

High Country News

For people who care about the West

THE PIONEER OF RUIN

*In a place no one else seems to want,
a young woman builds a home*

Feature and illustrations by Sarah Gilman





SARAH GILMAN

Editor's note

Pioneers, past and present

A few weeks ago, I visited the Eagle Rock Shelter, a nearby archaeological site on the Gunnison River. According to the scientists and students from Western Wyoming Community College who have spent the last few summers excavating it, small groups of people lived here on and off for 13,000 years, even as the landscape changed from pine forest to today's sagebrush and tamarisk. That's hundreds of generations — mind-boggling in a place where locals now brag about having fourth- or fifth-generation roots.



The shelter offered easy access to the river, a southern exposure that made for relatively warm winters, high bluffs from which to spot friends and foes, and the reliable presence of a dietary staple — rabbit.

Cisco, Utah, the setting of this issue's cover essay by longtime *HCN* contributor Sarah Gilman, lacks such obvious amenities. In fact, it's about as hardscrabble a place as you can find in the modern West. That's partly what attracted Eileen Muza, Gilman's 34-year-old protagonist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who is trying to make a go of it there. It's a classic Western story: Will she stay for a year or two and then vanish like yesterday's sheepherders, oil drillers, filmmakers and railroad workers? Or is she a true pioneer, someone who will dig in and create something new and lasting at a time when many Western communities are becoming warped by too-rapid growth?

I've never doubted that a determined outsider can transform a place. Ed Marston, *High Country News'* publisher from 1983 to 2002, accomplished exactly this. He and his wife, Betsy, who still works at *HCN*, moved from New York City to tiny Paonia, Colorado, in the 1970s, abandoning careers in academia and public television to embark on an unlikely journalistic path. Through his fierce writing and editing, fired by original thinking and an eagerness to challenge power, Ed not only influenced a generation of aspiring journalists, but also tens of thousands of citizens and officials and the way they think of the West. Even as he called out corruption and mismanagement, Ed insisted that the region could be something more than a resource colony for the rest of the country. And he always believed that we could learn to work across our cultural divides.

After he retired, Ed dug into his chosen community, serving on the boards of our electric co-op and other nonprofits, running for public office and investing in local real estate. Early in the morning on Aug. 31, Ed died suddenly from complications related to West Nile virus. We are still shaken, and we are deeply saddened.

In an upcoming issue, we will explore Ed's legacy in more depth. In the meantime, we've gathered some of his writings on our website (see hcne.ws/ed-marston). I recommend reading them; they remain as incisive and original as the remarkable man who wrote them.

—Paul Larmer, executive director/publisher

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By Sarah Gilman

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On the cover

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by Sarah Gilman.



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The issues leading Navajo Nation's presidential election

The Navajo Nation — the largest reservation in the U.S., stretching across three states — is a nation in flux. In late August, voters participated in a primary presidential election to weigh in on the future of the 300,000-citizen tribe. The incumbent president, Russell Begaye, was ousted. Vice President Jonathan Nez led the 18-candidate field, and Joe Shirley Jr., a former two-term tribal president, earned the second-highest number of votes. Nez and Shirley now advance to the tribe's November general election. The top issues galvanizing voters this year are the Navajo Nation's economy, the precarious future of the Navajo Generating Station, clean water and a controversy over purged voter rolls. Younger voters see language, culture and tradition as dominant in the office of president. "Our priority is inspiring the next generation and giving them the resources they need," Nez said. "It's about working together, helping each other out, encouraging each other so we can make a better Navajo Nation."

ANTONIA GONZALES

Read more online: hcne.ws/navajo-election



Navajo Nation presidential candidate Jonathan Nez addresses constituents on the Navajo language radio station KGAK after winning a majority of the votes in the primary election Aug. 28. Nez will face former tribal President Joe Shirley Jr. in the November general election. CAYLA NIMMO/AP PHOTO

The end of the Colorado River.

PETE MCBRIDE



Paddling the Colorado's headwaters

Photographer and filmmaker Pete McBride recently climbed atop his paddleboard and glided down the headwaters of the Colorado River. It was June, and beneath his feet the Roaring Fork, a tributary of the mighty Colorado, was far from roaring. In fact, it wasn't much more than a babbling brook. For decades, McBride has documented the changing state of his backyard river, the place where he says he learned to fish and swim as a child. In a recent essay, he reflected on the dry summer and the new normal it portends. "Shrinking snowpacks and low waterways will eventually affect everyone. As our watershed goes, so goes much of Colorado's recreation-based tourist economy," McBride wrote. "The white bathtub rings that already mark the West's major reservoirs, lakes Powell and Mead, are not only stark reminders of the water levels we once had; they also foreshadow what may come."

PETE MCBRIDE

Read more online: hcne.ws/parched-river

Trending

On public lands, corporations profit

In a recent opinion column, Greg Zimmerman, deputy director of the Center for Western Priorities, a public-lands advocacy organization, argues that a deal between the U.S. government and concessionaire Delaware North allows private corporations to profit off the country's most pristine landscapes. Delaware North is part of the expanding so-called public-private partnerships in national parks, monuments, wildlife refuges and other American publicly owned lands. Zimmerman writes: "Setting aside the important question of whether we should be privatizing park functions, it's hard to defend an individual who has so blatantly abused the public's trust."

You say

BILL CHASE: "This issue arose long before (Interior) Secretary Ryan Zinke came around. As frustrating as the copyright issue is in Yosemite, it's a decades-old problem."

LYNN JACKSON: "The article neglects to mention Patagonia, REI, and other industrial-level recreation companies. Are they not profiting from massive restrictions and designations on federal lands, which sends millions of people and all their new and shiny outdoor equipment and toys into the area?"

GRETCHEN CREMO: "The National Park Service needs to shoulder some of the blame here for dropping the ball when the trademarks were being registered."

Read more online: hcne.ws/concessionaire-takeover and [Facebook.com/highcountrynews](https://www.facebook.com/highcountrynews)

3 million

Amount of acidic waste, in gallons, released during the 2015 Gold King Mine spill near Silverton, Colorado.

48

Number of sites, including Gold King, that received Superfund status in 2016.

In 2015, Environmental Protection Agency workers at the long-abandoned Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colorado, accidentally released acidic waste into a nearby river. Utah, New Mexico and the Navajo Nation filed lawsuits seeking to recoup cleanup costs from the EPA, but now the agency is attempting to dismiss the lawsuits.

JODI PETERSON

Read more online: hcne.ws/no-consequences



Sandhill cranes flying above Oregon's Columbia National Wildlife Refuge. CHRIS PARMETER

"It seems reasonable that a creature with 10 million years of generational knowledge would make wise choices about where it sets down."

—Stephen R. Miller, in "The arresting quiet of a crane migration in Washington." Read more online: hcne.ws/cows-among-cranes

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HUMAN REHABILITATION

"Restoration's crisis in confidence" (HCN, 8/6/18) is a breath of fresh air. For far too long not only restoration's promoters but also the media, foundations and government agencies that fund restoration projects have ignored the movement's inherent contradictions, as well as its failure to deliver the "restoration" that has been promised.

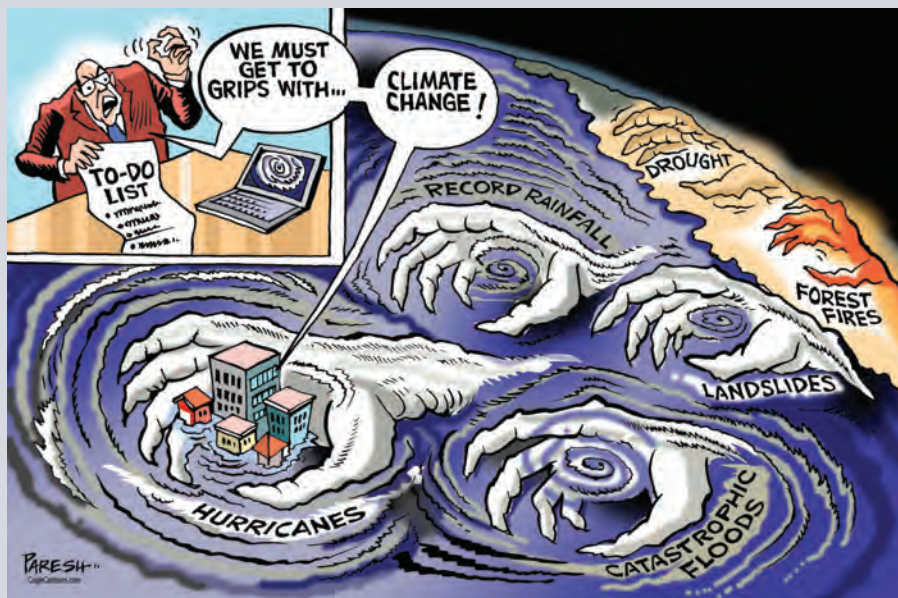
The problem, however, is not climate change but rather the hubris of a species that claims to have the power to restore what it has destroyed. The evidence suggests otherwise: Humans can rehabilitate the damage we, or events like hurricanes and floods, cause. Restoration, however, is a natural process that humans do not, and perhaps cannot, fully understand, but which we can easily damage. As pointed out in the article, in an age of climate change, we humans do not even understand where natural restoration is headed.

Take this summer's Western wildfires: They are nature's way of readjusting vegetation in response not only to climate change but also to what we humans have wrought in the West's forests via clear-cutting and "thinning," which actually increase rather than decrease fire risks in all but the short term. But no one knows what the future landscape, shaped by these new types of fires, will look like.

Modern ecosystem restoration got its start with efforts in Northern California to bring back the salmon by rehabilitating the damage done by logging roads and old forest liquidation logging during the middle part of the 20th century. Somewhere along the line, that effort was co-opted by state and federal agencies, which now use restoration as mitigation for allowing damaging logging, ranching and water-management practices to continue. The salmon have not recovered.

I hope *High Country News* will continue to closely and critically examine restoration as currently practiced in the West, debunking the false and exaggerated claims of its proponents, exposing its flaws, missteps and failures, as well as celebrating real achievements. HCN should also take the lead in correcting the language that conditions how we look at the natural world. Since it is actually nature, not humans, that effects restoration, let's call what we humans do out there to help by its proper name: rehabilitation.

Felice Pace
Klamath, California



SHIFTING BASELINES

In "Restoration's crisis in confidence" (HCN, 8/6/18), Maya Kapoor offers a thoughtful summary of current debates about the role of history in ecological restoration.

Kapoor correctly describes how restorationists in the Southwest are moving away from their traditional focus on recovering historic baseline, or "reference," conditions. Baselines have always been arbitrary and difficult to describe, and they are increasingly detached from the kinds of future scenarios we associate with climate change.

Two other points, however, are worth mentioning.

First, the notion of restoring degraded ecosystems to pristine conditions is mostly limited to the Anglophone world of former British colonies. In most other regions, including Europe, the idea of restoring ecosystems to a pristine natural state has never resonated. We Americans are just beginning to catch up.

Second, the idea that history is no longer relevant for restoration — "ecologists can't look to the past," as Kapoor puts it — because ecosystems are so dynamic ignores the fact that we know ecosystems are so dynamic largely from research about the past in fields such as paleoecology, historical ecology and environmental history.

