah’s mining, logging and ranching are in decline; and the region is already a public-lands playground for the world.” Larmer described a place teetering uneasily on the edge between a fading, extraction-based economy and the tourism industry, with its own seasonal boom-and-bust cycles. “Would the anger and resentment fade?” he asked.

It didn’t. Though jobs grew by 51% and per capita incomes by 41% between 2001 and 2022 in the neighboring counties, the monument has remained a political lightning rod, channeling anxieties about the future of rural communities and how land in the West is best used and valued. These anxieties often become refracted as questions of community identity: Who are we? What do we stand for?

Identity and its relationship to political ideology is central to Graham Lee Brewer’s 2019 profile, “Markwayne Mullin is for Trump — and Indian Country.” Brewer captured Mullin, then an Oklahoma representative with his star on the rise, before he ascended to the Senate and then the top post at the Department of Homeland Security. (Mullin was nominated by Trump and confirmed by the Senate in March.) Though he is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, Mullin “does not fit stereotypical notions of what it means to be Indigenous, either in how he looks or how he

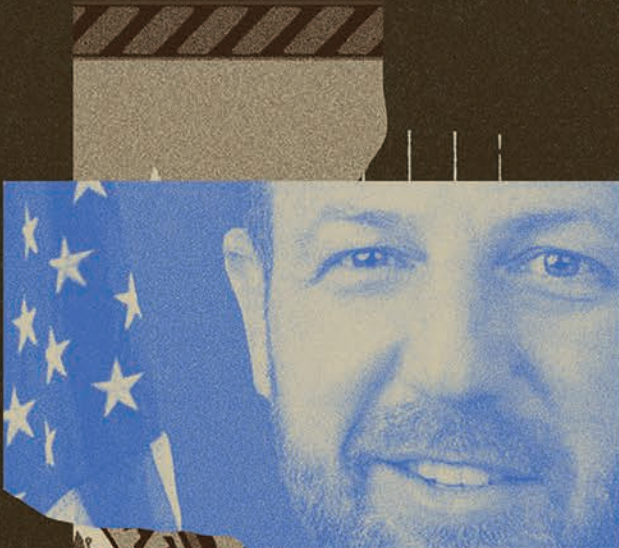
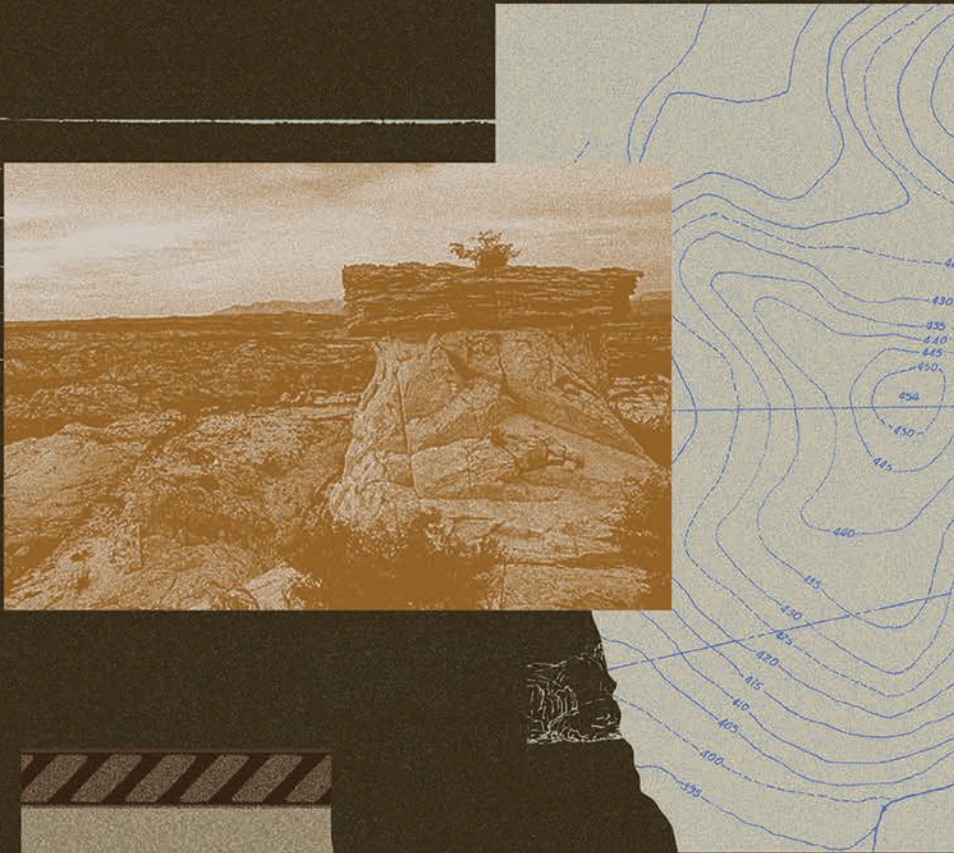
operates as a lawmaker,” Brewer writes. Brewer’s profile describes a politician full of seeming contradictions: ultra-conservative but known for bipartisan dealmaking; white-passing but an advocate for tribal sovereignty — and now serving an administration that has rolled back measures intended to bolster that sovereignty. One example is Trump’s move to drastically shrink Bears Ears, which had been co-managed by a tribal land commission that Trump’s proclamation eliminated. Since taking over at DHS, Mullin has invoked his Native identity to defend his department from accusations of racism; meanwhile, DHS is attempting to build a new segment of the U.S.-Mexico border wall along the southern boundary of the Tohono O’odham Reservation in Arizona, despite the tribe’s objections. “Is Markwayne Mullin good or bad for Indian Country?” Brewer asked. While some Natives hope Mullin will use his position in the Cabinet to advocate for their interests, it’s not clear that he’s willing or able to challenge a president whose policies have largely been hostile.

Many of the tensions that animate these archival stories are in play this election season. During the Sagebrush Rebellion, the “rebels” presented themselves as the true voice of the West, and the media perpetuated that myth — despite the fact that, as Nice reported, their policy proposals were generally unpopular. Today, white men in cowboy hats are still often portrayed as more “authentic” representatives of the West’s inhabitants, a depiction that flattens the region’s complexity. That complexity is visible in a number of high-stakes races this fall, when the region could play a key role in determining control of both chambers of Congress. Alaska’s Senate race, for instance, pits Mary Peltola, a moderate Democrat and Alaska Native who grew up fishing near the Bering Sea, against Republican incumbent Dan Sullivan, who grew up in Cleveland and went to Harvard.

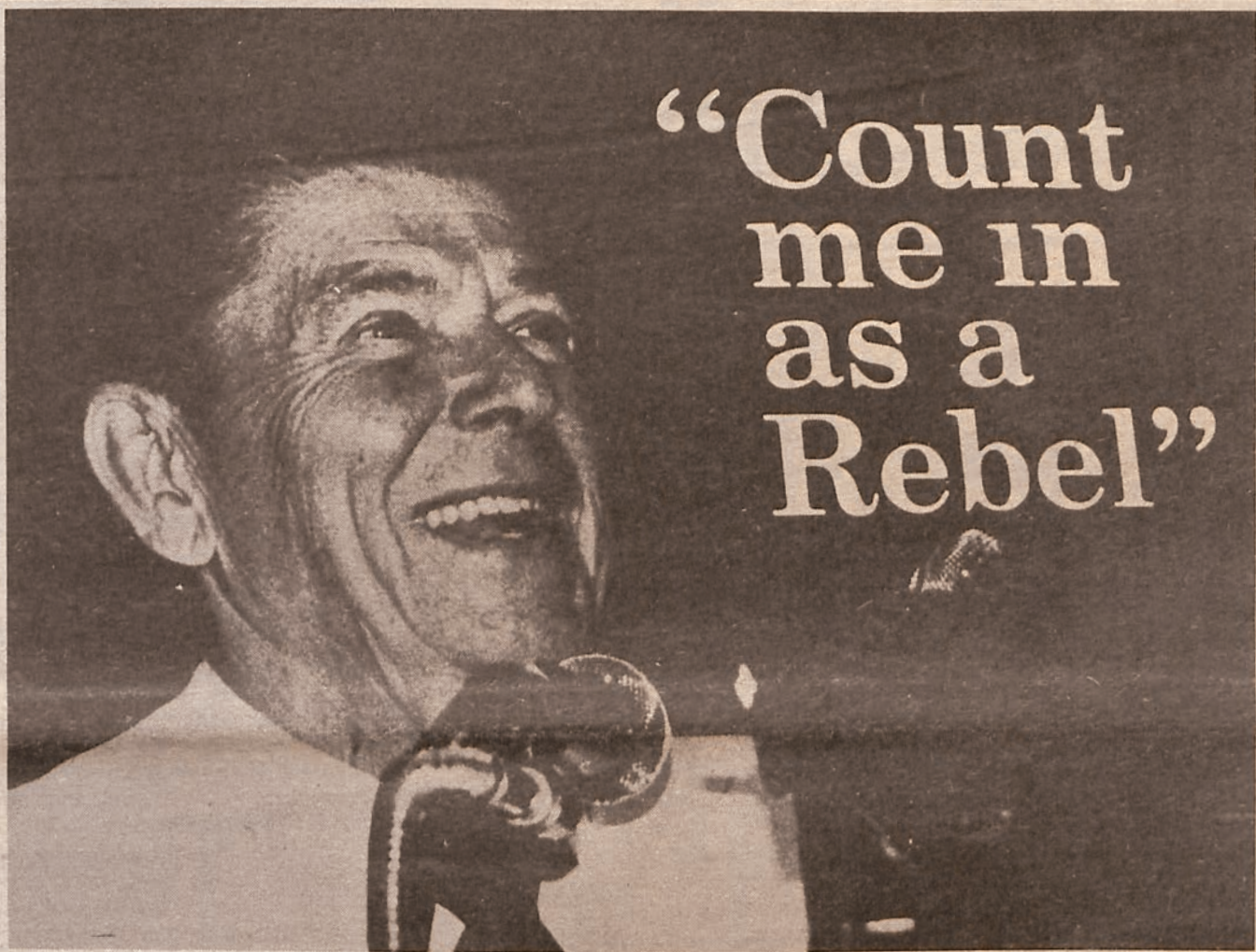
Origin stories help us understand the present moment, but they don’t predict the future. Instead, they remind us that the future is never inevitable; it’s being determined right now. 🌱

Zoë Carpenter is a writer and editor from Oregon.

Clockwise from top left: Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. **BLM**; Ammon Bundy. **Lauren Grabelle / HCN**; The Virgin River flows past the Bundy ranch near Bunkerville, Nevada. **Andrew Cullen**; Senator Markwayne Mullin. **United States Senate**



ORIGIN STORIES



Rebels revel in new power, polish

by Joan Nice

SALT LAKE CITY — A dark-haired singer in a white hat belts a song into the microphone: "The Sagebrush Rebellion is people gettin' down to earrrth..." The ballroom sound system blasts the words over the heads of a well-dressed crowd of 500 that is delicately spooning frothy desserts out of parfait glasses. A few people grimace at the volume. "Gettin' down to earrrth..."

The chandeliers, tapestries and mirrored walls of the Little America hotel here have toned down most people's raw exuberance, but their excitement about their cause, the Sagebrush Rebellion, can't be contained.

"It's a religious festival," whispers one observer. "They're reciting their creed."

One factor in the fervency here is the outcome of the national election. Now the Rebels not only have a sympathetic president, but also half a dozen conservative Westerners pulling the public land strings in the Senate. Their goal of turning federally managed public lands over to the states looks more tangible than ever before.

A huge black-and-white photo of an exuberant Ronald Reagan overlaid

with the slogan "Count me in as a Rebel" stands behind the podium. In a telegram read aloud at the opening session yesterday, Reagan pledged to "work toward a Sagebrush solution." The personal message, despite its vagueness, drew hand-chapping applause.

Sen. Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.) tells the crowd that people on Capitol Hill who used to snub him are now "rubbin' round my ankles like old tomcats."

"How does it feel to be surrounded by conservatives?" a jubilant blond Utah official asks a reporter sitting next to him at lunch.

The meeting here is part celebration, part show. In his opening address, Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch (R) gives an osten-

tatious welcome to members of the national media, including *U.S. News and World Report*, the *L.A. Times*, the *New York Times* and the wire services.

"Seldom in life does one participate in an event which is obviously of great historical significance," Hatch tells the crowd. "The building of the Panama Canal, the placing of a man on the moon, these are uniquely spectacular events which future generations cannot forget."

"We are participants in just such an experience. The consequences of what we now are about to do will have an impact upon the West and future generations that cannot be measured. There is no doubt that it will constitute the major factor in the political and economic future of the West."

A year ago, that sort of rhetoric would have been viewed as pure pie-in-the-sky. But the election has changed all that. Now Hatch's and Rep. James Santini's (D-Nev.) Sagebrush Rebellion bills are out on the legislative table, they claim.