History cannot provide a roadmap for specific restoration plans, but it remains essential for placing those plans in their larger context of social and environmental change.

Peter S. Alagona
Santa Barbara, California

A FIRE DEFICIT

Cally Carswell's piece on life in the Southwest during aridification hit home with me, living as I do on the edge of the national forest near Santa Fe. The town sits at the base of two large national forest watersheds, both of which are heavily forested and choked with thickets of decadent trees born of past overgrazing and a century of misguided fire suppression. These watersheds are ticking time bombs that will host high-severity fires any year now, and Santa Fe will face post-fire flooding that could cause millions of dollars in damage and depress the all-important tourism industry.

This is a familiar story in many towns around the West, but Santa Fe has a twist, given its urban population. Here, the U.S. Forest Service has been thinning and doing management burns in the Santa Fe River watershed but still has thousands of acres untreated directly adjacent to the city. Funding shortfalls and vocal members of the public who strongly object to any smoke from prescribed fires have hamstrung efforts to prepare for the inevitable wildfires (and their uncontrollable smoke).

As a wildland firefighter, I know what's coming for Santa Fe. Thinning and prescribed burning should have been ongoing for decades to inoculate our forests against high-severity fire. Now, with shorter burning windows given drought, it may be too late. This fire deficit is a problem throughout the West, but with the Trump administration cutting funding for fuel treatments and fire science, the monster fires will continue and only get worse.

Tom Ribe
Santa Fe, New Mexico

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The downwinders' ensemble gathers on stage in the final scene.

KEN HOWARD FOR SANTA FE OPERA

The next act in the West's atomic past

Trinity test downwinders speak out in opera halls and Congress

BY ELENA SAAVEDRA BUCKLEY

Outside the Santa Fe Opera, a 62-year-old venue nestled in juniper-covered hills, retirees reclined by cloth-covered tables in the parking lot. As the August heat reflected off the asphalt, they tailgated with flutes of champagne. Soon, they would file in to see *Doctor Atomic*, an opera about physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and the 24 hours before the first atomic bomb, which he helped create, detonated over New Mexico's Tularosa Basin in the Trinity test.

Doctor Atomic has been performed in New York and San Francisco, but never before in New Mexico, where Manhattan Project scientists from Los Alamos Laboratory created the bomb. John Adams composed the opera in 2005, and Peter Sellars' libretto uses declassified Los Alamos documents, focusing on the scientists' perspective. This was the first time that downwinders — people whose families lived in the Tularosa Basin, in the path of the bomb's radiation — appeared on stage during a performance. This summer, 73 years after Trinity, New Mexico's downwinders are finally receiving some attention — onstage and in Congress.

The Trinity test occurred at 5:30 a.m. on July 16, 1945, about 150 miles south of Santa Fe and the laboratory and only

weeks before the bombings in Japan. It bathed the basin in light, creating a half-mile-wide crater. The Tularosa Basin Downwinders believe the blast's radiation gave their families cancer, either from the air or through milk and produce, and that the diseases are being passed down genetically.

Tina Cordova, co-founder of the Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium, was one of the downwinders in the opera. In one scene, she and her niece stood near a giant chrome sphere that represented the bomb. It hung on a track, ebbing and flowing over the stage like a stormcloud, almost grazing her head.

"I've seen people crying," Cordova said about the performances. "People come up to us afterwards and say, 'I'm so sorry, I had no idea.'"

In 1945, thousands of people lived in a 50-mile radius of the test site. Frank Gallegos, born three years later, grew up in an adobe ranch house just 12 miles from the site. His parents told him that in the days after the explosion, they saw fallout drift from the sky and watched as their cattle's coats faded from brown to white.

"The government didn't tell them nothing," Gallegos said recently. "The population wasn't great, and we were expendable if something happened." Five people from the Gallegos ranch, including Frank's mother, have died from cancer

since Trinity.

Cordova enjoyed appearing in the opera, but she wants federal recognition even more. In late June, she traveled to Washington, D.C., to request that Trinity downwinders and their families become eligible for compensation from the Department of Justice — something the group has sought for more than a decade. Cordova, who contracted thyroid cancer at 39, thinks compensation could change the lives of downwinders burdened by generations of medical bills.

For some downwinders, the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act offers a path to payment. People who lived in certain Nevada, Utah and Arizona counties in the 1950s and '60s, during nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site — and who have been diagnosed with certain cancers — can receive up to \$50,000 each. The 100 above-ground nuclear tests in Nevada made researching health effects, and justifying compensation, easier. But the act overlooks Nevada downwinders outside those counties, as well as downwinders affected by other atomic events. Cordova joined New Mexico Sen. Tom Udall, D, and representatives from Idaho, Guam and the Navajo Nation to testify in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee about expanding the act. According to Udall's office, the amendments are pending, but keeping Congress

Please see **Downwinders**, page 22

Elena Saavedra Buckley is an editorial intern at *High Country News*. [@elenasb_](https://twitter.com/elenasb_)



In the path of flames, far from help

As the West burns, a town fields its own amateur firefighters

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

Jack Frakes, chief of the Dufur Volunteer Fire Department, poses for a portrait in the fire station in Dufur, Oregon.

TERRAY SYLVESTER
FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

On the first day of August, hot winds whipped across the foothills east of Oregon's Mount Hood. The South Valley Fire, which started around 1:30 p.m., exploded to hundreds of acres in a few hours and thousands by nightfall. Pine trees lit up like torches. Sagebrush exploded in towers of flame dozens of feet high. Wind pushed the flames through dry wheat and pastureland in a long, cresting wave.

As the fire bore down on houses, shops and ranches, locals scrambled to the scene. Some brought plows and tractors to bury dry vegetation and create firebreaks in front of buildings, or carried hoses and water to douse the flames. Others loaded up animals in trailers to save them as the fire crept closer.

Dustin Miller heard about the fire less than 20 minutes after it broke out. He left his job as a local agricultural consultant, filled up a tank of water the size of a couple large ice chests that was mounted in his pickup bed, and raced toward the flames. Miller, a 27-year-old lifelong Dufur resident who's worked on farms and ranches ever since he could dig a trench, joined a fire line at one of the first ranches that burned and then, as it swept towards his home, retreated there.

At Miller's home, his landlord, Mike Filbin, was on a bulldozer, crushing sagebrush and scrub oak and burying dry grass to make a fire line around the barns and

houses. Miller stood on the freshly plowed fire line, along with dozens of other locals, as a wall of fire tore through the dry pastureland above his home. With a 100-gallon tank and garden hose, he sprayed the flames just feet away, advancing when he could and retreating when the flames became too hot.

"We had water and we had friends," he told me later. "This was in Stage 3 evacuation, and everyone was still here: fire trucks, tractors, plows." For hours, they beat back the fire. In the end, it burned around the property in every direction, but the houses and barns were untouched.

This summer has seen more than 2 million acres burn across the West; in less than a month, more than 100,000 acres burned in Wasco County alone. And the costs of fighting those flames are high: Six firefighters have died fighting record blazes in California, while near Dufur, a man lost his life defending his neighbor's home. Here on the dry flank of the Cascades, outside help can be slow to arrive. Even when it does, residents often choose to stay to protect their homes, harvests and heritage, doing so without hesitation. This summer's fires, however, have tested their mettle and challenged their ability to safely fight the blazes.

When Nancy Gibson heard the South Valley Fire was moving toward her and her sons' homes, she drove into the evacuation zone with her daughters-in-law. As both sides of the road burned and the smoke thickened, they rushed into their houses

to save what they could from the growing flames. "We weren't even supposed to be there and we were there, grabbing animals and taking pictures off the wall," she said. "Everything was just black. You could smell and just feel it coming." By the time they'd left, they'd grabbed two horses, two goats, a calf, a guinea pig and a cat.

"I've lived here 30 years and we've fought wheat fires before, but never one after another like this," said Gibson.

Luke Petroff, a lanky recent high school graduate with mid-length dirty-blond hair, agreed. Petroff, who has been helping on farms most of his life, said it used to be almost fun fighting the small blazes. But between mid-July and early August, three major fires ripped through the fields; the first, the Substation Fire, took the life of Petroff's friend and mentor, John Ruby, a retired welder and farmhand. "This year, it's downright depression," Petroff said. "I hate every minute of it."

Since Europeans colonized Dufur in the mid-19th century, wheat fields have spread across its undulating dry hills. Today, they span nearly 60,000 acres in Wasco County, and much of the land that isn't wheat is dry grass by midsummer. The tractors and combines used to tend fields and harvest inevitably kick up sparks, starting small fires. With spray equipment mounted in the back of pickup trucks, farmers can typically douse the flames without needing to call fire crews. And when fires get big, they call friends and fellow farmers, who drive along the spreading fire in a line of pickup

Carl Segerstrom is an editorial fellow at *High Country News*. [@carlschirps](#)



Dustin Miller poses for a portrait with his wife, Dana, and son, Carson, in terrain burned by the South Valley Fire just above their home on the outskirts of Dufur. Miller, who heard about the fire just after it broke out, left work and was on the fire line shortly thereafter. TERRAY SYLVESTER

with the assistance of a helicopter. The Hammonds were prosecuted and eventually jailed for setting that fire and others. In response, militants who sympathized with their plight occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016, sparking a month-long showdown with federal law enforcement. A relative who helped start the blaze said his grandfather and uncle set it in an attempt to cover up illegal poaching, though supporters say it was a necessary land-management tool.

In Dufur, firefighters recognize the urgency locals feel, said Tom Fields, a public information officer for the Oregon Department of Forestry assigned to the South Valley Fire. “We are concerned for their safety,” Fields said, “but we do understand that that’s their home and livelihood and that they’re doing all they can to protect it.” He said that their team leans on locals for their knowledge of the area and quick access to heavy machinery. “We want to bring them in because they know their property,” Fields said, including information about water availability, access points and local wind behavior.

This season, locals and firefighters have worked together more closely, driven by the intensity of the fires and the locals’ ability to respond quickly.

Jack Frakes, the chief of the Dufur Volunteer Fire Department, was one of the first trained firefighters to arrive at the South Valley Fire, about 15 minutes after it blew up. Local volunteer firefighters can get to the fires within minutes, but professional firefighters who get dispatched from about 15 miles away take about 45 minutes to arrive. When he arrived, about

a dozen farmers were fighting the fire. The locals’ quick response helped minimize the damage from the South Valley Fire, Frakes said. “The only way to do this is working together, shoulder to shoulder.” Cody Masterson, a local mechanic who helped fight the fires, said firefighters and locals developed a division of labor as the fires burned. “The firefighters go into the woods and let the farmers take care of the wheat,” he said.

As the fire abated and fire crews mopped up hot spots, the town sought to return to some sense of normalcy. But the fear of rekindled flames will linger until rain comes.

In town, farmers wondered if they could safely harvest their fields, worried they might accidentally throw up a spark and be forced to become firefighters again. Some questioned whether newer no-till farming methods raised the danger of fire. Even during good years, wheat farming is a tough way to make a living, but the fires this summer, combined with disruptions in the wheat market caused by President Donald Trump’s trade wars, are stretching farmers thin.

Still, the people of Dufur will continue to fight for their neighbors, fields and rural livelihood. As flames scorched his boots and singed his forearm, Dustin Miller stood his ground and protected his home. And after his house was saved from the flames, he rallied up the road with the makeshift crew of local firefighters to defend another neighbor’s property. “It’s all about protecting what you have here, not running,” Miller said. “It gets to the point where some of this stuff you can’t replace.” □



Farmer Ed Underhill, center, talks with his neighbors at Kramer’s Market in downtown Dufur on Aug. 8. Underhill and his neighbors were among the first to respond to the South Valley Fire after it ignited near here Aug. 1. TERRAY SYLVESTER



Reducing dry and dead fuels in the Kaibab National Forest. DAVID HERCHER/USFS

THE LATEST

Backstory

Wildfire activity in the West has increased sharply since the 1980s, largely owing to climate change and fuel buildup from fire suppression. **The Forest Service treats up to 3 million acres per year, but that’s a tiny fraction of the region’s 277 million fire-prone acres of public lands.** A landscape-scale approach that coordinates state, local and federal efforts has long been needed, say experts (“Good policy and good intentions won’t stop big wildfires,” HCN, 10/7/11).

Followup

In August, a new Forest Service report noted that catastrophic wildfires that endanger life and property are still increasing, partly because forest treatments remain “uncoordinated and not at the right scale.” It calls for **more state and local involvement, along with stepping up timber sales, prescribed burns and thinning projects.** “This is a welcome response to wildfires, as opposed to the cut-it-all-down approach we’ve seen from (Interior Secretary) Ryan Zinke,” Randi Spivak, public-lands director at the Center for Biological Diversity, told *Greenwire*.

JODI PETERSON

trucks, spraying it at close range. But a dry winter followed by a hard summer of high temperatures, no rain and gusting winds has pushed Dufur’s bucket brigade to the max.

Still, few in Dufur question the necessity of facing the flames. “We’re going to protect our own stuff before anyone else gets here,” said Miller, who’s fought alongside the farmers at each of the major fires.

Just how safe — and legal — it is for individuals to fight fires on the land they depend on has been a contentious issue in rural Oregon. Unlike trained firefighters, who follow a chain of command and are taught to value their safety first, locals are more likely to advance on the flames than set up defensible perimeters. They can also get there within minutes, while professional firefighters and air support can take hours to arrive. At times, tempers flare between the groups. Locals get frustrated watching as fully equipped rigs stand by waiting for orders or hold a far-off fire line as fires burn through fields and pasture. On the other hand, freewheeling locals who attack fires aggressively can put themselves, and the firefighters, in grave danger.

For example, during the South Valley Fire, firefighters set up a fire line along a road that separated a burning field from an unburnt one. Without asking permission and ignoring calls for patience from firefighters, a local jumped ahead of the defensive line and started a back burn when the winds died down. The back burn stopped the fire from spreading across the road. But if the wind had kicked up or the fire had blown up, the costs could have been dire.

A couple hundred miles southeast of Dufur in Harney County, a back burn set by ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond trapped firefighters near an active burn and forced them to evacuate



Republicans for hemp

The crop could be a lifeline for struggling agricultural communities

BY JESSICA KUTZ

Fran MacKenzie pauses while mowing between hemp rows for a portrait with her daughter, Margaret MacKenzie, Salt Creek Hemp Co. co-founder. ▶ Margaret MacKenzie checks the progress of hemp buds in her field.

LUNA ANNA ARCHIE/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

In May of 2014, the longest landslide in Colorado's recorded history killed three people and nearly buried Collbran, a small agricultural community in the western part of the state. From the urban Front Range, Margaret MacKenzie placed frantic calls to her 69-year-old mother, whose ranch, she feared, was directly in the path of the rocks and debris racing downhill. Fortunately, the slide stopped four miles away from the ranch. Still, for MacKenzie, the close call made two things clear: Her elderly mother couldn't continue to manage the 200-acre property alone, and the family's chances of selling the land — something they'd tried to do for years — had gone from slim to none.

So MacKenzie moved her own family to the ranch, where bills had been piling up. The property required constant labor, from baling hay to irrigating the fields, and tax and insurance payments were coming due. MacKenzie evaluated her options for turning a profit and arrived at a relatively novel solution: growing hemp. For decades, the law had lumped the crop in with marijuana, treating it as a drug even though it contains only minute levels of THC, the psychoactive chemical that gets pot smokers high. That meant that

growing hemp — which harbors valuable oils, useful fibers and nutritious seeds — was a federal crime. Then, in 2014, the farm bill removed some barriers to hemp cultivation, allowing states to authorize it under certain circumstances, even though, under federal law, it remained a controlled substance.

In conservative Mesa County, where Collbran is located, county commissioners recognized an opportunity. They excluded industrial hemp from an ordinance that banned marijuana cultivation and sales in the county, passed in 2013 after Coloradans voted to legalize marijuana. When MacKenzie planted her first crop in 2015, curious neighbors made their way up her dirt road to peer at the plants, which look exactly like marijuana. "We had more conversations on the fence line that year than work that got done in the field," she recalled.

Now, that curiosity has blossomed into a growing enthusiasm for hemp in conservative communities and political circles. Just a decade ago, such a stance was considered "political kryptonite" among politicians, according to Elisa Addlesperger, author of a 2015 article on hemp that ran in the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Information*; too many voters were likely to confuse support for hemp with support for marijuana. But today, with a better understanding of what the crop is

— and more importantly, what it isn't — conservative politicians from Oregon to Alaska are increasingly championing it as a potential lifeline for struggling rural communities. Colorado leads the country in hemp production, with over 25,000 acres licensed for production in 2018. (The acreage actually planted could be less.) At least 41 states have passed laws to make it easier to grow hemp, according to the National Conference of State Legislators. And Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R, has become a booster, pushing to legalize the plant on a federal level with the 2018 farm bill, which shapes the nation's food and agricultural policy. Hemp has thus become one of the few things Democrats and Republicans can agree on.

"If you think about it, it is a really Republican issue," said Zev Paiss, founding executive director of the National Hemp Association. "It is about jobs, and it's about economic development."

In Colorado, state Sen. Don Coram, a Republican who represents the southwestern part of the state, started growing hemp last year on four plots in Montrose County, including the former uranium-mining town Naturita. "I've always been very interested in it, because going back to my younger days in rodeo, all the ropes were made out of hemp," Coram said. He now has 29 acres, with 1,500 plants per acre, and he's growing it for its highly

Jessica Kutz is an editorial fellow at *High Country News*. [@Jkutzie](#)



valuable cannabidiol, commonly called CBD oil. The oil, which is found in both hemp and marijuana, is used for treating everything from seizures to arthritic pain, and its surging popularity is the reason farmers are getting into hemp.

There are 19 registered growers in Montrose County, and the interest just keeps building. Nucla, a town that neighbors Naturita, is considering converting its shuttered elementary school into a hemp-processing facility for CBD oil. And Sandy Head, executive director of the Montrose Economic Development Corporation, said her organization has been hosting information sessions for interested farmers. Head has gone even further, planting test acres.

"I really felt that in order to be able to talk to the agriculture community about what it was, I should have some experience," she said. Her husband gives her a hard time about it, joking that her father "would roll over in his grave if he knew you were growing weed." But the times, they are a changin'. "It is just a matter of conversation," Head said, and educating people.

Area farmers are beginning to get the message. MacKenzie, who invited curious neighbors to an open house on her farm, has become one of the Western Slope's go-to hemp experts. What started as a basic presentation in her barn in 2015 has morphed into a 500-plus-person event called Hemp on the Slope, complete with a farm-to-table dinner, equipment demonstrations, educational seminars and booths extolling the benefits of hemp products.

And events like it are sprouting like weeds. In nearby Paonia, Colorado — where HCN's headquarters are located

— a panel discussion in March titled, "What's the Deal with Hemp?" took place in the local movie theater. Down the road in Hotchkiss, the Western Slope Hemp Convention packed the community arts center with interested growers. And in August, a two-day Hemp and Hops convention took place at the Montrose County Fairgrounds.

MacKenzie has noticed a change in the events' demographic. At first, it was mostly young entrepreneurial types who had moved to the Western Slope from somewhere else, and maybe dabbled in marijuana production. Now, there are more people from the local farming community, "people who had farms and were maybe growing hay or some other crop," she said.

Hemp fans often tout the crop as a miracle plant. At the NoCo Hemp Expo in Loveland, Colorado, in April, speakers pumped up the crowd with talk of hemp-based plastic, clothing, concrete, houses and animal feed, among another 25,000 possible uses. But it could be years before any of these products are commercially viable in the U.S. There are still significant legal barriers, for one. At the federal level, hemp remains classified as a Schedule 1 controlled substance, alongside drugs like heroin. That means that banks can't loan money to hemp-based businesses or hold money earned from growing or selling hemp products. Farmers also can't get crop insurance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to cover potential losses to drought or disease. And so hemp farmers are taking on unusually high levels of risk, Head said. Farmers often ask her: "If the government is not going to touch

it and the bank is not going to touch it, (then) why should I go there?" In some cases, the federal Bureau of Reclamation gets involved, denying farmers water to irrigate hemp fields.

"If you legalize it at the federal level, those concerns are eliminated," said Colorado U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, a Republican. "And all of a sudden it is another commodity. (Legalizing) it would really make hemp mainstream."

Until then, there's little incentive to invest in highly specialized harvesting machines or the facilities that transform the plant's versatile fibers into products like textiles. "The amount of processing that is required to go from the plant to a T-shirt is huge, and we don't have very much of that infrastructure in the country at all," Paiss said.

Nevertheless, the potential is clear to people like Head. "It is going to offer a high-return crop for some of the ag people," she said, as well as new business opportunities for non-farmers. In Montrose County, there are already start-up companies making CBD lotions and tinctures. "It's a whole new industry, not just of growing but the consuming of the product and the goods and services," Head said. Montrose County received a grant this year from the state, and is partnering with the Montrose Economic Development Corporation to do a feasibility study on growing hemp seed as a livestock grain. And a CBD-oil processing company recently purchased the old Louisiana-Pacific building, which once housed a timber mill.

No wonder Republicans are jumping on the hemp train. As Coram said, "We are all capitalists." □



Colorado state Sen. Don Coram, R, shoos a herd of deer from a hemp field behind his home in Montrose, Colorado. LUNA ANNA ARCHER/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS



Monument Valley, Utah.

JOHN FOWLER/FICKR CC

THE LATEST

Backstory

"San Juan County is now the epicenter of a brutal battle over public lands," said Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, railing against then-President Barack Obama's designation of Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah. In April 2017, President Donald Trump ordered a review of all national monuments since 1996 ("Fact-checking Trump's Antiquities Act order," HCN, 4/26/17), ultimately cutting Bears Ears by more than 80 percent. **Last May, San Juan County sought to intervene in the ensuing lawsuits, arguing that restoring Bears Ears would hurt its economy.**

Followup

The county recently launched a tourism campaign, whose tagline, "Make it Monumental," references Bears Ears and Monument Valley. **It's branding itself as a less-crowded entry point to Utah's red-rock country, even as its leaders want Utah to be exempted from the Antiquities Act under which the monument was established.** In July, Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, sponsored such a bill. Meanwhile, public comment on the BLM's draft management plan for the shrunken Bears Ears is open through Nov. 15.