Under Hatch's "Western Lands Distribution and Regional Equalization Act of 1979" state land commissions would be allowed to take over "unreserved unappropriated public lands" — about 600 million acres nationwide. By the bill's definition, that would mean state control of most wilderness areas, national recreation areas and national forests, as well as lands now controlled by the Bureau of Land Management.

National parks, monuments and wildlife and migratory bird sanctuaries established prior to 1979 would remain in federal hands, as would Indian re-

servations and lands needed for access to dams, highways and other federal property.

In Alaska, for example, none of the parks, monuments and refuges established in the recently passed Alaska lands legislation would remain in federal ownership, because they were established after the bill's 1979 deadline. The bill would also allow states to man-

age places such as the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana and Desolation Canyon in Utah.

Santini's bill, unlike Hatch's, would leave Forest Service land in federal ownership.

Nevadans started the move, by claiming ownership of 49 million acres of public land within their borders. Five states followed with similar legislation: Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming and Washington. California and Colorado began formal studies of the idea.

Since the election, however, the Rebels have decided that their best chances lie not with state battles in the courts, but in congressional action.

NO NUTS

As the movement's hopes have grown, so has its concern about public opinion.

"We are not a bunch of nuts," says Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens (R). "We are not a bunch of greedy miners and cattlemen," Utah county commissioner Calvin Black tells the crowd.

If it is not acceptable to sound eccentric or covetous here, expressions of environmental concern are encouraged. John Harmer, the chief executive officer of LASER (League for Advancement of States Equal Rights) sets the tone: "I, too, am an environmentalist and will take second place to no one. The stewardship of the earth is a sacred trust." If the MX missile, synfuels de-

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velopment, nuclear waste and nerve gas disposal are any indication of the federal government's environmental sensitivity, how could the states do worse, Rebels ask?

Compromise also seems to be grudgingly accepted as the order of the day. "I'm not advocating we get out the flintlocks," says Black, who is president of LASER. "Maybe we have matured or degenerated, I don't know."

Hatch is more emphatically conciliatory: "If my bill is inadequate in any way, I'm not above changing it."

One speaker after another underlines an apparent concession made by the Rebels from earlier stands. Once, many of them had sought to get the public lands into private ownership. Now the leadership is publicly advocating state retention of the lands.

The public domain in the West is so valuable, Hatch tells reporters, that "the governor would be impeached and the legislature removed if the lands were taken out of the public domain."

Dean Rhoads, a Nevada rancher and state legislator, has promised to push for a state constitutional amendment that would assure state retention of the lands. Hatch opposes any such requirement in the federal bill, however, as a usurpation of state rights.

As he explains his aims, Hatch pleads for unity. At the close of the conference he gets a unanimously approved resolution in support of his bill "or a bill like it." But whenever the big group breaks up into workshops, mild bickering begins. Various factions can't resist occasional potshots at the leadership's recent willingness to settle for revision instead of revolt. And the issue of final ownership remains an undercurrent in the discussions.

2-High Country News—Dec. 12, 1980



ORRIN HATCH has emerged as the Rebellion's most outspoken proponent.

A reporter asks LASER's John Harmer to list the non-profit foundation's financial backers. He flatly refuses on the grounds that liberal groups such as Common Cause are not required to reveal their sources of income.

Despite Harmer's tight lips, hints about LASER's constituency lie on the name tags at the \$145-admission conference: Conoco, Citizens for Mining, Club 20, National Inholders Association, Wyoming Farm Bureau, U.S. Borax, Stewart Capital Corp., International Snowmobilers Association, Louisiana Pacific, representatives of state and county governments, and teachers from Western colleges and universities. If, as the speakers suggest, this is a second American revolution, the generals and subordinate officers are gathered here, not the foot

Rebels...



(continued from page 1)

soldiers.

Former Colorado Rep. Wayne Aspinall (D), speaking at an economics workshop, says the movement is a return to traditional American values. His gray hair combed back like the neat rows of a plowed field, Aspinall makes no apologies for judging things in terms of economic impact. In fact, the small, intense man is suspicious of people who don't measure by the dollar — "people who've grown up in an age when everything was given to them."

While those who wrest resources from public lands have to pay a fee, those who enjoy the amenities go free. This amounts to government subsidy "to the users of wilderness, water facilities and national parks," Aspinall says.

He doesn't like subsidies, no matter who receives them. "I'm 85 years old, and that makes me eligible for so many government-funded advantages it embarrasses me," he says.

700,000 ACRES, 600 BIRDS

Like Aspinall, many people here believe that money is the most reliable measure of value. At the economics workshop a gray-haired Elmore County, Idaho, resident scoffs at the federal government's wasteful business practices. Where they could be using the land to grow crops, "they want to lock up 700,000 acres for 600 birds," he says, shaking his head. "If you can figure out the economics of that you're better with a pencil than I am."

On the land in question the Interior Department has proposed an expansion of the Snake River Birds of Prey Natural Area. As the man sits down he mutters, "700,000 acres — for chicken hawks!"

One of the economics speakers, Allen LeBaron of Utah State University, discusses a question raised by the movement's critics: Would the management load bankrupt states if federal lands were transferred?

A study he conducted for the Four Corners Regional Commission leads him to conclude: "Sure we're going to have to spend some money, but it ought to be do-able." Some states would break even on revenues from land-users, he says, but most would have to spend one to two percent of their state budget on the management chores.

Environmentalists have said this study underestimates both the costs and the income to be derived from the public lands.

LASER consultant and Utah legislator Mac Haddow says state govern-

ments would get more income from lands than their federal counterpart. Because states would not have the federal government's "chilling effect" on mineral exploration and development, increased royalties should be worked into the equation, he says.

An official from Grand County, Utah, famous for its July 4 bulldozing of Bureau of Land Management roadless areas, tells the group that his local economy is being "smothered" by an excess of federal land. He goes so far as to broach the taboo question: "Why not get this to a lower level? We do want to sell some lands. Let's spell that out."

The Utah mining industry representative sitting next to him cheers him on. "Let's not backpedal on this," he says.

Later, at a workshop on mining, participants seem more to accept the idea that lands should go to the states, but less excited about the crusade.

Russell Babcock of the Northwest Mining Association says it will be dif-

ficult to organize mining support of the Sagebrush Rebellion "if the Reagan administration pulls back the regulatory curtain a little and says, 'We're going to be good hosts.'" Some states such as Utah and Colorado might be sympathetic to mining, but others such as Montana and California might offer even tougher stipulations than the feds, he says. Nevertheless, Babcock is willing to "investigate and get involved" in the rebellion.

The man who is leading the mining session, William Drescher of the University of Arizona's College of Mines, seems somewhat more diffident. For him the rebellion is a forum for airing gripes in an effective, dramatic way — sort of a "Boston Tea Party" — not a serious attempt to alter land ownership patterns in the country.

Speakers at the workshop on mining paint a picture of a hostile bureaucracy in Washington, filled with "transplanted environmentalists," that is blocking production vital to the country's energy and security needs. When environmentalists don't get their way through friends in high places, they use the courts — irresponsibly, some say. "I'm fed up with the opportunities available to every extremist to file a \$30 lawsuit," says a lobbyist for the American Mining Congress.

In the audience a representative for U.S. Borax suggests that more mining firms try lobbying on Capitol Hill. "Washington hears the environmental point of view because they have their troops back there. It doesn't hear much about mining," he says.

Rebels assume that the federal government is, through regulations and withdrawals, blocking production of essential materials. Drescher says, "Over two-thirds of the public domain has been withdrawn from access for mineral exploration, development or production."

Environmentalists dispute these figures. In Utah, for instance, less than 10 percent of federal lands are withdrawn from mineral entry, according to Dick Carter of the Utah Wilderness Association. What's more, he says, the largest

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PARTICIPANTS at the posh LASER gathering in Salt Lake claim federal lands in the West belong in private or state hands.

withdrawals are for the Wendover Bombing Range and an oil shale development site, not for conservation purposes. As to the government's "chilling effect" on private enterprise, Carter says that mineral production has been at record levels in recent years.

If the miners have some qualms about giving lands to the states, they are not alone here. Two representatives

of the movement's idea factories make a strong case for putting the public domain into private hands. Both David Theroux of the Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research in San Francisco and John Baden of the Political Economy Research Center in Bozeman, Mont., think that trading the federal government for the state is swapping one bad manager for another. They say that private ownership would not only increase production efficiency, but would also strengthen environmental protection efforts, by providing a financial incentive to look out for the land.

Theroux stands quietly in the back of most sessions. Baden makes his views known.

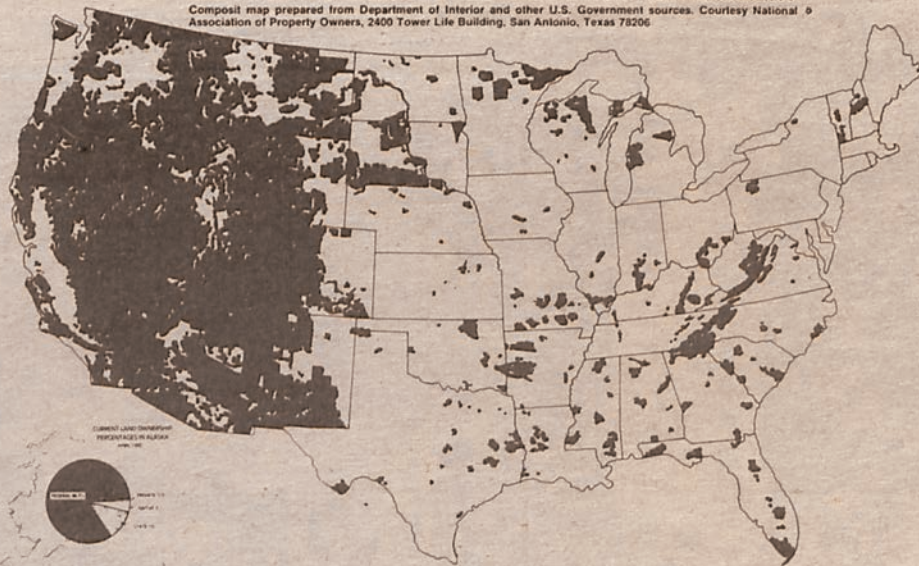
At the congressional hearing that follows the meeting, Baden asks Congress "to permit environmental interest groups to obtain fee simple ownership of wilderness lands." The lands would be managed more sensitively by, say, the Audubon Society, than by the government, he says. If the landowning

environmental group decided to block mining in an area it owned, it would have to "face the opportunity cost of that decision," Baden says. What's more, the proposal would "reduce the subsidy now obtained by these groups," which do not pay for their use of the wilderness, Baden says.

"Sell wilderness to the environmentalists?" House Mining Subcommittee Chairman Santini looks astonished. "That gives me some tantalizing food for thought."

STATE LANDS ILLEGALLY CLAIMED BY U.S. GOVERNMENT

Composit map prepared from Department of Interior and other U.S. Government sources. Courtesy National Association of Property Owners, 2400 Tower Life Building, San Antonio, Texas 78206



For now, Baden and Theroux's schemes probably won't get beyond the conceptual stage. Their libertarian bent, like the miners' laissez-faire capitalism, is viewed as bad politics by the Rebel leaders. Somehow they remain a part of the anti-government Rebel family, however, if only distant cousins.

Clearly outside the clan is another group of dissenters who show up late in the conference — the card-carrying en-

vironmentalists. The steep registration fee apparently kept most of them out the first two days. But after LASER's Saturday morning press conference, Audubon Society volunteer Jim Pissot steps up to the press room microphone.

Pissot, joined by three associates, chides LASER for what he considers its elitist bent: "If it costs \$145 to get into a conference like this, we wonder what it will cost to get into these lands (when the states take over)."

Another member of the environmentalist panel questions the states' ability to protect the land from unscrupulous developers. None of the Western states

have the battery of protective legislation available to the federal government, such as the Wilderness, Endangered Species, National Environmental Policy, Antiquities, and the Clean Air acts.

"No one condones a sometimes ineffective and non-responsive bureaucracy," says Charles Callison of the Public Lands Institute. But the answer is to change the bureaucracy, not abandon it, he says.

ACHING FOR CHANGE

Rep. Santini's hearings have already begun in an adjacent room, so few media representatives and fewer conferees listen to the tiny band that shanghaied LASER's press room. But even before the environmentalists appeared, the Rebels hinted at the big questions that would be raised as soon as they left the conference hall: Why should voters, most of whom reside in the East, let Western states take charge of hundreds of millions of acres of energy-rich lands? For that matter, why should people in the West let them do it?

Up until recently most of the Sagebrush leaders probably didn't expect to succeed. Hatch admits that "part of the point is to keep the bureaucracy on the defensive so it has to treat us with some sort of decency."

A poll taken in 1979 by the Behavior Research Center of Arizona showed that only a third of a random sample of 1,025 people in the Rocky Mountain states supported the Rebellion. Only in Nevada did a majority of people favor divestiture of federal lands.

But the Rebels see the Reagan win as an indication that old polls may no longer apply — that people are aching for change. That analysis has given them the courage to try for more than symbolic protest.