JODI PETERSON

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Tooele Army Depot (North Area), Tooele, Utah, 1986.

DAVID T. HANSON

WASTE LAND, By David T. Hanson

176 pages, hardcover: \$50
Taverner Press, 2018

In 1985, photographer David T. Hanson turned his lens on certain American landscapes: 67 of the 400 Superfund sites — areas contaminated by toxic waste — considered “highly hazardous” by the Environmental Protection Agency. His series of aerial photographs, published in their entirety for the first time, comprise the book *Waste Land*. Hanson’s camera intensifies the 67 sites, which range from nuclear plants to asbestos mines, by filling the frame with their sprawling shapes, sludges and scattered mechanical structures. They look as if they could stretch endlessly past the photographs’ edges. In the book’s foreword, Wendell Berry urges us not to see the images as beautiful. “What we can see in these vandalized and perhaps irreparable landscapes,” Berry writes, “we are obliged to understand as symbolic of what we cannot see: the steady seeping of poison into our world and our bodies.” ELENA SAAVEDRA BUCKLEY

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A skip, a dispersed staff and a tied knot

We’ll take one of our quarterly breaks after this issue. Watch for us again Oct. 15.

The mornings are cooling down in Gunnison, Colorado, where much of our *High Country News* editorial team is hunkering down, and students have arrived at Western State Colorado University to start the fall semester. As they haul their backpacks across campus, some *HCN* staffers haul suitcases across state lines, moving to new places across the West.

But first, a wedding. In Gothic, Colorado, Associate Editor **Kate Schimel** married her longtime partner **Ethan Linck**, an occasional *HCN* contributor. Editor-in-Chief **Brian Calvert** officiated, and current and former staffers returned to the Western Slope to attend. We wish Kate and Ethan all the best in life, and also on their long drive to their newly shared home in Seattle. Other staff members have relocated, too: Assistant Editor **Emily Benson** has moved to Moscow, Idaho, and Editorial Fellow **Carl Segerstrom** is now working from Spokane, Washington. *HCN*’s editors are dispersing far and wide as we prepare for even deeper coverage of the West and its issues.

Meanwhile, back at our Paonia, Colorado, headquarters, we’re pleased to welcome **Karen Howe** onto the customer service team. Karen, a native of Salt Lake City, Utah, moved to Paonia in 2014 after graduating from Western State Colorado University with degrees from the art and environment and sustainability programs. She comes to *HCN* after working for Thistle Whistle Farm in Hotchkiss and the Delta County Library system. In her free time, she’s practicing bow hunting — with the help of a left-handed bow she found at a garage sale.

Over the last few weeks of summer, visitors have found their way to our multiple Colorado outposts. **Basia Irland**, an ecological artist and longtime subscriber, stopped by our Paonia offices before a speaking

engagement at Elsewhere Studios. In Gunnison, subscriber **John Herrick** paid a visit, as he prepared to run an ultramarathon on Sept. 1.

You may have seen our, um, *creative* request for donations to bridge our budget gap (and if not, let’s just say it had to do with “pants”). We ended up raising \$129,169, surpassing our goal of \$100,000. Many thanks to those who donated! We’re also thrilled to announce that “Inside the Firestorm” by **Douglas Fox**, published in *HCN* in August 2017, won the American Geophysical Union’s Walter Sullivan Award for Excellence in Science Journalism, in the features category. This is his second year of winning the award for *HCN*. Nice work, Doug!

Finally, if you happen to be in Gunnison on Sept. 14, we invite you to the *High Country News* Live event at Western State Colorado University at 6:30 p.m. Editor-in-Chief **Brian Calvert** will moderate a conversation with three assistant editors, **Paige Blankenbuehler**, **Emily Benson** and **Anna V. Smith**, about a few recent stories. This event will help kick off our annual autumn board meeting.

—Elena Saavedra Buckley,
for the staff



New to our customer service team, Karen Howe. LUNA ANNA ARCHERY/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

THE



FEATURE AND
ILLUSTRATIONS
BY SARAH
GILMAN

Most everyone speeds on the road that runs alongside Cisco, Utah. It can be hard not to, once you work your way into that feeling of empty space and no one to hold you accountable. The town, after all, doesn't look like much — a desolate mess of ruined buildings on the scenic route from I-70 to the recreation mecca of Moab, Utah, just a few miles from the boat ramp on the Colorado River where rafters load up after running Westwater Canyon. A cursory internet search will tell you that Cisco has cameoed in car chases in the movies *Thelma and Louise* and *Vanishing Point*, and may have inspired the Johnny Cash song “Cisco

Clifton's Fillin' Station.” Without fail, articles about Cisco will also tell you that it's a ghost town. This irritates Eileen Muza. Cisco is not abandoned, she often points out: “I live here.”

The La Sal Mountains rise up south of Eileen's home, and Cisco stands in the Cisco Desert, in an exposed, waterless low spot that one book describes without irony as “a hole.” But Eileen has her own names for things, her own landmarks. “My Mountains.” “The One Tire Valley.” “The Green Valley.” And the Cisco Desert itself — a scrubby barren plumed with pump jacks and shimmering with broken glass? Eileen calls that “The Unknown.”

The Unknown was not why Eileen moved to

PIONEER OF RUIN

In a place no one else seems to want, a young woman builds a home



*“It’s what the whole world will be like after World War III.
... The Four Horsemen are headquartered there.”*

—Hillary Lambert Renwick, *Focus*, 1989

Cisco. It might be a reason that she stays, though, if she stays. It is also the reason it is so hard to stay. The desert here is not nice the way it is in Moab, with its shapely red-rock expanses and verdant cottonwood bottoms. In Cisco, even the light has blades. One time, a lake of oil leaked from a pump jack inside town limits. Another, Eileen looked up to discover two men shooting in her direction from the window of a white pickup.

And on a hot, still day in June of 2017, a man running a raft shuttle found Eileen’s dog crumpled in the weeds at the road’s shoulder. He loaded the limp body onto his trailer, blood running over his hands, and drove it to her house. She was raw that

afternoon, when I arrived for a visit, her face shadowed under a broad hat, her eyes hidden behind sunglasses. She hunched over a wheelbarrow as her friend Joe Bell and I helped her look for rocks to seal Cairo — pronounced *Kay-ro*, after Cairo, Illinois — beneath his little mound of earth. “You don’t have to help,” she said a few times, but we ignored her, pulling stones from the flats and palming them with a clang into the barrow.

She wouldn’t be getting another dog, she finally insisted. “It’s too much of a weak spot for me. I need to be really fucking strong out here.”

If I let myself be soft, she seemed to be saying, *I will not last.*

Ironically, the new interstate ran right through the townsite that Cisco had left to follow the railroad.

BY NOW, MAYBE YOU PICTURE Eileen as a weathered old hermit lady with her mouth set in a grim line, who is suspicious of strangers and keeps a gun by her front door. And Eileen does carry a handgun, a 9 mm that hangs heavy on her hip. But she is only 34. She's small and hard, with a face darkened enough by sun and dirt that her teeth flash like a signal mirror when she laughs. She has an all-day coffee habit, hair shaved close to the scalp, and the kind of intent, sunlit eyes you sometimes see staring out at you from old tintype photographs. Eileen is a gardener who has landed in a place where nothing will grow.

Eileen was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the oldest of six kids. Her parents — a mailman and a landscaper — never had much money, so in the family mythology, property was the foundation from which other good things grew. According to one oft-told story, as a girl, Eileen's grandmother brought a plate from the evening meal each night to an elderly neighbor and stayed to talk. In return, he willed her his house, and she and Eileen's grandfather were later able to use it as collateral to buy their own, opening a door to better lives. Their kids learned to be resourceful. Eileen credits her love of castoffs and thrift to her mother, Linda Muza, who is on such good terms with the guys at the dump that she bakes them pies.

Eileen attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for a year after high school. But the \$30,000-a-year price tag seemed to lead to impossible debt, so she dropped out, and, after she had worked off her loans, traveled instead. She had always loved exploring abandoned buildings; now she grew bolder, sleeping in doorways in Paris and living for a time in an abandoned mansion in Sicily, where horses came down from the hills to nuzzle her hands. The habit continued after she returned to the Midwest, where hard times had left old factories yawning with dark invitation, industrial cathedrals of brick and stained glass. Eileen was cautious, but undeterred by the abstract possibility of falling through a rotten floor, or of getting caught, Linda said. And yet she had a certain tenderness. Every family has a worrier, Linda told me, and Eileen was the Muzas'. She could be gregarious and disarming. When Eileen moved back to Chicago in 2007, she became so fond of a Korean spa that she and her girlfriend sometimes slept overnight in the nap room so they could soak in hot water for two days.

For 10 years, Eileen grew green things for the city of Chicago's floriculture department. She loved the diverse cast of co-workers, gay, straight, every shade of skin, people from all over the world. She tended the garden in her yard until it overflowed with color. But like the Art Institute, it felt shaky. The work was seasonal, and her house was a rental in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood.

Then, in January 2015, Eileen traveled to Utah to see the Great Gallery rock art panel, where life-sized red-ochre figures loom on cream-colored sandstone. Another passenger on the plane told her about Cisco, so Eileen stopped there, as many do, en route to her actual destination. She paused in front of a rough log cabin and metal trailer, across from a peeling post office the size of an upended van, all of it surrounded by debris and distance. "That looks like the only house in America that I can afford," she said to herself. She saw possibility in the junk, and supplies. Almost everything she might need, except water and soil. In a place no one seemed to want, she could build something truly her own.

The empty house wasn't for sale, but she tracked down its owner in nearby Grand Junction, Colorado. Eileen negotiated her price. Negotiated it again. And by April, she had it: A place to make a life, for less than a used car.

THE CISCO THAT DREW EILEEN bears little resemblance to the Cisco that was. Before the full metastasis of European settlement, the land here was lush, part of Ute territory. Bands

passed through seasonally, harvesting pronghorn and wild onion, and later moving with their own livestock. Photographs of the town that eventually rose in this spot show unlikely squares of lawn, a mercantile, service stations and hotels. Smiling children cluster in front of a school where there is now only a weed patch. Rubble is all that remains of most buildings. Those still standing are full of garbage that people have dumped, and surrounded by junked vehicles in various states of dismemberment, also full of garbage.

A bare spot along the tracks on the north side of town marks the place where a giant tank stored water pumped from the Colorado River. Like the much more populous Thompson Springs to the west, Cisco started as a water stop for the steam-powered railroad. The original town site was established a couple miles away on the narrow-gauge line. Then Cisco followed the new standard-gauge railroad to its present location. A post office opened in 1887.

Many of the early "news" items in local papers document the minutiae of everyday lives — dances, who was visiting who, a kidnapped sheepdog that found his way home after a two-year absence. Cisco was where ranchers from the Book Cliffs to the north and the river bottom and the La Sals to the south brought their livestock for winter range and shipping. Tens of thousands of cows roamed the greater area. As the forage deteriorated, sheep came into favor, with 230,000 permitted to graze by 1938, despite the passage of rangeland protection laws. As many as 100,000 sheep were sheared annually in Cisco in those days; in 1906, a single outfit shipped out a quarter-million pounds of wool. It was packed into tubular sacks and piled along the railroad grade, where local kids played king of the mountain before heading home to be inspected for ticks, according to Dale Harris, who attended elementary school in Cisco and now lives part-time a few miles away. Like many other residents, Dale's dad, Ballard Harris, built a life there from salvage. He moved his family house from Green River to a spot west of Cisco and assembled an attached service station from the pieces of a building he bought in a ghost town called Sego.

Drillers hit hydrocarbons in the Cisco Desert in the mid-'20s, and the industry periodically flared and subsided there over the next century. In 1952, a man named Charlie Steen was living with his family in a tarpaper shack in Cisco when he made the uranium strike south of Moab that spurred the mining and milling frenzy that consumed parts of Utah until the 1980s, when Moab's mill finally closed. After diesel train engines replaced steam in the '50s, the town leaned on its role as a stopover for east-west automobile traffic.

Cisco's population hit about 250 in 1940. It had periods of diversity, though likely the segregated variety. Italian, Chinese, Japanese, African-American and Native American crews worked the railroad. There were Basque shepherds from Spain. A famous black cowboy named Charlie Glass was a regular in the area until his death in 1937. According to Moab resident Ginger Shuey, Glass occasionally stopped by the house where her grandmother, Virginia Gruver, boarded guests. Virginia left her kids — Ginger's young mother, aunt, and one of her uncles — in charge while she was away, and Glass looked out for them, Ginger said. Once, a customer tried to grope Ginger's aunt, and she dumped a bowl of stew on his head. When he leapt up in fury, he found Charlie's gun in his face.

It can be difficult to judge whether the Wild West stories about Cisco are true or apocryphal. Perhaps that matters less than the fact that people choose to tell them, simultaneously recreating the town and adding its patina to their own histories. Virginia, Ginger told me, was a bootlegger. The sheriff raided her house, but never found her whiskey because, being a man, he didn't think to look in the brown-glass Clorox bottles by the laundry. Dale said his father went to investigate a strange

noise one night wearing only “his unders and a six-shooter,” and found a man and a woman trying to crowbar open the change box in the service station phone booth. He scared them so badly they got wedged in the doorway trying to flee.

AJ Rogers, a retired Utah Department of Transportation foreman who grew up and still lives in Thompson Springs, remembers visiting the café in Cisco in 1970 to play pool and drink beer as a teenager, the proprietor not being particular about ID. In 1973, AJ got a seasonal job building I-70, and it was I-70 that ultimately killed Cisco, bypassing it by a couple of miles. Ironically, AJ told me, the new interstate ran right through the townsite that Cisco had left to follow the railroad.

The town “went from very quiet to absolute silence,” recalled Dean Christensen, who ran leases in the oilfield over the next 40 years from the house next door to Eileen’s. Even so, he said, the distance from law enforcement meant “there was always something happening in Cisco.” One resident supposedly built a two-story doghouse over an oil well to hide it from inspectors. Dean claimed at least three bodies were dumped near Cisco during his tenure, and that the serial killer Ted Bundy stopped by the old store and gas station and immediately turned around when he found a group of armed locals playing cards. Dale Harris’ dad’s place burned down after he died, and Dale demolished the garage and root cellar, too. Transients had been staying there, he explained uneasily. He’d found a coyote carcass strung in a doorway. His son found a dead dog hanging from a pole.

By the 1980s, Grand County had collected 80.5 acres of Cisco in lieu of delinquent taxes. It sold the land to a company that planned a mall-sized incinerator that would process 2,000 pounds per hour of toxic chemicals like PCBs. The company’s president attended county meetings in a polyester suit and diamond pinkie ring like the *Dynasty*-version of an old-time snake-oil salesman.

It would have been a fitting conclusion to Cisco’s decline — the town no longer valued for what it might produce, but for the wasteland it had become. In the end, even this faded. An hour down the road in Moab, the county seat, environmental consciousness was growing. In 1988, the then mostly conservative community blocked the incinerator by a two-to-one vote.

The referendum signaled the region’s new direction: A near-complete dependence on tourism, its own form of extraction. When experiences are sold, when scenery becomes commodity, places can morph into caricatures of themselves, obscuring context and meaning. Moab drew the money, and Cisco drew the lollygaggers. The ruins alone couldn’t imbue Cisco’s scrap of ground with the complexity of memory — substance abuse and skeletons in the desert and drinking water carried in milk cans and men crushed between train cars and joy and poverty and house fires and holes in the floor and rooms washed yellow with leftover road paint because it was what there was to use. The town became a sideline, a bit part of many narrative threads, but with no complete one of its own. And with no center, it could become whatever viewers wanted.

Like with the La Sals and the desert, Eileen came up with her own affectionate name for Cisco: Garbage Island.

IT DIDN’T TAKE EILEEN LONG to realize that leaving her property on Garbage Island unattended was risky. The day after she bought it, someone ransacked the trailer. She couldn’t stay to ward off vandals because she was broke. So during the first two years, she tried to have friends camp there while she went home to Chicago for the temperate months to work her landscaping job and see the woman she was dating. In the off-seasons, she returned to Utah. Eileen’s mom, Linda, joined her for her first month there, and the two worked on Eileen’s two small parcels through bitter winter weather and bad head colds, burning



“Cisco is the best place to land in the midst of troubles.”

—Fern Schultz,
occasional visitor to
Cisco, Utah

debris in a metal barrel as they went. It was so cold when her dad, Richard Muza, visited that the paint he intended to use on Eileen’s little post office froze solid and he had to thaw it with a space heater.

Eileen’s parents supported what she was doing. “I remember thinking, you’re really going to know who you are here, because there’s no distraction,” Linda said. “It’s like this is where music began. This is a place that people had to fill up with their own sound so they didn’t fucking go crazy.”

Eileen had been warned about Cisco’s extremes, but by early winter of 2016, she had settled in full-time. “Part of me wants to just see how bad it’s going to get,” she told me after a mutual friend introduced us. She went to Catholic school, she said, “and I think this place has something to do with that. It’s a challenge, but also it’s a punishment. Everybody has to wander through the desert, right, in the Bible?”

Over the coming months, she grew skinny on discount groceries and boiled her coffee with water poured from five-gallon jugs filled at the 7-Eleven in Moab or a spigot behind a dumpster in Grand Junction, where she went for building supplies when she couldn’t find what she needed in Cisco. The wind was constant, and that spring, it gusted so hard one night that some of Eileen’s friends heard a lopsided building tear apart and collapse.

In summer, it got so hot that sometimes Eileen would lie down on the dirt floor of the cabin’s cellar when the sun hit its apogee. It rained so rarely that she forgot what it felt like, she said, though sometimes the wind threw pebbles against the metal skin of her trailer, and they sounded yearningly like the first drops of a storm.

A few days into one of my visits, fed up with the heat, Eileen, her sister Claire, and Claire’s friend, Amy, piled into an SUV and bumped overland to find a spring that someone had told Eileen about. Eileen imagined it as a deep pool and brought a bar of soap. There was supposedly an old road, but every track we tried ended in a gully or holes big enough to swallow a wheel. We exited off the interstate instead, searching a web of oil and gas roads until we found a place where a thicket of saltcedar and cottonwood glowed in the sunset light. Water gurgled somewhere beneath the riot, but we couldn’t see it. Eileen stepped gingerly through the cattails. “There are animals in here,” she squeaked, part nerves, part delight.

Claire and Amy branched north looking for water, too, but found only a dead cow. They led us to the little knot of juniper trees where it lay, and we peered through a hole in its chest. There was only blackness inside.

EILEEN CAME TO RELISH the freedom of The Unknown, all searching walks and random artifacts: a dump full of brown-glass Clorox bottles like the ones Ginger Shuey described; a wooden post hammered into the ground miles from anywhere with a metal file jammed into the top. She became the place’s unofficial archivist. Still, she asked Claire, only half-jokingly, if she might go insane. Linda worried about Eileen being a young woman alone out there, and about Eileen being lonely.

The most challenging thing about Cisco wasn’t the solitude, though. It was how often Eileen had company she didn’t want. When she bought her place, she hadn’t realized just how many spectators the ruined town drew. She watched flabbergasted as tourists climbed under fences to explore ominous buildings papered with “No Trespassing” signs or wandered onto her own property filming with their iPhones while she was in plain sight. She piled twisted metal and wood to keep people from driving into the desert and circling behind her place, where they were difficult to track. If someone seemed creepy, she’d find a way to mention her shotgun. She kept her buildings lit up all night with solar-powered exterior lamps. When a drone whined over the roof of her cabin, she tried to shoot it down. When

someone parked close to the cabin for too long, she blasted a recording of Charles Bukowski reading his grim poetry in a gravelly monotone. Once they hear him “talking about whores and beer farts,” she said, “people hit the gas real quick.”

People seemed to feel entitled to the space because they thought it was empty. Eileen fought this the best way she could think of: She let them think she owned the whole town, so they would listen when she told them to stay on the road. She didn’t like strangers trespassing on private land that absent neighbors couldn’t defend, or taking things for their own use. And she justified her own salvage of bits and pieces from the ruins by explaining that what she took stayed where it belonged: in Cisco.

Late one frigid December night, I was reading in Eileen’s post office when I heard a gunshot a few feet away. I cautiously stepped into the dark to find her in trenchcoat and underwear, standing next to her friend Nick on a boardwalk she’d built to avoid the gumbo mud that the earth became each spring. The muzzle flashed as she fired at an angle, again, into the sky.

“Fucking kids,” she said.

She pointed to the other side of town where she’d heard someone rummaging in a building on the main road. I spotted headlights rolling eastward. But instead of speeding away, the truck turned up the side road toward us. Someone inside played a high-powered spotlight over one old building, then another. The truck turned again and rolled to a stop between Eileen’s buildings, not 20 feet away from where we watched from behind the outhouse. The spotlight pooled across the front of the cabin. “I wish I was wearing clothes,” Eileen hissed. She fired once more over the desert. The truck reluctantly rolled on. Eileen stomped back to bed, her bare feet pounding the boards.

AS MUCH AS CISCO’S POWER to attract people irked Eileen, it was also the thing that began to steady her there. A woman named Farland Fish stopped in town one day to let her dogs chase the rabbits that lurked amid the junk and was surprised to find Eileen there, too. Athletic and tall with wind-tangled blond hair, Farland lived in the La Sals, worked odd jobs and shared Eileen’s love of old stuff. She felt an immediate kinship with the younger woman, and when Eileen moved to Cisco full-time, Farland became a steady visitor. Eileen thought of her as a second mom.

There were others, too. A man who checked the oil pumps began looking in on Eileen. Her nearest neighbor brought her bullets. Raft shuttlers brought her ice and oranges. A musician and woodworker named Michael Gerlach came out from Milwaukee after a bad breakup and stayed off and on for eight months. A drinking-water advocate named Fern Schultz hit the road following a dear friend’s suicide and a decision to drop out of grad school and ended up helping Eileen out a couple of times on Utah backroads. Later, she stayed for nearly a month.

Eileen first met Joe Bell, who later helped her bury Cairo, when she confronted him looking for metal as darkness fell one night. Joe turned out to be armed, a former defense contractor IT specialist with libertarian-leaning politics who had moved back to Moab, where he grew up, to become a blacksmith. They recognized something in each other, and soon Joe was a regular, too.