For now, the Rebels have gone home to their cows, corporations and Congress. But they'll be heard from again soon.

The next step, as outlined at the conference, is for Rebels to begin courting urban and Eastern America. In the East, they will say that the states can manage these lands more efficiently, producing more of the food, fiber and minerals that are essential to the nation's survival. In the West, they will try to sell divestiture as emancipation. "Perhaps the rebellion marks a time for the Intermountain West to stand on its own feet, cut the (federal) apron strings, and take the bad with the good," a Utah State University report says. To make sure the message is clear, the Rebels will try to unite the West to speak with one voice.

They know that is no small job. To most observers their chances look slim. But a year ago who would have thought a self-proclaimed Sagebrush Rebel could successfully battle his way to the presidency?

Mention the words "national park" and images of Yosemite Valley spring to mind: Traffic, developed campgrounds, even restaurants and lodges, all located within the park's boundaries.

Communities bordering the big parks are just a place to pick up groceries, gas up the car, or find a hotel room when we discover the campgrounds are full and we should have made reservations a year ago. The people who live in these small, rural communities — the miners, ranchers and loggers — are also often out of sight. Many were shown the door years ago in the name of environmental protection and the public good.

This model doesn't hold for the West's newest federally protected areas — the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah and the Mojave National Preserve in Southern California (page 12). One is managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the other by the National Park Service, but both face the same challenges: To protect the land and make it accessible while still listening to local concerns. Though planning for these areas is far from finished, federal land managers are showing a new sensitivity. The communities are demanding it.

Beauty *and the* Beast

The president's new monument forces southern Utah to face its tourism future

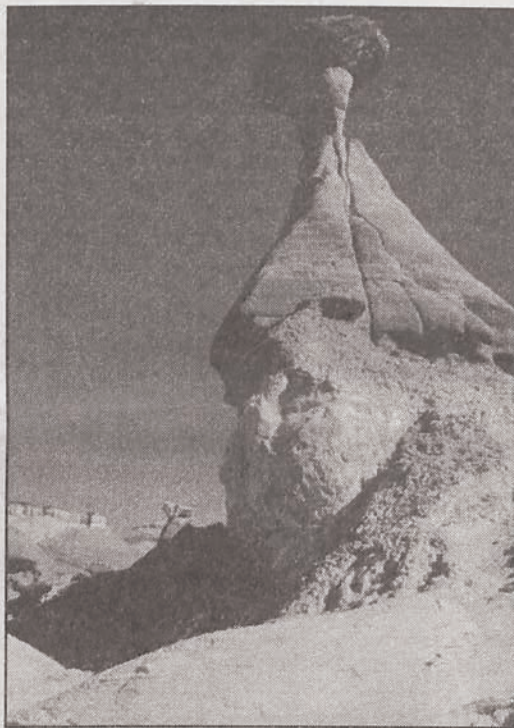
By Paul Larmer

KANAB, Utah — Outside the Kane County administration building, a warm autumn sun sets the red cliffs ablaze. Inside, seated in front of an American flag, Kane County's own firebrand, Joe Judd, 67, tells how he came to this small town in southernmost Utah.

"I retired 17 years ago as parks manager for the city of L.A.," he says. "I was responsible for 200 parks, 14 golf courses, and a staff of 2,200 that was 80 percent black."

Judd says the job was rewarding, but ate him alive. "You don't get to be a nice guy when you have your life threatened," he says, shaking his head. "So when I was 50, I said, 'I don't need this.'" He moved to Kanab.

Instead of hobby ranching, Judd became active in the Mormon Church, serving as a bishop and helping overhaul a soup kitchen for the needy. He also served on the board of the local power company. Then, two years ago he won a seat on the Kane County Commission.



Jess Johnson

Rock spire in the new Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

"Now I'm working on zoning ordinances and septic regulations," he says. "I'm trying to pull people here into the 20th century."

This Joe Judd seems far different from the one I talked to two months ago, the day after President Bill Clinton created the 1.7 million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The monument, more than half of which lies in Kane County, killed a proposed coal mine on the Kaiparowits Plateau that supporters say would have brought millions of dollars into Kanab and other towns in the area (HCN, 9/30/96).

On the phone, Judd cursed the Clinton administration for running

roughshod over local people and for destroying the last hope for good wages in his county, which is 95 percent public land and home to just 10,000 people. Soon after, Judd and his fellow commissioners sent county bulldozers into the new monument, some to areas environmentalists want protected as roadless wilderness.

Judd still curses the president and is unapologetic about the "freshened up" roads. But he quickly accepted \$100,000 from the Clinton administration to do planning in conjunction with the new monument, and then asked for and received \$100,000 that neighboring Garfield County had rejected as "blood money." His county then signed an "assistance agreement" with the Bureau of Land Management that spells out how the two will cooperate during the planning process for the monument.

"It was arrogant as hell for the president to use the law to his advantage as he did," the commissioner says. "But we're not going to sit around with our heads in our hands."

Before visiting southern Utah, I couldn't have guessed that Kane County might embrace the new monument. But Judd and others like him recognize that the monument solidifies two facts of life: Southern Utah's

mining, logging and ranching are in decline; and the region is already a public-lands playground for the world.

Even the angry leaders in Garfield County, which is home to the monument's northern half, recognize that the game has evolved from fighting off outsiders to adapting to a tourism boom that could turn their quiet towns into a theme park.

As I drove for hours around the edges of this immense monument and visited its widely scattered communities, I wondered how the land and the people would change over the coming years. Would the anger and resentment fade? Would the Bureau of Land Management be able to run a monument that will attract millions of visitors each year? And would the towns end up looking and feeling like every other strip-developed community near a national treasure?

Kane County: Prosperity's thin veneer

Kanab, pop. 4,500, boasts a golf course on the edge of town,

that bustles on a weekday in mid-November, and newish hotels, gift stores and restaurants line the clean, wide streets. It seems downright prosperous for a town that has just seen its hopes for a major industrial project — the Andalex coal mine — dashed.

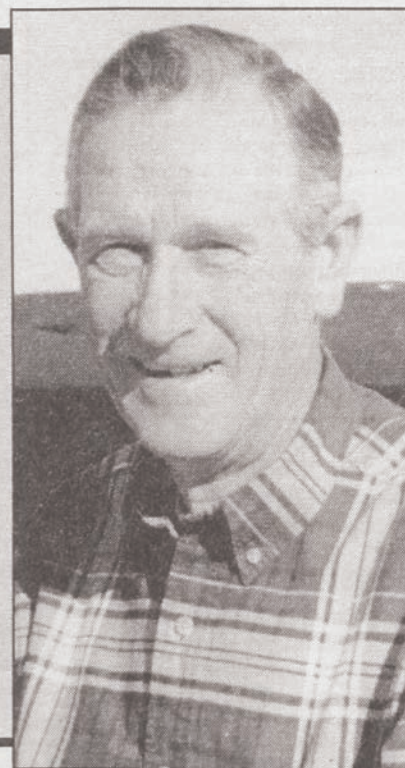
A mild climate and proximity to some of the southwest's finest scenery have made tourism the town's main economic force for years. Bryce Canyon, Zion, Grand Canyon and Capitol Reef national parks are all closer than a day's drive, as is Lake Powell. The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is just the latest and nearest attraction.

But not long ago, tourism was balanced by a sub-

stantial natural-resource-based economy. The scales tipped during the early 1990s, when Kanab lost more than 500 timber and uranium mining jobs. Families that had a primary breadwinner earning \$20 to \$30 an hour suddenly had to move or change occupations. Those who wanted to stay had to

***"It was arrogant
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**— Joe Judd
Kane County Commissioner**



Paul Larmer

send Dad to work as a trucker or laborer in a distant city and add Mom, grandma and the kids to the work force, most often cleaning hotel rooms and flipping hamburgers for tourists at \$5 an hour.

In 1990, 1.5 people per Kane County household were in the work force and the average income was \$25,000, according to a recent economic report prepared

for the county. Today, 2.6 people work per household and the average income has eroded to \$18,000.

"When the high-paying jobs dried up, more people had to work just to meet the bills," says Gil Miller, a Logan, Utah-based economist who drafted Kane County's latest economic development plan. "The only jobs available were in the tourism industry."

Kanab councilman Roger Holland says seven families in his Mormon Church ward lost their jobs with the closure of the Kaibab mill. "Some have gone on unemployment, then welfare," Holland says. "None of these families have come back to the point economically that they were before."

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Tourism has continued to grow, but workers not only earn low wages, they frequently get laid off during the cold winter months. Roger Carter, manager of the Red Hills Best Western in Kanab, says he pares his summer staff of 35 to a baker's dozen during November, December and January.

"We love our tourists, especially now that they're

all we have," says Carter, who moved his family to Kanab seven years ago from Flagstaff, Ariz. "But it's a boom-and-bust economy, too."

To this hard-hit community, the Andalex coal mine project looked like a savior. No wonder everyone was hopping mad when the President took that hope away.

Practical to the CORE

Later that evening, I meet with three men who have moved past anger to focus on Kane County's future. They lead a community organization called CORE — Coalition of Resources and Economies.

On my left is hotel manager, Roger Carter, who serves as CORE's president; on my right, Richard Negus, a 67-year-old London-born transplant who has been an animal-rights activist, journalist, and cat-show announcer at New York's Madison Square Garden. Dead ahead of me is the imposing figure of Jim Matson, the former manager of Kaibab Industries' logging mill in Fredonia, Ariz., 9 miles south of Kanab.

The mill closed two years ago, a victim of changing economic condi-

tions and, according to Matson, appeals of federal timber sales on the Kaibab National Forest north of the Grand Canyon brought by environmentalists.

"Do you have any environmentalists in your group?" I ask.

"All 12 of us," quips Matson.

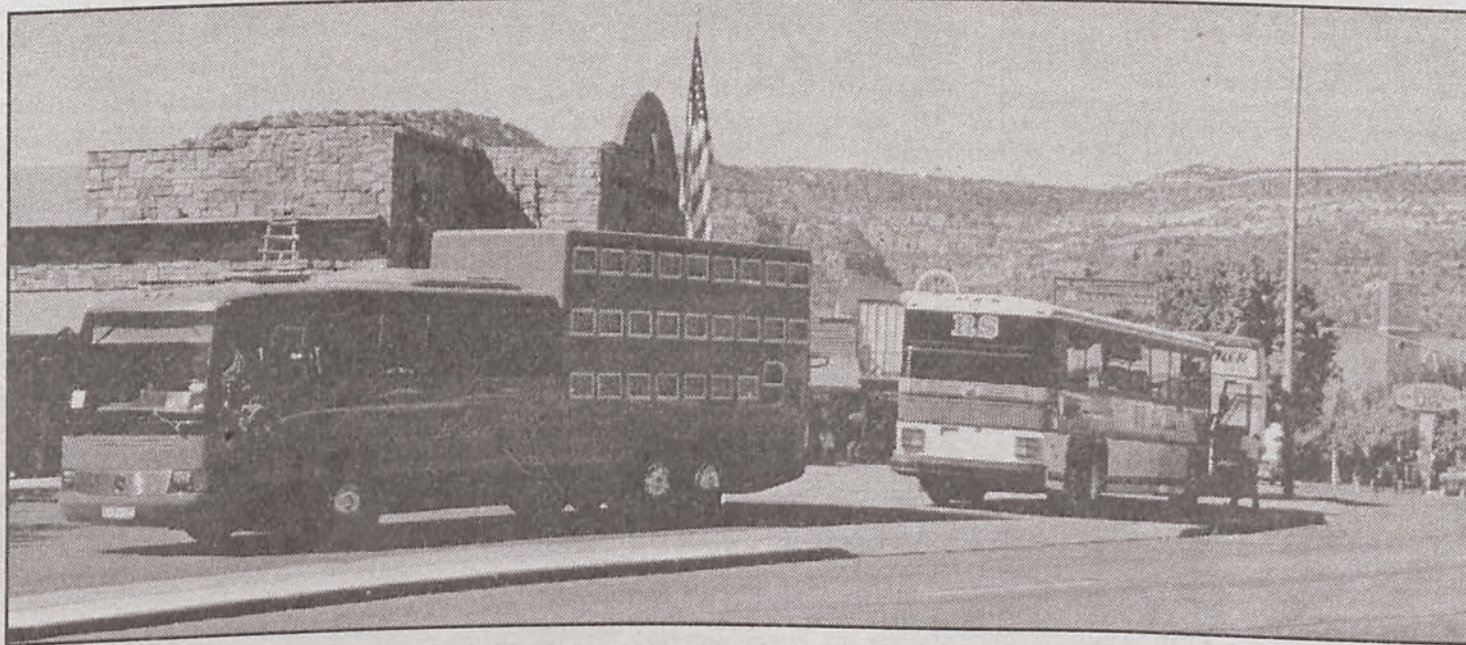
A forester by training, Matson, 52, has been reborn as a super-consultant on natural-resource conflicts and economic development. Kane County recently hired his firm to spend \$200,000 in monument planning monies.