These connections helped build Eileen a foundation that property and self-reliance alone couldn’t give: a boosted faith in her own vision, and a kind of community. They also made the punishing work — Eileen’s journey through the desert, with its long days and constant grime — lighter.

Eileen taught herself how to build windows and doors from studying how Cisco’s builders had improvised. Joe helped Eileen reroof the cabin with optimistic-looking red metal. Inside, Farland helped her peel back fake wood paneling, chickenwire and plaster, thick paint and layers of wallpaper. They yanked up



three shag carpets laid over several sheets of linoleum. Michael helped build a new floor; Fern broke down kitchen walls “full of rat stuff turned to dust.” Pieces of past eras, interleaved, emerged from the walls, from the dirt and sheds surrounding. *Star Wars* cards and a gold ring; old coins and floppy disks. Written on the cabin wall, in cursive pencil, a name: Jesse Gruver, Ginger’s uncle. And another inside the front door: Francisco Picabea, 1962, beside faded lines scrawled in Spanish and Basque.

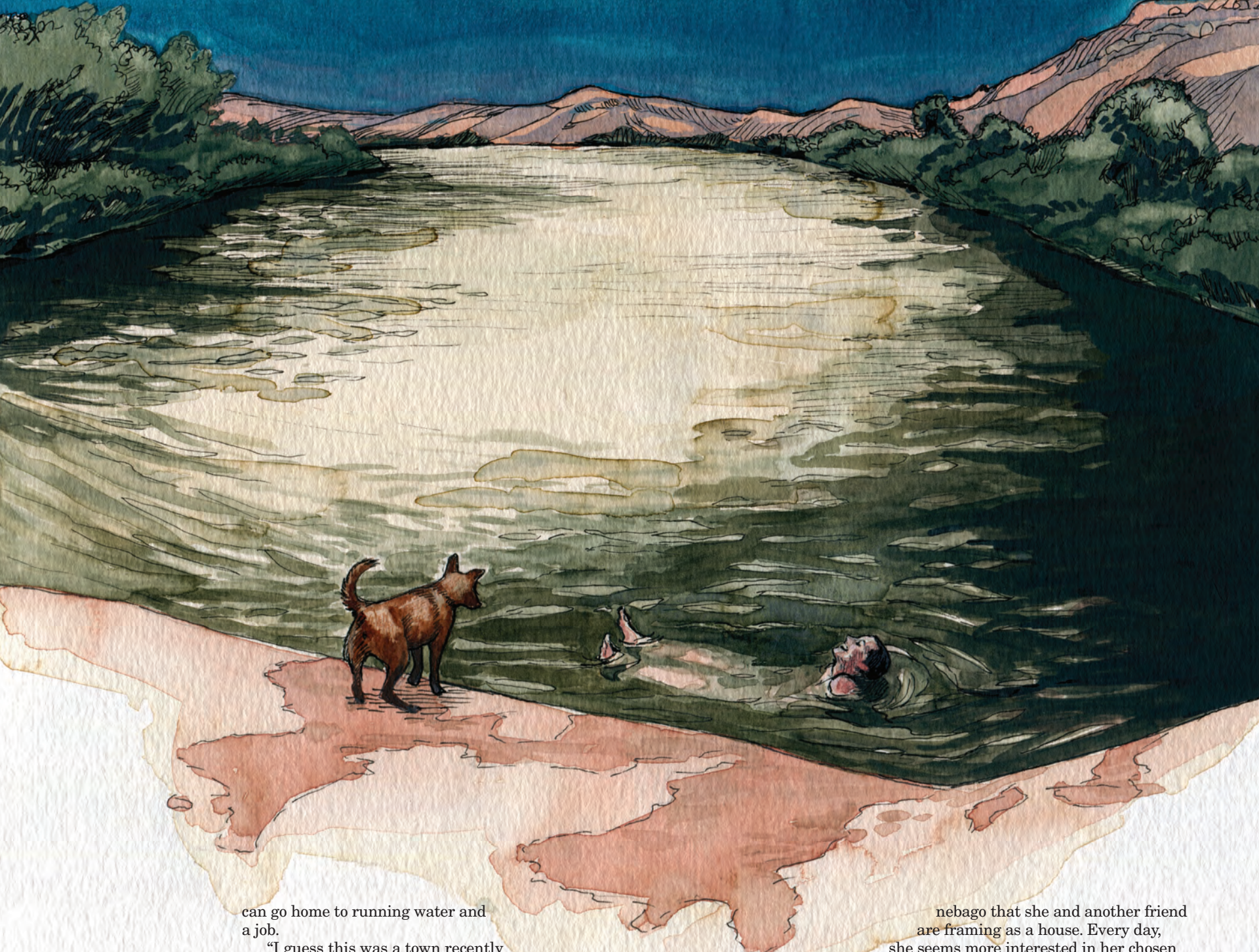
Eventually, Eileen had the cabin in livable shape, the tiny post office overhauled and fitted with an air conditioner, and the shack next door shored up and tightly insulated. She began renting out the two smaller buildings to guests through Airbnb, bringing in a thin but steady seasonal income and visitors from near and far that approximated the diverse mix she missed in Chicago. Besides family and friends, there were artists, an FBI agent, models from Europe, a couple from China, two young women on their way to Vegas to get married. One day, she got an email from a retired teacher in Japan who was building a scale model of Cisco for the railroad set in his house. Another day, some horses wandered into town and she, her sister Maggie and a friend led them back to the camp of some Peruvian shepherds.

The helpers, too, just kept accreting, some in less obvious ways. Among them was a couple from Arizona who stopped by bearing groceries and some dog treats several months after Cairo died. They gently urged Eileen to keep the treats, and

she resolved to donate the box to the Moab animal shelter. She figured she could walk a dog. The person behind the desk brought out a desert-born, dingo-looking little thing, with crooked ears, mysterious scars and a limp. She had been returned twice. Now, she climbed into Eileen’s car as if she had been there a thousand times, “like she was already my dog,” Eileen said. Eileen named her Rima.

Maybe it was just Eileen’s way with people that led some to return. Or maybe it was Cisco — its free-feeling distance from regular life, its suggestion that “ruin” was not ruin at all. “Cisco is the best place to land in the midst of troubles,” Fern told me. “There is no judgment. If you work, Eileen likes you. If you work hard, she likes you even more.” Joe Bell gave me an explanation for the phenomenon that seemed as plausible as any. “Once I realized (Eileen’s) situation, I wanted to see how the story ended,” he said. “I want to see her succeed.”

ON A WALK OUT INTO THE UNKNOWN this winter, I asked Eileen why she thought so many people were drawn to the town. She was quiet for a moment. “I like Farland’s thought that they like to peek into the future of humanity,” she said. Maybe Cisco compels them for the same reasons apocalyptic narratives about zombies and other disasters are so popular. They can look into the darkness of societal collapse from a safe vantage. Then they



Sarah Gilman writes and draws from Portland, Oregon. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Hakai Magazine*, *BioGraphic*, *Adventure Journal Quarterly*, and others. She was a staff and contributing editor at *High Country News* for 11 years.

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can go home to running water and a job.

"I guess this was a town recently enough to be sort of alarming as a ghost town," I said at another point. "If this town can empty out and blow away, basically it can happen to any town."

"And it will," Eileen said. "It happens everywhere."

But late one night as we watched the barrel fire burn down, I asked Farland and Eileen more explicitly if this ghost-town obsession was really about death. They rejected the idea. "It's the opposite," Eileen said. Even if old things can't remember, they take on the feel of those who used them, carrying it forward. And with the work of Eileen's hands everywhere here now — her soul layered with the others who have rebuilt this place over and over and over — she said she won't be leaving if she can help it.

What Eileen has done isn't restoration. But it does feel like a resurrection. Cisco is breathing again, and not just because of the wind changing the pressure in the buildings, making the boards creak.

Eileen still questions her decision to move here when smoke from wildfires blots out the sky or something creepy happens. She hasn't seen her mom in two years. Her grandfather died this spring, and she grieved from a distance, consoling herself by yelling at a bus full of Australian tourists. She sometimes talks about buying an old church in the green wilds of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. But even then, she would keep Cisco. She and her sisters are planning an artist residency in an old Win-

nebago that she and another friend are framing as a house. Every day, she seems more interested in her chosen home's future than she is in its past.

When Eileen was redoing the floor in the shack near the post office, she found two more signatures. They belonged to the Paces, brothers who founded a local cattle company and owned the mercantile for a time. She signed her own name low on the wall. "To me, this is like art now," she told me. "This is not just making a house. Everything is intentional. Those guys did the same thing."

"Everybody wants to put their name on something. I think that's what art is about:

"Here I am.

"I'm alive right now.

"Look what I made."

THIS JUNE WAS MUCH LIKE EILEEN'S FIRST on the property, a fist of heat pressing down. One weekend, we took off with Rima to look for water — a cake of soap wrapped in brown paper balanced between us on the dash of her little sedan. Not to the trickle spring with its dead cow this time, but to the Colorado River, where a shelf of stone sliced into the current.

The dog watched Eileen peel out of dirt-rimmed clothes and dive under. When she surfaced, floating on her back in an eddy, Rima dashed along the edge, biting and barking at the water — this foreign, wet, wild thing. And Eileen laughed, her teeth flashing up at the slate-gray sky, tassled at its edges by virga that promised rain but never touched the earth. □



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focused on them is a struggle.

And proving the health impacts of one 73-year-old blast isn't easy. Whether Trinity caused high cancer rates in the past, and whether those cancers are hereditary, remains uncertain. According to Steven Simon, a staff scientist with the National Cancer Institute who is studying Trinity downwinders, researching radiation effects is "almost impossible," especially in the Tularosa Basin. There are few regional health records from the 1940s, and the number of downwinders born before 1945 is dwindling.

Myrriah Gomez, a University of New Mexico professor who has collaborated with the Tularosa Basin Downwinders, believes that the act ignores basin residents because they are largely poor people and people of color. "We have Hispano farmers and ranchers and the Mescalero (Apache) Reservation, along with poor Anglo ranchers," Gomez said, while compensated groups are from "primarily white and in some cases affluent communities."

But even in New Mexico, prioritizing Tularosa Basin Downwinders is a challenge. The state has been shaped by the atomic industry: Today, nuclear labs employ over 20,000 people in the state, and the industry may keep growing. Heather McClenahan, the executive director of the Los Alamos Historical Society, watched *Doctor Atomic* with current and former

lab employees. She appreciated the downwinders' presence, but wished there had been more representation of the lab itself.

Now that the opera is over, Cordova waits for word from Congress. "There will come a day," she said after the last show, "when there can be no further denial that this has taken place."

In *Doctor Atomic*'s final scene, as the clock counted down to detonation, nearly the entire cast looked out toward the audience. The vocalists portraying Los Alamos scientists lay waiting on their stomachs, and the opera house began to rumble. Cordova and her companions were the only ones left standing. □

Before the last performance of *Doctor Atomic*, Tina Cordova looks out over Santa Fe from the opera house's deck. STEFAN WACHS FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS



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The Lilac Fire, Jeff Hall/Cal Fire



Al Larson shows off a nest full of bluebird chicks.
CRISTA WORTHY

We should all be more like ‘the bluebird man’



**OPINION BY
CRISTA WORTHY**

Each of us holds one or two central truths — bedrock beliefs that influence how we perceive the world. One of mine is that humans have been the scourge of life on Earth.

It started at age 6, with my sympathy for Bambi. Later, I learned how early humans wiped out giant Pleistocene animals and then went to work killing moas, dodos, passenger pigeons, Carolina parakeets — the list goes on. Since I’m a human, of course, I share the blame of my ancestors.

If I have heroes, they are the people who buck this murderous tide. Biologists like George Schaller, Alan Rabinowitz and Jane Goodall helped save pandas, tigers, jaguars, Tibetan antelope, chimpanzees and more, along with large swaths of critical habitat. Their work has been recognized worldwide. But I have a special regard for someone who’s unknown to most people: Al Larson, known to his admirers as “The Bluebird Man.”

Alfred Larson saw his first bluebird in the place where he grew up, southwest Idaho’s sage-and-juniper desert. Bluebirds are secondary nesters that rely on cavities hollowed out by other birds. When introduced starlings and sparrows started spreading across the continent, they kicked bluebirds out of their nests. Bluebird numbers plummeted, and Larson, an avid birder and member of Idaho’s Golden Eagle Audubon Society, noticed.

In 1978, a group of concerned scientists and bluebird lovers established the North American Bluebird Society, and Larson was one of the first “citizen scientists” to answer their call. At age 60, when most people start thinking seri-

ously about retirement, Larson started building bluebird boxes.

Now 96 years old, he says, “I never really retired.” Instead, he jokes, “I just changed jobs and went to work for me.” Larson built over 300 boxes in southwest Idaho, setting them up along five different “bluebird trails.” He initially located the boxes well off the remote dirt roads, to make them less visible. Now he places them as close to the roads as he deems safe, and every nesting season, he travels over 5,000 miles to visit the boxes. His goal is to visit each of them weekly once nesting begins toward the end of April.

Larson records the number of eggs in each box and estimates when they will hatch. Later, he measures each chick from the wing chord to the first joint, thereby obtaining an accurate age. His busiest time of year is usually the second week of June, when the majority of chicks, 8 to 14 days old, are old enough to band. One day this year he banded 140 birds, although 10 to 50 is the normal daily amount. Bluebirds fledge at 18 to 21 days, and once they leave the nest, they don’t go back. Larson then cleans out each nest box so it’s ready to go next year.

Over the 36 years he’s donated to this job, Larson has kept meticulous records, so he knows he’s banded more than 30,000 western and mountain bluebirds. He currently maintains 331 boxes, replacing any lost to vandalism, fires or juniper removal. Western and mountain bluebirds once were of “high concern” in this area, but due, in large part, to Larson’s diligent work, they are now doing well.

Self-reliant and frugal, Larson lives alone in his forest home about an hour northeast of Boise. His beloved wife, Hilda, passed away in 2014, but he doesn’t lack for company; Larson’s yard is always filled with birds.

Larson stopped driving a couple of years ago, so now one of his good friends, Boyd Steele, generally helps out. Otherwise, former Golden Eagle Audubon Society President Pam Conley is Larson’s “bluebird dispatcher,” arranging drivers. Current President Liz Urban says the group is committed to seeing the bluebird trails maintained into the future: “We offer to reimburse any volunteers for their gas expenses while working on the project.” She adds that Chris McClure, a member of the board, has gotten Larson’s giant dataset entered into a single database, so researchers can analyze population trends and other data into the future.

For now, Larson loves making his bluebird rounds. As he says in the short film *Bluebird Man*, “I enjoy the sounds, the wind in the trees. I’ve had a curiosity, a passion for wildlife. That’s sort of been a religion for me; it’s just what I believe in, what I want to be part of.”

Al Larson is an inspiration. He makes me want to discard my misanthropy and be part of a solution. If bluebirds could speak, they’d thank him, too. □

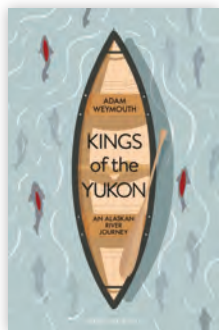
Crista Worthy lives in Idaho and writes about travel, aviation and birds.

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WEB EXTRA

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End of the line



Kings of the Yukon
Adam Weymouth
272 pages,
hardcover: \$27.
Little, Brown and
Company, 2018.

During one of his many visits to the Northwest Territories, Barry Lopez, author of *Arctic Dreams*, was asked by a Native elder how long he intended to stay. Before Lopez could respond, the elder, who'd met a journalist or two in his day, grinned and answered his own question. "One day: newspaper story. Two days: magazine story. Five days: book."

Lopez was no tyro, of course, but the point was a shrewd one. There is a time-worn tradition of writers traveling to the Canadian Arctic and Alaska to marvel at the land — at its nightless summers, its eccentric inhabitants, its fearsome bears. Jack London spent less than a year in the Klondike. John McPhee based *Coming into the Country* on four trips from his home in New Jersey. The fascination of the North stems, in part, from the fact that it's a damn hard place to visit, much less live in; little wonder that much of its literature is penned by outsiders.

You're allowed, therefore, some initial skepticism of *Kings of the Yukon*, whose author, Adam Weymouth, lives, the jacket tells us, "on a Dutch barge in London." *Kings* — one part travelogue, one part ethnography, and 10 parts ode to a charismatic fish — recounts a 2,000-mile canoe trip down the Yukon River,

from ice-strewn headwaters to sprawling delta. Weymouth's journey runs counter-current to the upriver migration of the Yukon's king salmon: "many pounds of muscle, toned through years of swimming headlong into Pacific storms, and their flesh... red as blood." These mighty fish give *Kings* its title and focus — and help its author find, remarkably, something new and insightful to say about the North.

Weymouth's Yukon fixation began in 2013, a year when just 37,000 king salmon returned to the Yukon — scarcely 10 percent of the historical average. The previous year, 23 Yup'ik fishermen had been arrested for flouting a state fishing ban, a deliberate act of civil disobedience. At their trial, which Weymouth covered for *The Atlantic*, the defendants noted salmon's centrality to Yup'ik religion and argued that the First Amendment protected their right to fish. The judge, though sympathetic, slapped each fisherman with a \$250 fine.

When Weymouth returns to investigate further in 2016, he finds a culture in slow collapse, fading with its most important resource. Fishing is permitted again, but it's hardly worth it. Young people have decamped for Alaska and Fairbanks; fish-drying sheds stand derelict.

Inside one abandoned cabin, "threadbare curtains blow in the breeze from shattered windows. ... The clock is stopped at twenty past four, the calendar stopped at August 2011."

Although Weymouth explores the science behind the decline's possible causes — is it overfishing? ocean conditions? climate change? — he is most concerned about its human victims. As he drifts from Dawson City to Emmonak, he meets a parade of Native and white fishermen, whose stories he tells with delicacy and dry humor. There's Isky, a rapping descendant of Pueblo Indians who wants to make fishing cool for local kids again; Richard, who sardonically narrates bus tours for discomfited New Zealanders; Jim, a caviar plant operator who goes by Egg Man. Especially memorable is Mary Demientieff, a gregarious Athabaskan elder with "family the length of the river, the breadth of the state." Mary presides over a flagging fish camp, where in the evenings she plays the guitar with "glee, unselfconsciously ... laughing and wheezing," a scene so charming it almost dispels the sadness.

Inevitably, *Kings of the Yukon* revives some familiar Alaskan tropes: Practically every writer who's ever encountered a grizzly — including, admittedly, me — has meditated on feeling "conflicted between fear and the privilege of the moment." (Your anxiety and awe is probably heightened when you come from a country whose largest carnivore is the badger.) Mostly, though, Weymouth's nature writing is exquisite, even when he's evoking the unlovely end of a salmon's cycle: "Its kype is caught in a rictus somewhere between a snarl and a leer, and its gills are clouded with fungus, where it gasps for air as though breathing through cotton wool." Just as Weymouth acclimates to the rhythms of his voyage, one of *Kings'* joys is stretching out in its prose, stately and pleasurable as a flat stretch of river.

While fishing communities have waned, Weymouth finds that another culture has ascended to take their place: reality TV. Half the riverside dwellers he meets, it seems, feature in one of Alaska's myriad unscripted dramas, from Andy of *Life Below Zero* to Stan from *Yukon Men*. "It seems quite possible," Weymouth writes, "that Alaska has the highest ratio of television celebrities in the world." Forget salmon — the biggest drivers of Yukon commerce today are *National Geographic* and the Discovery Channel. If we don't reverse salmon's collapse, reality stars might someday be the Yukon's last kings.

BY BEN GOLDFARB

Mary Demientieff at her fish camp, near Holy Cross, Alaska.
ULLI MATTESSON



Relittering

Ed Abbey was famous, or perhaps infamous, for tossing empty beer cans out the window of his pickup. Hell, he'd say, it's the damn *road* that we should be calling litter. This style of provocation dates back to the Cynics, a gang of Greek ethicists that came on the scene after Socrates died in 399 B.C. They were interested in drawing attention to *nomoi*, cultural conventions that go mostly unnoticed and, accordingly, mostly unquestioned. For guys like Antisthenes, Crates and Diogenes, acting outrageous in public was a favorite pastime.

Despite my wholehearted agreement with Abbey's point about the damn road being a damn road, there's a part of me that thinks his behavior was, if not wrong, at least sort of dumb. Adding trash to an already trashed planet is patently unnecessary, not to mention crude. Furthermore, this can-out-the-window radicalism has itself become a cultural convention, a standardized symbol of defiance.

If the goal is to shake things up, another Budweiser in the ditch isn't going to do the trick. Maybe we need a *new* outrageous act?

Personally, I'm a fan of *relittering*.

The story begins during my years as a philosophy student in Colorado Springs. Once or twice a week (more if I was reading a miserable text like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*) I'd leave the dorm an hour before sundown, black Hefty bag in hand. Something about collecting the city's refuse — Styrofoam cups and cigarette butts, broken bottles and cigarette butts, rags and wrappers and cigarette butts — freed my mind of words, concepts, big theories. It will sound paradoxical, but filthy trash consistently swept my headspace clean.

Unsurprisingly, the initial dozen or so outings ended with me back at campus, struggling to lift my bulging bag over the rim of a dumpster, fearful of catching a corner and leaking *Eau de C. Spgs.* onto

my noggin. That is to say, I prettified the cityscape by consolidating strewn garbage and transferring it to a socially sanctioned receptacle. A no-brainer: Where else would a good young environmentalist offload 30 gallons of disgusting junk?

Alas, philosophy teaches us little more than how to confuse our settled opinions. Soon enough, I was wondering why a giant metal box brimming with rubbish was not a blight, and from there it was just a hop and a skip to the local dump where, one hot Saturday morning, I watched bulldozers busy themselves with heaps of steaming waste. Their work reminded me of a neurotic friend who "cleaned" his room by tidying clutter into, say, 17 neat piles.

All we're doing, I realized, *is pushing this awful shit around. If it ain't recyclable, it ain't recyclable. Period!* I understood, instantly, that pure intentions and elbow grease wouldn't green up a single inch of a society that overproduces and overconsumes. It hit me as gut-level sadness: *This is your home. Welcome.*

Thus, relittering was born.