"We're a poor county, behind the times in land-use planning and economic development," he says. "The coal mine and the \$1.5 million a year it would have pro-

vided — now that's gone and we have to quickly shift our priorities."

Matson says the monument catalyzed a countywide economic plan that he had been working on for months. The plan focuses on bringing small and medium-sized firms to the county — companies like Stamp 'Em Up, a business started in Las Vegas by two Kanab women who recently moved the operation back to their hometown. The company manufactures rubber impressions for a variety of crafts, and at 200 employees, it's Kane County's biggest employer.

But Matson knows Kanab is a rookie in the recruit-



Tour buses in Kanab, Utah

Richard Menzies



Enraged, Garfield and Kane county commissioners sent bulldozers into the red Utah monument

Richard Menzies

ment game. Last year, he says, the owners of a tent and outdoor-gear manufacturing company scouted Kanab as a possible location for their business. They left quickly when town officials couldn't promise that the company's sewer, water, power and telecommunications needs would be met.

"We didn't even speak the same language," Matson recalls.

The new plan, which calls for zoning and upgrades in Kanab's infrastructure, should give the county the credibility it needs to start recruiting businesses from places like Southern California. It might be a tough sell.

Kanab's work force lacks the skills and expertise to attract the high-tech industries that are flocking to Utah's Wasatch Front, says economist Gil Miller. The nearest four-year college is several hours away, in Cedar City. And Kanab sits almost a hundred miles from an interstate and lacks commercial air service.

Kanab can't even attract the BLM. The agency recently decided to locate its temporary monument planning office in Cedar City, which is several hours away from the new monument and outside both Kane and Garfield counties. BLM monument supervisor Jerry Meredith says the agency didn't want to locate in any community near the monument for fear it would give the town an edge in the competition for permanent monument facilities. But there were logistical concerns as well, he admits.

Cedar City has an interstate, an airport, conference facilities and Southern Utah University, Meredith says. And, it has real estate.

"We needed 6,000 square feet of space and 18 houses for employees right away," says Meredith. Even Kanab would have been marginal, he says.

To Matson, the BLM's decision was "a slap in the face. It said that they didn't want to live with us."

It also said Kane County would, for the next three years, lose out on 18 high-paying government jobs.



Stuart Johnson/Deseret News

Louise Liston

A proud and defiant native

Though as a child she lived in Idaho and for a while in Tooele, Utah, Garfield County Commissioner Louise Liston has always considered her birthplace, Escalante, home. Before becoming a commissioner 10 years ago, Liston taught in a one-room school in the town of Boulder. Under her leadership, Garfield County has waged a rhetorical and legal battle against federal land agencies.

Louise Liston: "I love the land, and it's different from an environmentalist's love. We have a deep, abiding love; they have a weekend love affair. Their love is intense and passionate, but it's not an abiding love. That kind of love comes from making a living off the land. They go back to their amenities in their cities, while we continue to eke out an existence."

"I really think the president didn't know what he was doing when he created the monument. If he had visited the site, his perception would have been changed. He said, 'We can't have coal mines everywhere.' Well, that's right. We can only have mines where the coal is. Besides, the Kaiparowits is the ugliest place in the whole monument."

"But the monument is here and we've got to make something happen for the best. There are areas in the monument that deserve wilderness designation. In those places we could agree with environmentalists. But they want to drag the issue out for 70 years to keep their organizations going."

"We are already getting bombarded with visitors. Over Easter, the Hole-in-the-Rock road was bumper-to-bumper cars, and there were great clouds of dust. People were pulled off on all the side roads, and in the evening there were campfires everywhere. One couple in a Cadillac asked where they could climb the Grand Staircase. These people don't have any idea how rugged this country is. There will be accidents."

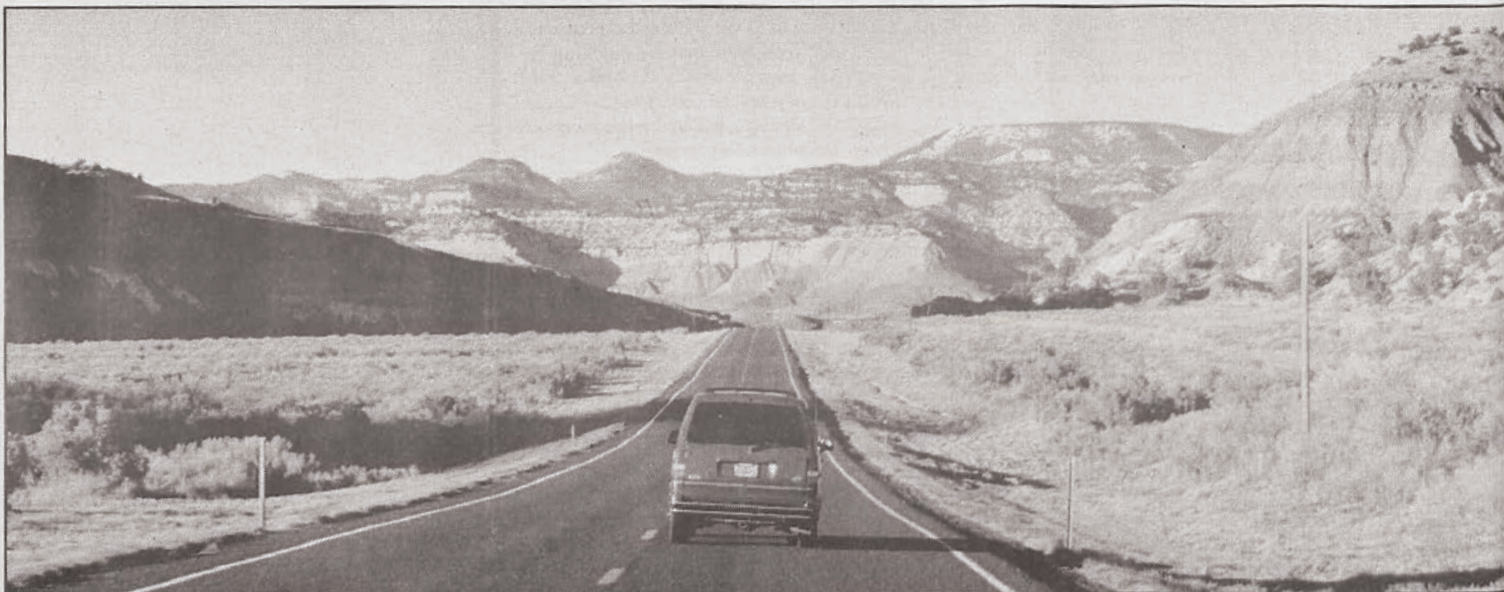
"Change is inevitable, but I think the land is going to be a victim. People will do a lot of damage that cattle and cowboys never did. You can't preserve the land and kick off the people. Rural values are the salvation of this country. I hate to see that go. We all do."

—P.L.

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Beauty and the Beast

APRIL 1997



Richard Menzies

Scenic Highway 12 cuts through the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Garfield County

Tiny towns surrounded by rock ...

If you designate it, will they come?

Driving the 60 miles east from Kanab to Big Water, pop. 350, which lies within a few miles of Lake Powell, I am struck by the immensity of the new monument. Its southern edge along the highway is a series of rugged, sparsely vegetated cliffs that extend as far as the eye can see.

The last protrusion is the Kaiparowits Plateau, which looms like the prow of a giant ship behind the town of Big Water. It is also the place where Andalex had planned to mine coal.

Big Water, with its dirt roads and boat-storage yards facing the highway, missed out on the mining boom, but its mayor, Gerry Rankin, says she is eager to capitalize on the new monument.

It isn't a Grand Canyon or a Lake Powell, she says, "but it's got a rough, difficult beauty, you might call it."

For Big Water to attract tourists, though, Rankin

says it needs the BLM to develop some roads into the monument so that people can sightsee. The town also needs a sewer system, she says. Without one, it has been unable to attract hotels or other large commercial enterprises. The carloads of tourists now passing Big Water on their way to Lake Powell have little reason to stop.

Joe Judd says he doubts the monument will give Big Water much of a boost. The southern portion of the monument, he says, is "like your big toe; there's nothing sexy about it. You won't see anything that you can't find in two-thirds of the rest of the state."

There are few roads into the monument from the south, Judd notes, and most are nearly impassable for all but skilled four-wheel drivers. The people who come and want to see the new monument will have to stay

around the outskirts or risk getting stuck or lost. Either way, they are a liability, in his view.

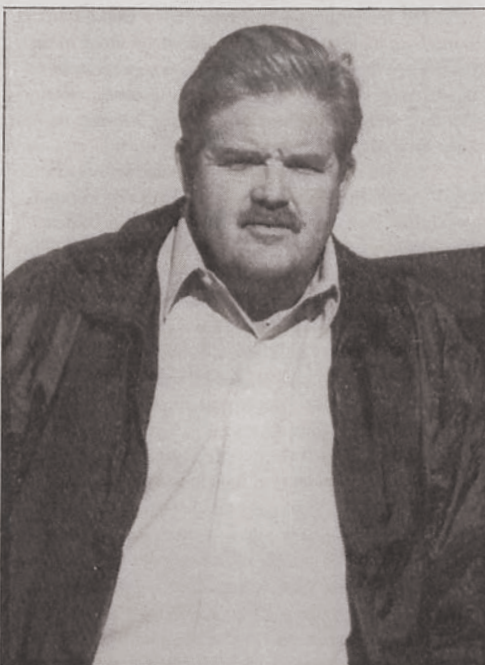
Judd recently jetted to Washington, D.C., with Garfield County Commissioner Louise Liston to ask Congress for \$575,000 to help his county cope with everything from a stretched police force to growing numbers of lost and injured hikers, and overflowing garbage bins. Liston asked for \$900,000 and an extra \$2 million for road maintenance and improvement in the monument.

By asking for so much money, Judd seems to contradict his prediction that the monument will generate little interest. But early readings indicate that tourists are chomping at the bit. The BLM offices in Kanab, Escalante and Salt Lake City say they are swamped with thousands of requests for monument information and maps. A Web site put on the internet by the town of Escalante's Chamber of Commerce received 2,000 hits during February alone.

"We want all the tourism we can get," admits Matson, "but we don't want a Moab (Utah)-type situation," where hordes of visitors have failed to lift family income and strained public services to the breaking point.

Kane County's eager-but-cautious attitude toward

'This monument was just plain stupid'



Roger Holland

Paul Larmer

Roger Holland, 52, is a Kanab town councilman, a part-time rancher and a mining consultant. He has done geological surveys on the Kaiparowits Plateau within the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Roger Holland: "This monument was just plain stupid; the president did it to keep people from voting for Ralph Nader."

"We can have a coal mine and wilderness. I've been going out to the (Andalex) mine site regularly since 1988, and I've never seen a backpacker on the Kaiparowits. Andalex would have provided 2.5 million tons a year off of 40 acres you couldn't see unless you were actually up there. But the environmentalists want to control all that country."

"The Kaiparowits coal is the best we have left. There's nowhere else Clinton can send Andalex to get a similar resource. It's like someone taking your Rolls Royce and saying, 'I'm going to give you the pick of the Ford lot.'"

"America will become a Third World nation if we don't pull our head out. Corporate America is getting sent abroad because it's too hard to do business here. I'm going to be one mad José when my kids get killed at war in the Middle East because we haven't developed the resources here."

—P.L.

tourism is based on experience. Even without the monument, towns like Kanab have begun to see the negative side of a minimum-wage economy and the outsiders it attracts. The newcomers may also have a tough time fitting in with the locals. The communities in Kane and Garfield counties share two characteristics: The citizens are predominately white and Mormon.

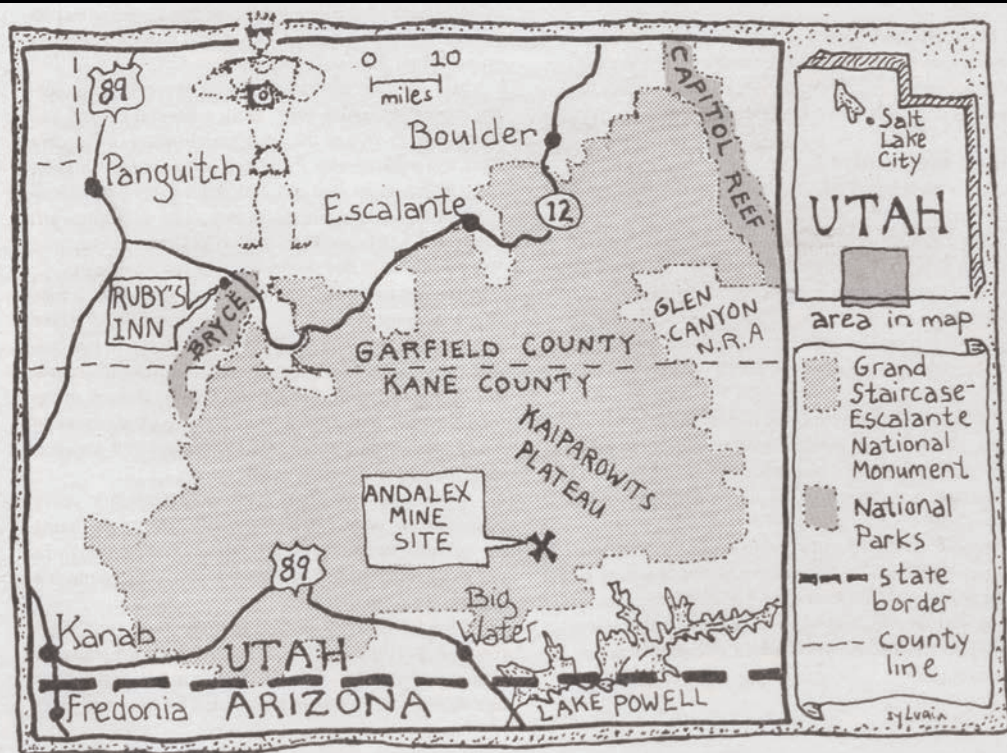
"The people that come down to fill these jobs have different values," says Tom Hatch, a sixth generation rancher who represents both Kane and Garfield counties in the state Legislature. "They work a season and then they go on welfare or unemployment. It's changed our schools and our kids. We have drugs and violence and some kids want to become gang members."