I started small. At the edge of a park or playground I'd stoop, pluck a wadded napkin, then walk five blocks and set it gently down beside a bus stop. Within a few months, the napkins became pizza boxes, ratty jackets, tires yanked from overgrown lots. The artist in me wanted to consciously arrange, to fashion a thing of beauty, but my inner Cynic wouldn't allow sugarcoating. He insisted that this was about forcing a raw confrontation between the citizens of Athens, er, C. Spgs., and their milieu.

The task was relocation, plain and simple. Haul nastiness from abandoned spaces and set it in the sun (preferably in a spot where it wouldn't cause extra labor for a municipal janitor or landscaper).

These days I live in a rural area, and while there's definitely plenty of garbage around, it appears manageable against

Industrial designer Taylor Lane built a surfboard out of 10,000 cigarette butts to bring attention to littering. HANNA YAMAMOTO



the backdrop of undeveloped nature, which means I generally shoo it towards a trashcan. I miss relittering, though. There was an absurdity to it, a black humor that helped me laugh in the face of our drive toward ruination. It was a grimy, tactile encounter with the truth of culture and place — what Henry David Thoreau would have called "Contact! Contact!"

Funny that old Henry should butt in here, as he, like Ed Abbey, was also an heir to the Cynics. Different eras call for different techniques, I suppose. One fellow finishes his Budweiser and rolls down the window. A second kicks that can out of the ditch, into plain view. A third borrows an ax, heads to a pond on the outskirts of town, and builds himself a cabin, a dwelling apart from the madness of his age.

And then there's Diogenes. He wore rags, resided in a wooden tub on the street corner, ticked off both Plato and Alexander the Great, and allegedly said, "Humans have complicated every simple gift of the gods." If such a generalization causes discomfort, well, that's the idea. □

Leath Tonino's writing appears in Outside, Orion, The Sun and many other magazines.

The task was relocation, plain and simple. Haul nastiness from abandoned spaces and set it in the sun.

Director Sydney Freeland turned to Kickstarter to complete the funding for her 2014 feature *Drunktown's Finest*, based on reservation life in her own New Mexico hometown.

SCREEN CAPTURE FROM DRUNKTOWN'S FINEST TRAILER



Native filmmakers are restoring cinematic narratives



ANALYSIS BY
JASON ASENAP

You nervously down your beer at a Toronto bar, then race across the street to the theater where your film is having its international premiere. As you take your seat, it hits you: Your face, your very soul will be projected — and judged — by Indigenous cineastes and filmmakers from around the world.

ImagineNATIVE — the world's largest Indigenous film festival — is underway, and it's too late to back out now. You're playing with the big kids: Indigenous filmmakers from across the globe sharing, competing, networking and storytelling.

Indigenous film has taken a long time to reach mainstream audiences and still has a long way to go. *Smoke Signals*, the 1998 indie hit written and directed by an all-Native crew, is widely regarded as the first film to cross over. But since then, few mainstream movies by, for and about Indigenous people have appeared. Hollywood has largely ignored Indigenous narratives.

Film festivals are often the only way to catch Indigenous movies. Occasionally, they feature a big-budget, feature-length "Indigenous" film — the kind with Indigenous actors or themes for set dressing but a white protagonist. The Native supporting actor generally exists for the white star to bounce ideas off, learn from and perhaps try to save (with mixed results).

Festivals with dedicated Indigenous programming, like Durango's and Santa Fe's, are a better bet for First Nations cinephiles. But Indigenous film festivals are the best: Toronto, New Zealand, Finland and Oklahoma, for instance. They provide a place for filmmakers to showcase work and bring Native film scholars together.

Here, you'll hear critiques of the quintessential American-settler fantasy, such as *Last of the Mohicans* and its nine American adaptations. "Where the white man can become a better Indian than the Indian," says film scholar Theo Van Alst, director of the Indigenous Nations Studies at Portland State University.

The gold standard for racist cinematic portrayals of Indigenous people remains John Ford's 1939 Western *Stagecoach*. Van Alst believes its glowing support of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion was perhaps its most damaging effect. But *Stagecoach* dehumanized Native people and helped establish cowboy-and-Indian stereotypes, as in what Van Alst calls the "Magic Bullet Theory."

"White bullets invariably find their mark no matter what angle they are fired from, and they're almost 100 percent fatal," says Van Alst. "On the other hand, it takes (more Indian) shots to hit a white guy."

The settler fantasy takes us to the 1990 film

Dances with Wolves, and ultimately to space, with 2009's *Avatar*, where the main character is dropped into the body of a Na'vi to become a "space Indian." "You're an insta-Native: No need to learn the language, culture or, uh, 'horsemanship,'" says Van Alst.

The lack of Indigenous films is largely due to a lack of funding. In June 2017, Canada formed the Indigenous Screen Office to support Indigenous filmmakers. In the first year, development and production work began on 35 projects directed by Indigenous people. In Norway, the International Sámi Film Institute supports the Indigenous people of northern Europe. No such office exists in the United States.

"I look at the funding levels (of Sámi films) and I also look at the Canadian funding base," says Shirley Sneve, executive director of Vision Maker Media, based in Lincoln, Nebraska. "New Zealand and Australia support their Indigenous filmmakers a lot more than we're able to do."

In lieu of federal support, Sneve says casino tribes could step in. But for now, sporadic grants and online donations fill the void.

Take Navajo filmmaker Sydney Freeland's 2014 feature, *Drunktown's Finest*. Despite backing by Robert Redford's Sundance Institute, Freeland had to seek finishing funds through Kickstarter.

Then there's Taika Waititi. A Maori filmmaker from New Zealand, Waititi was an indie darling, with films like *Two Cars, One Night* and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*. Then, in 2017, he directed *Thor: Ragnarok*, netting nearly \$853 million. Rumors abound that Waititi has now been tapped to direct a film in the *Star Wars* franchise.

Hollywood took a chance on Waititi and tapped into a unique voice with a narrative that was "undiscovered" by non-Native standards. That narrative is garnering interest: Nearly 200 people attended two screenings of Indigenous short films put on by Sundance in Albuquerque earlier this year. "I think from the non-Indigenous perspective they were really excited to see these different (films)," says Maya Solis-Austin, senior manager of the Sundance Institute's Native American and Indigenous program.

So why do Indigenous filmmakers persist? When the lights come up on your film and you take in that sea of smiling faces, you remember there is no better medium to work in, and no better audience to screen for. It's just you and a few other people, sitting in a room, telling stories. □

Hollywood took a chance on Waititi and tapped into a unique voice with a narrative that was "undiscovered" by non-Native standards.

Jason Asenap is a Comanche and Muscogee Creek writer and director (and an occasional actor) based in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BEN GOLDFARB

OREGON

Sooner or later, it's coming: the Really Big One, a massive Northwestern earthquake that will shake infrastructure to rubble and drench seaside towns with tsunami waters. Electric grids will go dark, bridges will crumble, solid ground will liquefy, and residents will find themselves in deep doo-doo — literally. When sewage systems fail, millions of pounds of human feces will have nowhere to go, thereby creating one of America's grossest public health disasters. That's why five Portland counties, with help from the delightfully named nonprofit PHLUSH, have launched the Emergency Toilet Project, an exercise in crisis potty-training. The goal is to convince Northwesterners to include two buckets — one for No. 1, the other for No. 2 — along with food and water in their earthquake preparedness kits. According to *Oregon Public Broadcasting*, the project recommends "lining the poo bucket with a heavy-duty 13-gallon garbage bag and then covering each use with sawdust, shredded paper, or grass clippings to help dry the excrement." The fate of those poop bags, however, remains unknown. And there will be a lot of poop bags. Said Sue Mohnkern, a program supervisor in Hillsboro: "The average person poops about half a pound a day — not something I knew before I got into this particular project."

IDAHO

Speaking of innovative waste management, a few Treasure Valley breweries will soon begin slinging suds concocted from recycled wastewater. Although it might be hard for Gem State drinkers to overcome what one brewer calls "the ick factor," the *Idaho Statesman* points out that recycled water is "cleaner than the liquid pouring from your kitchen tap" — so clean, in fact, that brewers will actually have to add minerals like calcium to it. The toilet-to-tap ales, invented to raise Idaho's water conservation awareness, will be whipped up using technologies such as reverse-osmosis systems and "a mobile purification truck from Arizona." The greatest challenge, the *Statesman* reports, is naming the beverages: "Brown Trout" has already been vetoed by the city of Boise, which is evidently not as open about excrement as Portland.



COLORADO Seems that way, doesn't it?
 GREG PELLAND

WASHINGTON

Naval Base Kitsap, a command center on Puget Sound, is home to the Pacific Northwest's largest concentration of maritime weaponry, including a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and 14 submarines. But even the U.S. Navy was baffled by the bizarre ordnance that drifted over to nearby Brownsville Marina on Aug. 28: a spherical hunk of metal, encrusted with "decades of marine growth," that officials identified as an old mine of uncertain origins that had broken free from its moorings. The Navy and Coast Guard swiftly secured the area, establishing a 1,500-yard perimeter and advising locals to avoid windows. Later that day, as *The Seattle Times* reports, two Navy divers — presumably the ones who drew the short straws — tied a rope to the mine, towed it to safety, and, at 8:04 p.m., blew it to smithereens. According to a spokesman, the fact that the detonation didn't trigger a second blast suggested the mine was inert — a revelation that probably came as cold comfort to all the salmon fishermen who'd blithely boated over the antique explosive as it bobbed around the Pacific.

NEVADA

Now for some very different mine-related news. Ever since its underground wealth helped the Union win the Civil War, Nevada's identity has been tied to mineral extraction. So it makes sense that a Silver State company is investing in mining's next expansion: to the Final Frontier. On Aug. 29, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that the Nevada Institute for Autonomous Systems, an R&D center for drones, is partnering with a Polish company to develop techniques "that could be used to mine areas on the moon, Mars or asteroids." One corporation has already expressed its optimistic intention to begin gouging minerals from asteroids as soon as 2023. No word on whether the new industry will be subject to NEPA, the Clean Water Act, or intergalactic sage grouse management plans.

UTAH

Next time you fish in an alpine lake, take a moment to wonder how its trout got there. One possible answer: They fell out of the sky. Aerial fish-stocking began in the mid-1940s, when game agencies hired newly returned pilots to carpet-bomb mountain lakes with fry. Despite the practice's venerable history, some folks were shocked by a recent mesmerizing video of piscine paratroopers plummeting into Raft Lake. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources responded reassuringly: "Think of it as a high diver diving into a deep pool of water." A *very* high diver.

MONTANA

A UPS driver attempting to deliver a package to the Great Falls home of novelist Jamie Ford was thwarted by an unexpected ursine obstacle. Instead of the parcel he expected, Ford received a form with a single line explaining its absence: "Bear in driveway." And you urban mail carriers thought yappy little terriers were a problem.

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see hcn.org.

Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos [#heardaroundthewest](https://www.instagram.com/heardaroundthewest) on Instagram.



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“Yet because ‘foreign-born’ is too often a euphemism for ‘illegal,’ many of these workers are vulnerable. Consequently, so is an industry that is far more important to Idaho than its famous potatoes.”

Jerry Brady, in his essay, "Idaho's economy depends on 'foreign-born' workers," from *Writers on the Range*, hcn.org/wotr