Steering the ship

Matson says the county will keep tourism's downside uppermost in its mind during the BLM's planning process. "We want to steer the ship rather than have someone steer it for us," he says.

Steering the ship means local control. The county wants monument visitor centers and staff offices located within communities such as Kanab and Escalante, not inside the monument. Environmentalists say they like that idea.

"There's no reason to put a Marriott in the middle of



the Kaiparowits Plateau," says Scott Groene, an attorney with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "This is actually a place where we all agree."

Jerry Meredith says his agency will consider placing several visitor centers in the communities around the monument. "This monument is so spread out that it doesn't lend itself to having one central headquarters," says Meredith, who previously oversaw the monument area, as the BLM's Cedar City district manager.

Kane County also wants to hire county employees to man new monument campgrounds and facilities. The idea of having local people filling these slots — instead of senior citizen volunteers or federal employees from afar — is novel.

"If we could get 150 jobs paying \$8, \$9 or \$10 an hour with benefits, that would be a whole lot more than we have now," says Richard Negus, CORE's public affairs director.

Meredith says the BLM will consider contracting out services to the counties, though it is too early to commit.

Garfield County: Holding to the past

Garfield County is Kane County's colder, rougher brother. It has some of the most scenic — and already well-visited — portions of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. (BLM officials say that more than 500,000 visited the monument area last year and this year the number is likely to boom.) But the county's cool and wet winter climate, compared to Kane County, also means a shorter tourism season. Its towns are smaller and scattered across a landscape that is more than 98

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Beauty and the Beast

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percent federally owned. All 4,000 county residents could fit into the town of Kanab.

It's snowing and raw as I drive through Panguitch, the county seat. And quiet. Only a handful of cars and trucks cluster around the open businesses — a grocery store and a gas station. Panguitch is the county's biggest town with a population of 1,400, but it looks like a carnival that has closed for the season. The museums, gift stores and hotels are here, but no customers. The town lost a timber mill and nearly 100 jobs two years ago.

Twenty-five miles and maybe six cars later, a lone coyote scampers across the road as I turn in to Bryce Canyon National Park. Ruby's Inn stands guard just outside the park entrance; compared with Panguitch, it bustles. A busload of foreign tourists load up in front of the lodge, which is run by a local family; inside, several dozen tourists dine at the cafe and browse in a souvenir shop the size of a department store.

At 80 years old, Ruby's Inn is the economic heavy of Garfield County, employing nearly 500 people during the summer months. But the minimum-wage-plus-tips pay can't compare to wages provided by a coal mine or a timber mill.

The next lonely hour down the road runs right through portions of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. This northwestern side of the monument, with its hayfields surrounded by towering cliffs

dotted with juniper and pine, seems a world away from the harsh desert I encountered near Big Water. And it is; it has taken me a whole day to travel around just the western half of the monument.

I finally reach Escalante, another Mormon-settled community where locals recently hung effigies of President Clinton and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. There's a room at the Prospector's Inn, but only after I track down one of the owners washing her truck out back.

She asks me if I'm here to see the monument. "Well, take a look out the window," she says when I say yes. "Everything you see is the monument except for this little town."

The woman says she doubts the monument will lead to a boom in Escalante. But later, as she serves dinner at the restaurant behind the hotel, she says hers is one of three new hotels to open in town within the last three years. And someone recently bought one of the original old, brick, two-story, Mormon settlers' houses which abound in this town, intending to run a bed and breakfast.

Even here, in a settlement that looks much as it did a century ago, change is in the air.

Las Vegas mulch

The next day, sitting in a cramped trailer office at the Utah Forest Products mill south of Escalante, manager Stephen Steed asks a question.

"How many people stayed at your hotel last night?"

Just me and one other, I say.

"Yeah, that was probably our state forester who's down from Salt Lake for the week," Steed says. "That means a traveling newspaperman and the state forestry guy took care of the tourist industry in Escalante last night. Try feeding that to your family."

Though Steed doesn't have much use for tourism, he's not mired in the past. The fourth-generation logger and his father ran the mill until it shut down here in 1993, and he learned from that experience. The new mill is financed by outside money and is a different animal. It is smaller, employing just 65, and it is more efficient, producing a variety of goods, including milled lumber and chips.

"There's no waste," says Steed. "We even ship the chips to Las Vegas. They mix them with fertilizer to make a landscaping mulch for all those subdivisions in the desert."

This value-added stuff is what Garfield County commissioners have started to look for. They recently hired a Salt Lake City-based consulting firm to help its ranchers market "riparian-free, monument beef," says consultant David Nimkin of Confluence Associates. Riparian-free, he says, means cows stay out of streams.

He also sees local logging companies producing finished products, such as furniture or floor boards. "There's a big market for softwood floors in the Salt Lake City area, but most of the wood comes from the southeastern United States," says Nimkin. "Why

couldn't Utah fir and pine fill that need?"

The concept extends to the monument: Keep its 1.7 million acres rugged and relatively roadless, and instead of fast-food jobs you'd need guides and outfitters to lead dudes into the trackless interior, says the planning consultant. The guides could even educate visitors about the history and culture of the area.

"These towns are never going to be gateway communities like Springdale (outside Zion National Park)," says Nimkin. "But they could market the monument as one of the last great, wild places, a place where you need a local guide to show you the deep dark secrets."

Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt is paying attention. He has promised to help Garfield and Kane counties plan for the changes that lie ahead. Leavitt's planning director, Brad Barber, says the state is setting up an economic development team that will help these communities find money for new business ventures and the roads and services they need.

"Where do we put the lodges? Do we have building codes? What do we want our town to look like? Do we want any old, ugly Motel 6 in town?," asks Barber. "These are the questions these communities need to face now."

The pioneer spirit

Before leaving Escalante, I stop at the ranch of Garfield County commissioner Louise Liston. The scrappy

Let's 'work with the situation'

Gerry Rankin moved from Salt Lake City to Big Water, Utah, pop. 350, more than six years ago. When she isn't teaching at the town's only school, she is the mayor of the town, which lies just a few miles west of Lake Powell. Until recently, Big Water was known primarily as the town through which Andalex Coal Co. wanted to bring out coal from its proposed mine on the nearby Kaiparowits Plateau.

Gerry Rankin: "The biggest worry we have here is keeping our kids from saying the 'F' word. There's no knives or guns in the schools, and we don't have any street gangs. We don't even have streets."

"We had high hopes for Andalex. Not that most people wanted to see us become a big city. Most moved here to get away from that. The (mining and trucking) jobs would have been good, but having one coal truck come right by this school every seven minutes would have been a problem."

"We don't have an abundance of commercial activity. Our convenience/gas store burned last summer and reopened a mile away, with no gas tanks. The restaurant is temporarily closed. This is a rough time of year. From May to October, there's lots of tourists attracted to Lake Powell. But Arizona gets most of the Lake Powell business because they've developed their shoreline. Boat storage is our biggest commercial enterprise."

"I've written (Interior Secretary Bruce) Babbitt, President Bill Clinton and the BLM asking that we be involved with planning for the monument. I feel it's better to work with the situation as we find it."

— P.L.



Paul Larmer

Gerry Rankin



An abandoned house sits on rangeland outside Panguitch in Garfield County

Paul Larmer

and articulate Escalante native is known as a staunch defender of rural values. Yet she and her fifth-generation cattle-rancher husband, Robert, have adapted to a new West: They've given up on cattle and now raise ostriches.

The Listons trace their roots back to the Mormon pioneers who found a way across the tortuous terrain from Escalante southeast across the Colorado River. You can still travel The Hole-in-the-Rock route, which lies in the new monument, on a teeth-rattling dirt road.

"When you know of the sacrifices our pioneer ancestors made, you feel that it demands the same type of sacrifice from you," Liston says.

She says her son-in-law next door worked at the old sawmill which closed in 1993. He has yet to find a permanent job and that's been tough on Liston's daughter and their six children.

"My daughter started working at the Dairy Queen in Panguitch," she says. "Now she's driving 50 miles to work at Ruby's Inn. They sacrifice to stay in the valley. You don't do that unless you love it."

More tourism in Escalante could mean that Liston's daughter could work closer to home, but that doesn't sit well, either. "It worries me that we'll turn into Moab and have resorts," says Liston. "We'd love to keep our farming community and our cowboy flavor. I believe that's what draws the tourists."

Louise Liston is a study in contradictions: As a county leader, she has refused to take monument planning money from a despised federal government, yet she recently asked Congress for \$2.9 million to help the county cope with the monument. She would like the prosperity tourism could bring, but despises tourism because she fears it will change her quiet community forever.

The contrast between Liston and Kane County Commissioner Joe Judd appears stark. Faced with rapid change, one holds to the past while the other reaches for the future. But as I head out Liston's door, she says, "You know, the monument is here, and we need to make the best of it."

Can the communities surrounding the monument

grab hold of their destinies before they get overrun? Scott Groene, who witnessed Moab's unchecked boom in the early 1990s, says wryly, "Everyone says they don't want to be Moab, and yet they end up doing everything they can to ensure that they will. Once the people show up who only want to make money, it's all over."

But Brad Barber is optimistic; he sees "an opportunity to create something great for southern Utah."

Pulling off Highway 12, I look out a seemingly endless expanse of domed, knobbed and sculpted rock. Like a dark and gleaming serpent, a narrow ribbon of road winds miraculously through this desert. Beyond, the dark rising of the Henry Mountains.

A canyon wall seems close enough to touch. I pick up a stone and give it a good heave. It looks good for awhile, riding high and strong, but then it slows and drops straight down, like Wile E. Coyote, into the abyss.

In this country, getting from here to there has never been easy. ■

Paul Larmer is HCN's associate editor.

A Cherokee for Trump

Congressman Markwayne Mullin may not look like a typical Indigenous lawmaker. But the hard-right, white-passing Cherokee is far from an anomaly.

FEATURE
BY GRAHAM LEE
BREWER



J.D. REEVES FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

Last April, on the day the country was eagerly anticipating the release of the Mueller report, a small group of seniors in rural southeast Oklahoma woke up early to go have coffee with their congressman. There was concern for a nefarious plot underway.

"The Green New Deal has nothing to do with climate change. It has to do with a federal takeover," Rep. Markwayne Mullin said as he slowly paced between the lectern and the half-dozen rows of folding metal chairs. "Federal takeover of our buildings, federal takeover of our air, federal takeover of our farms, federal takeover of our school systems."

In a pressed plaid shirt tucked into blue jeans that hugged his brown cowboy boots, Mullin was in his element. These were his people. He may have been a member of Congress for seven years now, but you wouldn't have known it by looking at him. Mullin has all the conservative talking points down about abortion and the dangers of socialism, but what his mostly rural Oklahoma constituents like about him is how rough he is around the edges, in all the right ways. He has cauliflower ear from his days of wrestling and mixed martial arts. He speaks with a thick rural accent and often stumbles over common phrases, coming across as less city and more country. He's routinely direct and unpolished — some might even say crass, especially when he appears frustrated, like the time in a committee hearing when he told Democratic Rep. Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico to shut up.



There are certainly many members of Congress who are not traditional bureaucrats, but Mullin has to be in the top tier of those lawmakers who would otherwise never choose to spend time in D.C. In fact, he won't even admit to enjoying his time there. "I enjoy being a father. I enjoy being a husband," he said to me recently. But as far as being a lawmaker goes, he describes it as more of a duty. Much like the man he and his supporters sent to the White House, Mullin rarely hesitates to speak his mind, and he's rarely conventional. Oklahoma Rep. Tom Cole calls him "the authentic voice of eastern Oklahoma."

"Socialism is nothing but a disguised free democracy, meaning that they make you think you have a choice, but you really don't," Mullin said as he continued pacing in front of the meager assembly.

According to Mullin, the Green New Deal's real endgame is not stemming the flow of greenhouse gas emissions from one of the world's largest contributors, it's control. The plan calls for free higher education, meaning, Mullin says, that the government will choose where you learn. It calls affordable housing a human right, which means free government housing. It will raze buildings that don't meet energy standards and make the government give a livable wage to people who don't even want to work. "It has nothing to do with eliminating my cows from farting, it has to do with that farm being deemed a hazard to the public health," Mullin explains. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — the vocal and politically galvanizing congresswoman from New York — and her Democratic colleagues want climate change deemed a national emergency so the feds can claim "eminent domain and take over our farms. And now what do they control?" he asks, hanging on that last word.

"Our food," an older woman in front snaps back quickly.

"Our food supply," Mullin agrees, nodding his head.

This worldview marries two of Markwayne Mullin's defining principles: his distrust of government, particularly when it comes to regulatory overreach, and his belief in private enterprise. Mullin left junior college in 1998 to take over the family plumbing business when his father's health began to fail. The business remains successful today, but after much prayer, Mullin — frustrated by the Affordable Care Act and Environmental Protection Agency requirements his businesses faced — decided to run for office in 2011. He had been approached by a political consultant who was a fan of his mixed martial arts career. But it's his work in Indian Country that most intrigues me, and likely perplexes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, inside and outside the capital. Mullin and I are both citizens of the Cherokee Nation, though, as many will tell you, he does not fit stereotypical notions of what it means to be Indigenous, either in how he looks or how he operates as a lawmaker.

Cherokee politics are complicated. They always have been. Our tribe has a history of being internally divided by vilages as well as ideals. When Europeans first encountered the Cherokee in the 16th century in the southeastern part of the continent, the tribe spoke three different dialects spread across five settlements, each comprising several

towns. Today, families still hold resentments from betrayals that preceded the Trail of Tears, and tribal elections can be cutthroat and deeply personal. Our leaders have been lobbying in the halls of Congress and the White House for hundreds of years now. Mullin is but one in a long line of influential, and complicated, Cherokee politicians and diplomats.

Mullin is also white-passing. The Cherokee Nation has never required a minimum blood quantum for tribal membership, and as a result we are the largest tribe in the country. That means we also have the largest diaspora, as well as the widest spectrum of political, cultural and racial identities. Like most Indigenous voters, Cherokees have historically voted Democrat. But as the last elections for tribal chief showed, there are many vocal Cherokee Republicans. Mullin is an ultra-conservative, white-passing Cherokee who has been an advocate for both tribal sovereignty and for encouraging tribes to assert that sovereignty by allowing private energy production on their lands. That duality has caused many to ask: Is Markwayne Mullin good or bad for Indian Country?

MULLIN WAS RAISED IN WESTVILLE,

Oklahoma, a small farming community of about 1,600 in the far reaches of Adair County along the Arkansas border. It sits immediately east of Cherokee County, home to the Cherokee Nation capitol of Tahlequah, which has one of the highest populations of Cherokee speakers in the state.

We first met at his 2018 election watch party, where he handily beat his Democratic rival, fellow Cherokee and then-Tahlequah Mayor Jason Nichols. In an interview afterward, Mullin told me about his first day on the House floor as a freshman lawmaker in 2013. "Tom Cole came up to me and said, 'Congratulations, you just doubled the Native American Caucus.' I had no idea what he was talking about." How could he not have known that? I recall thinking. That Mullin may have not fully understood the significance of his position is a potentially troubling thought for Indian voters.

"I know it sounds funny, but I mean this sincerely: I didn't know there was anything special about being Cherokee," Mullin told me this summer in his D.C. office. The question had stuck with me, and I was curious to know what Mullin meant. In Adair County, he explained, "everyone around you was Cherokee. So it

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was as normal as anybody else's town, it was just the way that it was."

Rep. Tom Cole, a Republican and a member of the Chickasaw Nation, told me that when he first got to the Hill in 2003, he knew that being Chickasaw would be a big component of his approach to policy. The significance of that responsibility quickly set in for him. Very soon after arriving at the Capitol, he got a

call from Northern Cheyenne Chief Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a former U.S. senator from Colorado. "I'm just calling to tell you you're going to pick up about 2 or 3 million new constituents whether you know it or not," Campbell said. "Because when they figure out that you're there, you're going to start getting Indians from all across the country."

About a month later, Cole said, he

came to his office to find a Native family sitting on the couch. They were there, he said, because his office was the only place in the building that felt "Native" to them. It felt familiar. "And ever since then, they've started coming and coming, and you realize what a special opportunity and I think obligation that you have to be in a position like this. In the entire history, and this includes the arrival of

"I know it sounds funny, but I mean this sincerely: I didn't know there was anything special about being Cherokee."

—Markwayne Mullin

(Reps.) Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids, there's only been 16 tribal members in the House of Representatives. Eight of them are from Oklahoma." Cole's office today is filled with beadwork, pottery and Pendleton blankets. On a table next to the couch in his office sits a picture of his great-aunt, Te Ata, the world-famous Chickasaw storyteller whom Q'orianka Kilcher portrayed on the big screen in the 2016 film *Te Ata*. Kimberly Teehee, the Cherokee Nation's delegate to Congress and a former Obama appointee, told me Tom Cole would fall on his sword for Indian Country at any given moment, regardless of what the GOP does.

"He's a very much needed voice on the Republican side of the aisle," said Democratic Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna Tribe. "I look at him as a mentor."

By contrast, Mullin's reputation



Congressman Markwayne Mullin, left, joins Vice President Mike Pence, his wife, Karen, and Congressman Kevin Hern as they enter Air Force Two to depart from Tulsa to Washington, D.C., last summer. IAN MAULE/TULSA WORLD VIA AP



is just as tied to GOP politics as it is to Indian Country policy, and the two don't always coalesce. His legislative record on Indian Country policy is often a sticking point for many in his district. He voted against renewing the Violence Against Women Act in 2013 because he disagreed with its LGBTQ provisions, and in 2016 he disputed a Reuters article that quoted him as advocating for the relaxation of federal regulations so tribes could allow private mineral exploration on their lands. The proposal came from two leaders of Trump's Native American Coalition, which Mullin chaired during the campaign.

Now in his fourth term, Mullin has become a more vocal and recognizable figure in Congress when it comes to Indian policy. He introduced legislation both this year and last to fund Indian Health Services in order to keep it running during a government shutdown. In a

January op-ed, he wrote that the federal government has a responsibility to provide health care to Indian Country: "Anything other than a full execution of those responsibilities is a breach of trust." He cosponsored the Stigler Act amendment, which removed a requirement from a 1947 law that members of the Five Civilized Tribes be at least one-half Indian blood in order for their lands to be held in "restricted fee" status. He also cosponsored the Not Invisible Act of 2019, which established an advisory committee to combat violence on tribal lands. He's been on Trump's Indian Country policy team since the campaign, a place where many, including Cole, think he could have great influence.

IN EARLY 2016, DONALD TRUMP'S CAMPAIGN began reaching out to tribal leaders, advocates and policy experts to form an Indian Country policy team. Among those tapped for a spot was Tom

Cole. He said that while he was considering the request, he watched the video of Trump's 1993 testimony before a House subcommittee meeting on Native American affairs, where Trump said people on some reservations with casinos "don't look like Indians to me." If Trump won the nomination, Cole decided, he would vote for him as a fellow Republican. But until then, he wasn't going to be part of his team. "Markwayne went the opposite direction, and I'm glad he did because it's given him a relationship with the White House, with the administration, that's been very helpful," he told me in June, well after many of Trump's gaffes and

missteps in Indian Country.

President Trump has had a poor record with Indian Country, from his near-total reduction of Bears Ears National Monument to his suggestion that tribal citizens be required to have a job before receiving treatment through Indian Health Services. He hung a portrait of Andrew Jackson, the president who signed off on the removal of the Cherokee people, in the Oval Office. Mullin seems to have a good relationship with the White House, but if it has borne any fruit for Indigenous people, it's not obvious. When I asked Mullin last summer about Trump's 1993 testimony, he said that he thinks Trump has grown since then. "In this job, your perspectives do change," he said. "At that time (Trump) was looking at it from a business perspective and not as the leader of a nation." Trump also used to be very pro-choice, Mullin added.

Despite vilifying Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez all over eastern Oklahoma, Mullin appears to have a good relationship with just about everyone in his orbit. He leads a bipartisan workout group that includes lawmakers like Democratic presidential candidate Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii and Rep. Joe Kennedy III, a Democrat from Maryland who is also a close friend. There's little if any indication in committee meetings that Kennedy and Mullin are friends, but they have an easy, jovial way of speaking in the hallways of Congress. Both lawmakers said they learned a lot about the possibilities of bipartisan work and finding common ground from each other. When I asked Kennedy if he ever had to defend his friendship with Mullin, he laughed: "Yes, every day." Kennedy said they agree on virtually nothing, but Mullin is kind and never quits, so what's not to like?

Oklahoma Republican Rep. Frank Lucas calls Mullin "the puppy." He's always moving, almost always positive, and constantly motivating himself and those around him. As a child, Mullin had clubfoot and had to wear leg braces and undergo surgeries. He also had a speech impediment. "I couldn't fight with my mouth," he said. But he became a college wrestler and MMA fighter and, eventually, someone who speaks regularly on national television about taxes and presidential candidates. It's an arc he attributes almost entirely to hard work and discipline. His staff likes that he's energetic, direct and doesn't hesitate to speak his mind. It's those qualities at their extremes, though, that usually get Mullin's name in the press.

The day I followed him around the Capitol, he got into an uncomfortably tense back-and-forth with an OB-GYN who was testifying about the Trump administration's move to amend Title X to keep doctors from providing patients with information on options that include abortion. On the way to the hearing, one of Mullin's staff members asked if he had his questions prepared. He responded that he had decided not to use them. Instead, he said he would ask one of the doctors to explain the difference between delivering and aborting a baby. Essentially, he wanted to know: How do you kill a baby? Mullin left the hearing early after getting into a lengthy argument with the chairwoman, who accused him of attacking the witness, found him out of order, and took away his remaining time.

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"There are a lot of conservative, hard-core evangelical Cherokees who believe he is doing exactly the right thing."

—Kirby Brown, associate professor at the University of Oregon and a Cherokee author who has written about Cherokee nationhood



Outbursts like this are frowned upon in Cherokee culture. Many of Mullin's Cherokee constituents mention this when his name comes up. "We don't (publicly) attack people about their person or character based upon their politics," said Kirby Brown, an associate professor at the University of Oregon and a Cherokee author who has written about Cherokee nationhood.

Other Cherokee citizens I spoke to see him as a tribal member who invokes citizenship only for political gain — also a

common criticism of the state's governor, Kevin Stitt, another Republican, white-passing Cherokee Nation citizen. But others argue that Mullin has grown into his role as an Indian lawmaker. Having a tribal citizen in Congress is a good thing, they say, for better or worse; at least he understands what sovereignty and treaty rights really mean.

"I would push back really hard on that 'for better or worse' part. It does matter who's in that room with (Trump's) ear," Brown said. In 1835, Brown's ancestor, James Starr, and 19 other Cherokee dissidents signed the Treaty of New Echota without the consent of Chief John Ross. Ross and many other Cherokee leaders had hoped to use their diplomatic talents to prevent the government from forcing them, at gunpoint, on a deadly journey a thousand miles to the West. But others, including Brown's great-uncle, believed they saw the writing on the wall — that the U.S. government would take their homelands and their lives — and through the treaty, the group tried to get as much as they could for their people. That treaty gave way to the Trail of Tears, which impacted tens of thousands of Cherokee people.

"They shouldn't have done that," Brown said. "It was against the law, they knew it was against the law, they did it anyway, probably for a lot of different reasons. But I would have much rather had John Ross in that room talking to those treaty guys than even my own uncle because of the impact of the decision and the impact of what was said had on the Nation as a whole." One of the ways we Cherokees get in our own way, he told me, is the idea that having somebody in the room is better than having nobody. "I think there are limits to that argument, if the somebody in the room is going to

argue for privatizing Indian land, or if the somebody in the room is not going to put tribal nationhood and sovereignty front and center and first." Someone, Brown added, who understands that, whether they intended it that way or not, their opinion might be unfairly seen as representative of Indian Country.

One instance that perplexed Brown and caused several meltdowns from others on social media occurred when Mullin appeared on Fox News in response to Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren's controversial DNA test. After being introduced as a Cherokee and one of two Native Americans in Congress, Mullin referred to the Trail of Tears as "the volunteer walk." Mullin has ancestors who came to Oklahoma from the east before forced removal, when tribal leaders were still deliberating with the federal government in a vain attempt to stop the state of Georgia from completely stripping them of their rights and humanity. At the time there was still a glimmer of hope that their gift for diplomacy would help them keep their homes and land. Speaking of his use of the term "volunteer," Mullin told *Fox & Friends* co-hosts

Steve Doocy and Ainsley Earhardt, "And I use that as a loosely term (sic)." He said, "The heritage runs deep in my family. For (Warren), they're just stories."

The people like Mullin's ancestors who left before the Trail of Tears — what we Cherokee call "Old Settlers" — may have "volunteered" to leave, but only in the sense that they chose to move themselves instead of waiting to be forced off their land.

About a month after his TV appearance, Mullin told me that he regretted not being more precise with his language. Still, he stood by the use of the phrase. Missteps like that cause many Cherokees to believe that Mullin knows little about the Indigenous experience or is culturally disconnected. He would argue that he very much grew up Cherokee, on Cherokee lands and with Cherokee people. He said he just didn't appreciate that as unique until he came to Washington.

And on a national stage, being Cherokee comes with some baggage. Many of us are white or white-passing, and we have a tendency to be the loudest in the room. When you're Cherokee, you often

have to be particularly sensitive to the Indigenous experience outside your tribe. We were the first to ascribe to assimilation by creating a written language, a Constitution and a court system, and we adopted the practice of owning slaves. Our leaders also became tireless diplomats. Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green described Cherokee leaders in the years preceding removal as “masters of public relations” in their book *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears*. “Their policy was to make certain that no one could forget them. The result is that the Cherokees have become the Indians whose name everyone knows.” And we’re often the reason that the friendly white couple down the street with the “Native American”-theme living room believes they’re Indian, too.

Mullin is by no means completely disconnected from Indian life in Oklahoma. He knows his pocket of Indian Country well. He has close working relationships with several chiefs, and he understands the economic forces their tribes represent. While his district is still mostly Democratic, as it was before he was elected, there is a conservative coalition among Cherokee voters. “He’s not even an anomaly in the Cherokee Nation,” said Kirby Brown. “There are a lot of conservative, hard-core evangelical Cherokees who believe he is doing exactly the right thing.” Mullin may seem like an odd amalgam to outsiders, but he is Cherokee through and through.

“When I got up here ... I was getting the craziest questions, and people’s lack of knowledge about Cherokee Nation, saying, ‘Did you live on a reservation?’ for instance,” Mullin said. (The Cherokee Nation has no reservation.) “One of the biggest things I get is, ‘Oh, I can see the high cheekbones.’ I’ve got that more times than you can think.” Mullin may not be the staunch advocate for Native interests that Cole has come to be, but

members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, know significantly more about Indian Country because of him. Last year, Rep. Kennedy introduced legislation to return land rights to the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. Kennedy attributed his understanding of much of Indian Country to the world Mullin opened up for him. He told me he didn’t fully appreciate that tribes still faced many of the obstacles they do until he met Mullin.

IN ATOKA, MULLIN WAS NEARING the close of his talk. He’d touched on the idea that Democrats want to allow the “killing of babies” who are born early due to a failed abortion — something conservatives have been calling “born-alive” — and that they planned to move the country away from a democracy and closer toward a socialist governing structure. Elsewhere, Attorney General William Barr was about to give a live press conference on the Mueller report. But under the fluorescent lights of the Atoka community center, the proposed reroute of nearby Highway 69 was more important.

Throughout the entire day, the Mueller report was only mentioned twice. As the congressman was about to leave a second town hall, a city employee jokingly asked him what he thought of the investigation. Mullin said that his phone had been ringing nonstop, people asking him where the smoking gun was. Mullin, however, had actually forgotten the report was going to come out that morning. He said the same thing later when Choctaw Chief Gary Batton inquired about it.

When we last spoke in November, Mullin said the White House has been occupied with the impeachment inquiry — which he adamantly opposes — keeping the president from being more involved with his Indian Country policy team. Mullin said he still sees a lot of opportunity for economic development in Indian Country under the current administration. And if, say, Elizabeth Warren, whom he has repeatedly denounced, were to be the next president, Mullin says he’d “absolutely” be able to work with her on issues related to Indian Country.

But she won’t win, he added, laughing. He believes Donald Trump is a great ally to Indian Country, one of the best presidents for Native people. Mullin’s Oklahoma counterpart, Rep. Cole, said something similar about Barack Obama.

Only a few days prior to our last talk, Trump declared November as National American History and Founders Month, a time that has been recognized as National Native American Heritage Month for almost 30 years. Mullin said he didn’t think anything of it, adding that he’s not that sensitive about those things.

“I’ve told you before, I never knew I was special for being Cherokee until I got to Washington, D.C.,” he said. Later, he added, “I was Cherokee way before I was a congressman, and I’ll be Cherokee when I leave Congress, too.” ■



Graham Lee Brewer is a contributing editor at *High Country News* and a member of the Cherokee Nation.

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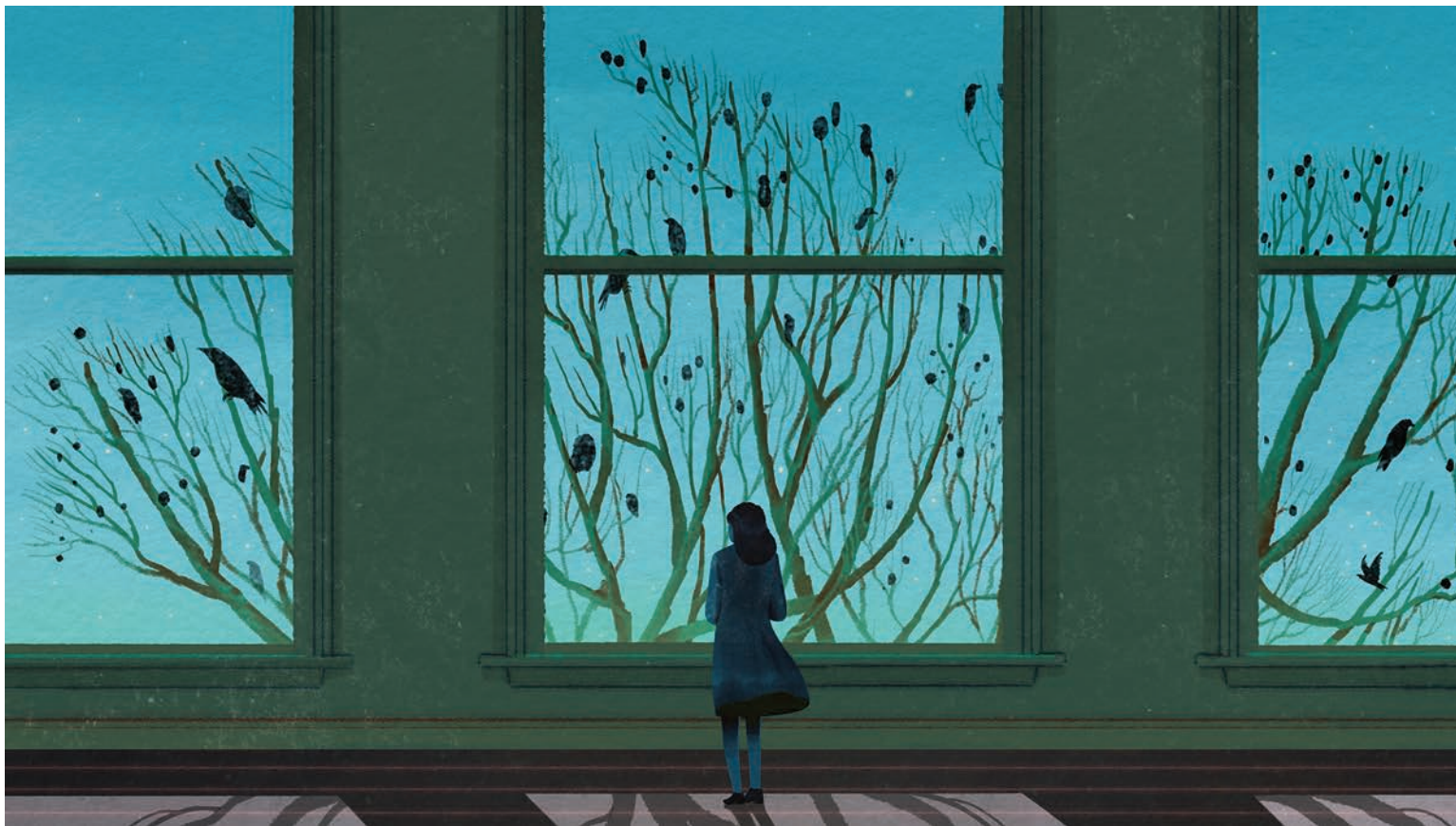
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Emily Mesner



ESSAY

Room to roost

Finding kinship and community with urban crows.

BY ELIZABETH WEINBERG
ILLUSTRATIONS BY LISK FENG

THE CROWS WERE QUIET. They perched in bare-limbed trees, heads tucked beneath still wings, black bodies silhouetted against towering buildings tinged sepia by streetlamps. Occasionally, a sentry noticed me staring, and, unsettled, took flight, startling me with its lone caw. Despite the clamor of the night-dark city — trash trucks, bar noise, late-night buses — I'd grown used to the birds' silence.

It was 3 in the morning, and I was walking through downtown Portland with local birder and naturalist Gary Granger. Since 2017, he and

his wife, Rebecca, have documented the winter roost of thousands of American crows, sharing what they've learned through talks, social media and their website, pdxcrowroost.com. That February night — blessedly free of the region's ever-present rain — I got to tag along.

Crows spend most of their time dispersed individually or in small groups, foraging for food and — particularly during mating and chick-rearing times in the spring and summer — maintaining territory. But evenings from roughly November to March, thousands of crows leave their usual haunts and gather in downtown Portland. It starts with a raucous pre-roost assembly, all noise and chaos and preening and ostentatious corvid acrobatics. As night falls, they disperse into trees and onto building ledges throughout downtown. Once roosted, Granger noted, they never squabble, never displace one another, and never eat. They come together, quite simply, to rest.

We walked at least seven miles, tracing a grid through downtown. I didn't notice the first crows until Granger pointed them out, more than 100 birds hunkered in trees outside a Nike store, unbothered by the fairy lights adorning the trees or the cars driving by. After a while, I began to anticipate them, especially

in trees near brightly illuminated buildings, where the shadows of their bodies were stark against the city. But the sight of several hundred crows sleeping along an urban street, fully ignoring the human noise around them, never failed to make me feel like I had walked through a portal to another world.

That night, we counted more than 12,000 crows.

CROWS GATHER IN SIMILAR urban winter roosts all over the continent, but we don't know exactly why. It could be that cities are warmer than rural places, thanks to the way concrete soaks up and radiates heat. But roosting crows never huddle together, and in Portland they rest on the outer limbs of trees, exposed to the wind and rain. It could be that there is plentiful food, but studies of winter crow roosts show that the birds disperse to forage during the day. It could be that there are fewer predators, but even cities have owls and hawks, and some roosting groups, like the one in Irvine, California, start the night in urban areas, then move into nearby wetlands, where predators are bountiful.

It may be, ironically, that the crows come to the city to avoid one predator in particular — us.

Throughout much of the settler-state United States, crows have been reviled as pests, perceived as wreaking havoc on agricultural lands. Humans have retaliated: A 1940 issue of *Life* described an Illinois Department of Conservation campaign where game wardens and farmers destroyed crow roosts with dynamite, then clubbed the stunned crows. In one winter, the magazine noted, the department's "score" hit 328,000 crows.

Studies have shown that crows have long, socially shared memories, that they can distinguish individual humans and teach other crows who and what should be considered a threat. Perhaps many of the surviving crows decided moving out of farmlands was in their best interest.

Still, the city is not exactly a haven. Here, too, we see them as pests: While they don't eat at the roost, they do poop, frequently and plentifully. You can tell where crows have been roosting by the white smatterings that coat the sidewalk like crusted snow.

For a while, downtown Portland relied on pressure-washing and the assistance of a Zamboni-like sidewalk-cleaning-machine known as the "Poopmaster 6000," but the droppings accumulated anyway. In more recent years, Downtown Portland Clean & Safe, a nonprofit funded by downtown businesses and property owners, has switched to falconers, who are paid around \$55,000 annually to bring in Harris' hawks several nights a week to harass the crows away from the core business district. The hazing works, but only temporarily; Granger has noticed that the crows learn the falconers' hours and move into the area the hawks were patrolling once they pack it in for the night. That means the sidewalks get cleaner, but hardly clean.

On the one hand, I understand the hazers: The crows roost across a hundred or so square





city blocks, leaving a field of white splotches under every single tree and building ledge they sleep on. It looks messy and is a potential health risk. But I can't help thinking we owe the crows more. We attacked them while they slept; we transformed their historical habitats and built sprawling urban ecosystems. Now we have the gall to be annoyed when they show up to rest. If crows have decided spending time among us is the best way to survive the winter, I figure it behooves us to find ways to accommodate them.

DAWN APPROACHED, and the crows grew restless. I could barely tell the sky was changing — just a little more blue at the edges, a little more definition in the clouds — but the crows were well aware the sun was coming up. Granger brought me to Pioneer Courthouse Square, a brickwork plaza home to food trucks and a fountain — and to the crows' morning check-in. Hundreds of crows who had rested there were shaking off sleep, shimmying and stretching their wings. Thousands more were flying in from the trees and buildings to the west, arriving in flocks, then splitting into different trees. The sound was shocking, a cacophony of cawing voices clamoring over one another, dropping to quiet and then crescendoing to a croaking roar.

Watching the crows, I couldn't help seeing a mirror image of my own queer community. Our exuberant gatherings at brunch and dance parties, yes, but more than that: our resilience, our togetherness. Like the crows, we've so often gathered in places where we're not straightforwardly welcome, where we're seen as dirt marring an otherwise uncontaminated society. Still, we've banded together and said: *Here, we will come together. Here, we will make ourselves safe.* Who am I to say the crows should do anything else?

Elizabeth Weinberg is a queer essayist and science communicator based in Portland, Oregon. She's the author of Unsettling: Surviving Extinction Together, which examines the climate crisis from a queer perspective.

TOWNSHIP AND RANGE

Exploring the intersection of race and family in the interior rural West.



Field notes on good fortune

What my dog taught me about how to live.

BY NINA MCCONIGLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA ANAND

I HAVE BEEN DECIDEDLY mediocre at most things — a true jack of all trades, master of none. I know how to do a lot of things: I can shoot a gun, knit, make crabapple jelly, drive a stick shift, quilt, bird and make piecrust from scratch. But I am not particularly good at any of them, in my opinion, and my knowledge of each is pretty shallow. Nevertheless, I have always tried out new hobbies with great gusto. I get excited about learning new things. I just tend to move on before I really master any of them.

There is one exception: I have a superpower for finding four-leaf clovers. I can wander across almost any lawn or patch of grass, zero in and find one. It's almost like a party trick. At picnics and park playdates, I casually look down, scour the green and pull one up.

A patch of clover is really just one large, interconnected plant, a family of stems sharing roots beneath the grass. When one of them grows four leaves, other ones nearby may carry the same mutation, as if luck has traveled underground. So, usually, I can pull up a few. I have delighted and surprised many a friend by handing them a bouquet of clover, a little bundle of luck.

But it really isn't luck at all. It's stopping, taking the time to look down and really see what is in front of you. Which is something that few of us do these days. The main thing I scrutinize and spend time looking at is my phone screen, the glow of it lighting up my face as I scroll through all sorts of shallow information. What wonders might I have missed with my attention focused so?

AT THE END OF THE SUMMER, our dog died. Lincoln was almost 10 and seemed in good health; he had an autoimmune disease and needed steroids, but he lived his life full steam ahead. The day before he died, he stole a hamburger from our daughter's hand and chomped it down. He had been coughing and wheezing a bit, so we drove him to the Colorado State University Veterinary Hospital to get checked out. My husband reminded me how lucky we were to live next to one of the best veterinary hospitals in the country. Within the hour, Lincoln was diagnosed with pneumonia, and 12 hours later we made the difficult decision to put him down.

I was in a daze. I wept as we made the late-night drive to the hospital. On a small gurney, I held his paw and kissed his head as the vet gave him a series of shots. I smelled his scent

and stroked his back. And just like that, the little heartbeat that had spent hours every day at my feet or cuddled up against me was gone. They let my husband and me sit with him alone in a room as long as we wanted. I cried and held him until he started to feel cool. But I didn't want to leave him. I held his collar to my face and wept at our bad luck.

But really, Lincoln was the best luck. How lucky it was that I answered an online ad for him while scrolling — that this particular dog ended up in our particular life. Of all the dogs in the world, out of all the possible circumstances, our paths came together. It was almost like finding a four-leaf clover, but instead of something in the grass, I got a ball of fur, a living thing who gave me years of companionship.

*How many forms of
luck are we surrounded
by that don't look like
luck because they have
become ordinary?*

He was singular in terms of the kind of relationship we had. All my relationships with humans have complications; there are histories, expectations, misunderstandings and obligations. With Lincoln, it wasn't like that. Sure, he was a dog. Still, it felt almost radical to be loved by something that didn't care what I had accomplished that day. No matter what, he was there, nuzzled up against me.

A DOG NOTICES THINGS we have trained ourselves not to notice. Lincoln was a master at it.

A smell.

A squirrel running along the fence.

A rabbit darting across the grass.

A package being delivered.

Someone cooking bacon in the kitchen.

Dogs live almost entirely through attention. And when we took walks together, I began borrowing some of that attention for myself.

So perhaps one of the greatest gifts he gave me was his way of being in the world. It was Lincoln who taught me to look down in a different way. He made that attention a daily ritual. With him, on our walks and through repetition, I began to notice the world anew. I knew when the milkvetch and fleabane bloomed. Learned the names of mountain mahogany and stonecrop. Where antelopes tended to graze. Noticed star lilies and cinquefoil. That one rock that looked like a scowling face. Where to avoid prickly pear, and where there was a little stream where he could get a drink.

Finding a four-leaf clover feels like a moment of improbable luck; having a dog is a long, sustained luck you don't recognize until you realize how extraordinary the ordinary days have been. Luck is usually imagined as something unexpected and external: finding a lucky penny, a winning lottery ticket, that four-leaf clover. A dog makes you think about luck differently. It isn't always something you find. Maybe you don't understand how lucky you are until you've been living with it for years.

During the weeks after he died, as I sat crying, my head resting on his dog bed, I realized he was the extraordinary thing; this ordinary creature who was here with me all along. Lincoln was the kind of luck I overlooked, because he had become part of the furniture of our life. How many forms of luck are we surrounded by that don't look like luck because they have become ordinary?

Lincoln taught me that luck isn't always a four-leaf clover hiding among all the ordinary ones. Sometimes luck has four paws instead of four leaves. Sometimes it follows you from room to room, waits for you at the door, insists you go outside and stops to sniff a patch of sagebrush you would have walked right past. Lincoln taught me that being lucky doesn't mean avoiding loss; it means noticing what you've been given while you still have it. For years, I thought I was the one taking care of him. But all along, he was teaching me to slow down, pay attention and notice what was right in front of me. And maybe that's what luck really is — not finding something rare, but realizing how much of your life was lucky all along, that I was already living inside my good fortune. ☀

Nina McConignley is a writer and professor at Colorado State University and the author of How to Commit a Postcolonial Murder.

COLORADO

Dan Blumstein, the UCLA professor who runs the Marmot Project at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory north of Crested Butte, Colorado, came up with a creative idea for saving a 64-year-old wildlife research project. When budget cuts hit, Blumstein was determined to keep his Marmot Project afloat. He told NPR that inspiration came to him after he and his wife watched the Apple TV show *Margo's Got Money Troubles*, and he thought, well, "Marmot's got money troubles," too. But rather than a pornography-friendly account, Blumstein created the rodent-loving account "OnlyMarms" on the subscription platform OnlyFans. So, if you're in the mood for some delightfully "uncensored marmot content," check it out.



MONTANA

This story had us giggling raptor-ously: One fine morning, the 300-pound green dinosaur stationed outside the Dino Mart in Gardiner, Montana, went missing. Fortunately, the legendary Sinclair Oil mascot was quickly located, gazing serenely from a clifftop 10 miles away in Yankee Jim Canyon near Yellowstone National Park. Jacques Sims, who works at the Sinclair station, told KTVQ's Q2 News: "To think that our dinosaur was sitting up in the canyon up there, it was funny. We were laughing all day." The pranksters went to considerable trouble planning their heist, making sure to "capture" a dino far enough from the building to be unmonitored by cameras. Extracting the exceptional *Apatosaurus* wasn't easy, and carting it off was even more challenging: "They literally had to unbolt it from the cement pad out here, and they re-bolted it up on a cliff," Sims said. On a normal day, such a "grand

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

theft dino" caper would get you arrested, but Sinclair management declined to file a police report. As we learned in *Jurassic Park*, "Life will not be contained. Life breaks free, it expands to new territories and crashes through barriers. ... Life finds a way." And so do big, green lovable dinosaurs.

WASHINGTON

Here's a cat-aclysmic story straight out of a Disney movie: Sixty cats were found on an abandoned 40-foot sailboat anchored off Point Defiance Park in Tacoma, Washington. "It started out as a welfare check," Officer Shelbie

Boyd told KUOW. The Tacoma Police initially sent out a marine services unit, but after finding dozens of abandoned cats and no human beings, they dispatched the animal control unit. Unlike DHS, the officers couldn't deport the Feline American residents until they'd obtained the proper search warrants, so they simply left food and water and promised to come back later. When the animal control officers returned, they rescued 30 cats from the vessel. But more were hiding in nooks and crannies ... a lot more, in fact. The police left out more food and water, acquired another

warrant and returned once again. To root out the remaining rascals, they ultimately had to drill into the belly of the boat; cats are not inclined to obey authority figures. All in all, they rounded up 60 cats-away. And all of them were in pretty good shape, aside from being a little stressed out. A few cats had skin and fur issues, though most were wearing flea collars.

Which naturally raised the question: Who supplied those flea collars, and how did all those kitties wind up on a sailboat? Turns out a guy named Derek Hieb owned the vessel. But Hieb apparently fell on hard times, *The Seattle Times* reported, and was living on the boat during the COVID-19 pandemic when a friend gave him a cat named Missy. Missy had kittens, but Hieb couldn't afford to get all of them spayed and neutered, and, well, nature took its course. As Ogden Nash noted: "*The trouble with a kitten is THAT/Eventually it becomes a CAT.*" And one cat soon followed another, until six years later, Hieb had dozens of furry roommates. He found work as a rigger and lived on the boat until right before police seized it. All 60 cats received medical attention at the Humane Society for Tacoma & Pierce County, and some may still be up for adoption. Check out Tacoma Humane's adoption page under "Sailor Cat."

WASHINGTON

What would we do without our marmots, cats and dinosaurs, not to mention Jimothy the Raccoon, Seattle's sublimely spherical celebrity? We heartily concur with whoever wrote on Jimothy's Facebook fan page: "It was July 2026. The sky was on fire and we couldn't eat lettuce. Jimothy was our glimmer of hope. Our silver lining." Ours, too. Rock on, Jimothy. We love you. ☀

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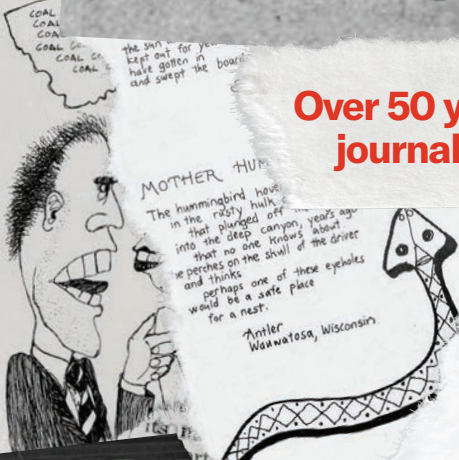
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From yields as pump hauled o' shaggy. Chicks hang like feathers of 'stud or lark in calligraphies of 'stud where retracted plinkers plow the creek. I discovered inhabitants thriving world of the Sixth sense, having no moment treading it like eternity, wild very!

We like to think of High Country News as a bristlecone pine — shaped by the wind and sun and snow, but still standing strong with roots firmly planted in the Western soil.

And if HCN is that tough old pine, then you are a vital part of the vast network that feeds our work. **Your support gives life to our stories.**

HCN traces its roots back to 1969 when Tom Bell bought *Camping News Weekly*, a small outdoor recreation publication. In 1970, he rechristened it *High Country News*.

And thanks to our many readers and supporters — **folks like you, who have consistently kept this publication going strong with your generosity** — here we stand today, ready for the next 50 years.



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Ed and Betsy Marston outside the HCN office in Paonia, Colorado in 1980. Courtney White/The Indelible West



...to the...
...standed, which is a good thing, as...
...dispenses to delay any longer my...
...the "winter station".
...And you can throw in the key not to...
...and moreover I'm beginning to get...
...inward vision. I experienced with...
...renewed faith and the pump pressing...
...recharging for a few minutes, could...
...get a credit in here. I think, then...
...world really by joining.



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#IAM THE WEST

**CINNAMON SIOUX PRIEST
HEATHER RAE PRIEST**
**Co-founders of Priest Family Revival and the
Antelope Foundation**
Boise, Idaho

Our dad, Randy Priest, opened his first hat shop in Challis, Idaho, in 1980, and later on in Eagle and then Donnelly. He was loved by everyone, a cowboy mule-packer who knew how to make people feel welcome. When he died, we realized, oh, we're now the matriarchs of the family: Now, Priest Family Revival is matriarchal. We've been in Idaho for generations, and we come from people who work the land. We come from structural poverty, so why wouldn't we just build from who we are instead of borrowing from the imaginations of capitalism? We wanted to build our business like our dad did, so we started training post-incarceration women in beading and jewelry-making, instilling a sense of dignity and value, the idea that your time has value. We have backgrounds in the recovery space and in working in prisons and post-incarceration case management. And so, we put all that together, because this company was always meant to be built in community.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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